

The Sculpture of Leroy Lamis

By William S. Ashbrook, Jr.

LEROY LAMIS is widely known on the campus of Indiana State University as an assistant professor of art, but not enough people in the academic community are aware of his national reputation as a sculptor. In the space of little more than a decade, his work has been exhibited in dozens of galleries from coast to coast, most notably in New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Not only has he exhibited, but his sculpture occupies a place in the permanent collections of some important museums (including the Swope Gallery of Terre Haute), while other pieces by Lamis are to be found among holdings of some of America's leading private collectors.

That the Whitney Museum purchased Lamis' *Ask Not*, a work that he created to express his feelings following the assassination of President Kennedy, is an accolade indeed. It is an even more remarkable achievement for an artist who divides his time between a full-time academic career and his own work. Quite naturally, one wonders how a college professor can find time to work intensively at sculpture and how he can reconcile these different disciplines and activities. Besides his commitments in the classroom, Lamis manages to spend an average of forty hours a week in his studio at home. He acknowledges that he is grateful to be teaching because it insures both his independence and the detachment necessary for his sculpture. Teaching keeps him at a safe distance from the (for the artist) possibly subversive influence of the art market. Both to talk to Lamis and to view his work makes such an observation seem consistent, for he is a highly organized and painstaking man. Indeed, he teaches because he loves to teach and because he finds the distinct activities of teaching and sculpting complementary.

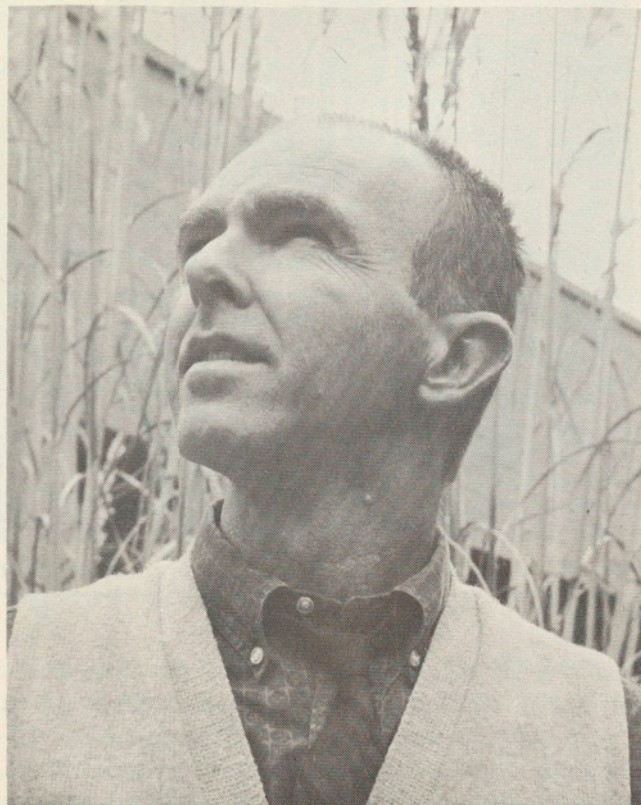
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TERRE HAUTE

TALKING with Lamis, one is struck right off by his reluctance to talk about himself or about matters of technique; he would much rather discuss his finished works and his ideas. He feels, quite understandably, that a work of art is more significant than the man who makes it and that it is itself of more value to the viewer than any questions of how it is made. He will admit, however, that he did not take up sculpture seriously until he started to college when he was twenty-four. He began working in alabaster and then started to experiment with glass prisms, lenses and rotating grids. He grew dissatisfied with this medium because it was not permanent enough, too much was left to chance. Interestingly enough, he heard recently from a friend in France that some Parisian sculptors are working with lenses and rotating grids, the sort of kinetic sculpture that engaged Lamis' attention ten years ago. From the impermanence of kinetic sculpture, he found a gratifying strength and rigidity in making statues by welding I-beams. About five years ago, he found in plastic a more satisfying medium. While it has some of the qualities of glass, it is stronger, and it is a material very much of the age we live in.

To look at one of Lamis' recent works, *Construction #65* say, is a strangely exhilarating experience. Now Lamis works principally in plexiglass, making constructions of cubes within cubes within cubes. Face to face with one of these constructions, one responds directly to the translucent material, either colorless or in graduated shades of



Leroy Lamis

blue and green or red and orange, and reacts to the interposed shapes that seem mysteriously free of support. As one's eyes travel over the sculpture, each angle of viewing reveals new proportions, new relationships. A critic writing in *Art International* (March 1965) comments on Lamis' work and points out how the medium of plexiglass "lends an air of extreme and pristine elegance" to traditional forms. These economical designs are enhanced by the sparkling medium that permits the viewer's eyes to penetrate them three dimensionally, and the effect is not merely exhilarating but, ultimately, satisfying.

AS LAMIS said of his aims, on the occasion of the 1965 exhibition of Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture at the University of Illinois, "My work has something to do with perfection, space and contemplation." If, as one soon gathers, his rigorously controlled designs have some connections with the tradition of the Constructivists and benefit from the current vogue for Op-art, one comes to understand how he arrived at these starkly scintillating plexiglass cubes as a vehicle for his concern with "perfection, space,

and contemplation." Asked about this, Lamis responds by making a basic distinction between that art which deals primarily with ideas and that which is concerned principally with emotions. In the Constructivist tradition, emanating from Gabo's Manifesto of 1920, Lamis finds a congenial argument for Classical restraint and emphasis upon pure form, a basis for his reaction against the self-indulgence possible within the subjectivity of abstract impressionism. It follows, then, that Lamis conceives the function of the artist as an imposer of order rather than as a soul-baring exhibitionist. In rigorous discipline, he finds, paradoxically, freedom of expression without distraction and irrelevance. And to turn from discussion of his position to look at his work is to see color, warmth and brilliance, not something cold, desiccated or antiseptic.

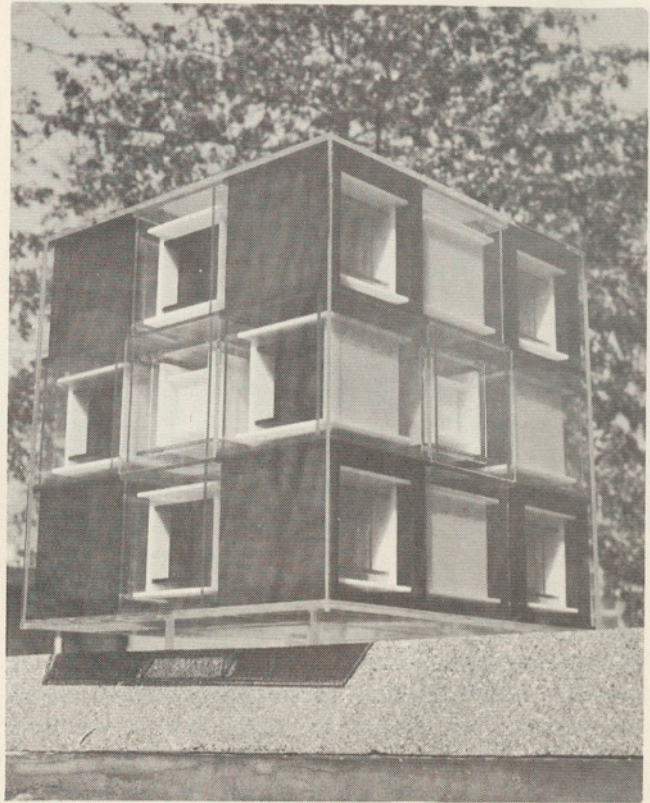
While he was in college, Lamis discovered the work and *pronunciamenti* of Naum Gabo. The Russian-born Gabo moved to Germany in 1922, on to England in 1935, and since 1946 he has made his home in the United States. Gabo is an artist of uncommon consistency and a man of unusual eloquence. Lamis has found his ideas stimulating and quite frankly acknowledges his indebtedness to the elder artist's fundamental principles. Gabo has said, "I am a Constructivist. I do not believe that boundless fantasy is necessarily the right vehicle for creative processes. In my experience, limitations and boundaries set to our imagination may actually serve as a source of inspiration rather than as a hindrance."¹ This pronouncement is one that Lamis subscribes to. But for all the rapport between their positions, one readily sees that Lamis is no slavish imitator of Gabo, although the older man has employed the medium of plastic and has, on occasion, worked with rectangular forms. Even though Lamis has found confirmation for his artistic orientation in Gabo's work and words, he has with his plexiglass cubes found an idiom peculiarly his own.

SOMEONE who is not a creative artist might perhaps feel that there are severe limitations to the number of ways in which plexiglass cubes can be arranged. While it is precisely the gift of the creative artist that he can conceive possibilities

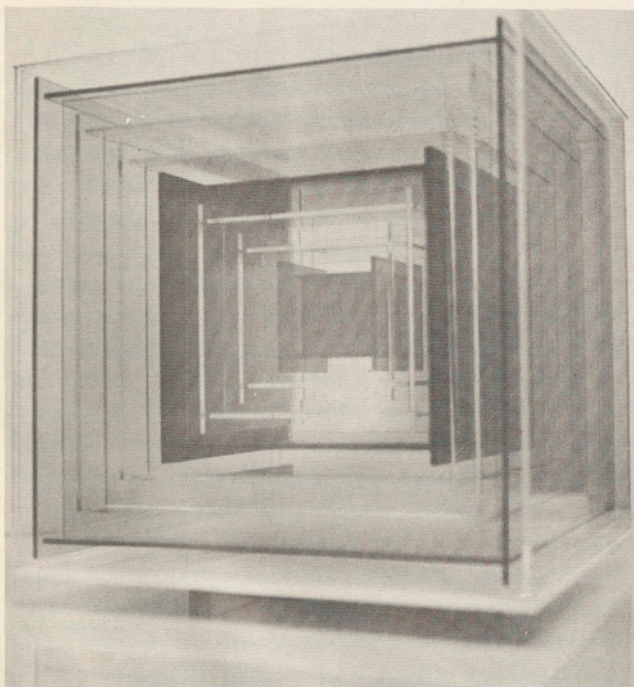
¹Naum Gabo, "A New Construction for Baltimore," *Magazine of Art* (February 1952), p. 74.

of arrangement that the layman cannot, Lamis freely admits that the day will come when he will expand his designs to include new motifs; at the same time he admits quite as freely that the plexiglass cubes still confront him with ideas and combinations he has yet to explore. Lately he has been working with larger compound constructions—stacks of cubes of contrasting colors, each containing complementary forms. While the execution of a single construction may occupy Lamis for a month or more, he has a backlog of cartoons for designs he plans to carry out. Even though it is difficult to predict the direction he will follow, it seems safe to assume that he will be working within and extending the Constructivist tradition.

As a successful sculptor with a growing demand for his work, Lamis cannot and does not ignore the rewards and problems of marketing his sculpture. At present his work is being handled by galleries in New York, Los Angeles and Toronto. To create a demand for one's work is to confront the danger of becoming merely a factory supplying that demand, with all its preconceptions of the form the work will take. To do that is to cease to create and merely to reproduce one's old designs. The artist's time and labor, as well as



Ask Not was completed in 1964.



Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger

#65, a 12½-inch plexiglass cube Lamis made this year.

the intangibles of creating a design, deserve a fair price; but even with the bull market for art that exists now in this country, there are still comparatively few artists who can sell any work they produce merely because it is theirs. Lamis has probably not quite attained that happy stage. He has now enough commissions to keep him busy, and he has the requisite confidence in his ability and surety of technique to keep on producing, but he is far from impervious to the pressures and dangers of success.

ALTHOUGH he has been kindly treated by the critics so far, he is aware of the unpredictability of writers who are forced to convey impressions derived from works of art that have nothing to do with words. He faces the possibility that since his success is based upon the work he is doing now, perhaps his future development will drive him to explore new ideas and new forms that may not catch the public's fancy. He admits he is prepared for such an eventuality and feels that someday he will move beyond the work on which his present success is based, and this he will do

whether this new phase of his work is less successful or more so.

Above all, Lamis values his independence. That is one reason he continues to teach. For him, however, teaching is much more than an insurance for his independence from a possibly ephemeral success; it provides him with a relevant respite from the demands of creative work. It affords him a stimulating contact with other minds grappling fresh with the fundamental challenges of control and freedom, of concept and execution.

IT TAKES courage to continue to create. One must face up to the unavoidable moments of loneliness, when there is nothing but the blank paper waiting to receive the inkling of an idea. For all the rewards of evolving and executing a design, there must first have been the moment of vision and, its corollary, the harrowing possibility that the vision might not come. These are the terms in which an artist lives, and here lies one explanation why Lamis finds in teaching, which he thoroughly enjoys, a stimulating relaxation from his own work.

Lamis is an exceptionally busy man. He acknowledges a direct connection between his present freedom to develop creative ideas and his activities as a fulltime teacher of art. Not only is his sculpture an exegesis of Gabo's principle that "limitations and boundaries set to our imagination may actually serve as a source of inspiration rather than as a hindrance," but his work in the classroom may be seen as still another application of that principle. To talk to Lamis and to examine his work at one's leisure confirm the impression of the underlying consistency and steadiness of the man's vision.

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