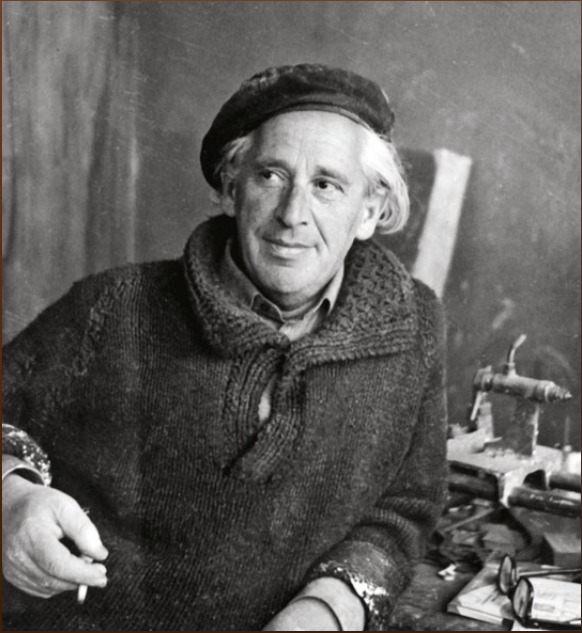


Herman Wald (1906-1970) was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in what was once known – before the First World War – as Austria-Hungary. After studying sculpture successively in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London, he emigrated to South Africa in 1937. While there are a number of 20th-century sculptors of Eastern European Jewish origin like Lippy Lipshitz, Herbert Meyerowitz, Moses Kottler and Solly Disner who have been recognised as important South African artists, Wald’s story has so far remained untold. His obscurity seems ironic and surprising since he was the originator of a number of iconic public sculptures which are indelibly imprinted on the popular imagination in South Africa. Yet very few people are familiar with his name.

Unlike most of the other practitioners of the art of sculpture in this country, Wald never had the luxury of a teaching post which would have enabled him to support himself and his family while exploring an independent direction in his work. While schooled in modernism in Britain and Europe, he often had to adopt more naturalistic approaches to suit a wide range of clients and their demands. Modernism in art was not appreciated by South Africans and he was often forced to compromise his creativity, especially when it came to portraiture. The conflict between Wald’s identity as a Jewish sculptor and the prohibition of the Second Commandment against the making of any ‘graven image’ led him to adopt a polemical stance to Orthodox Jewish thought on the issue.



Perhaps the most popular public sculpture in all of South Africa, *Stampede: The Impala Fountain* was commissioned from Wald as a public memorial to the late Ernest Oppenheimer. Intended to reintroduce ‘nature’ into the soulless, built environment of the Johannesburg CBD, it consists of 18 bronze impalas leaping in a continuous, graceful arc over jets of water. The dynamic movement of the impalas would seem to have been inspired by a number of possible modern sources, ranging from sequential motion photography and Italian Futurism to cinematic animation. In many ways Wald considered this to be his most successful work, appealing to artistic laymen and art experts alike. Restored in 2002 by the late artist’s son Michael, this fountain-piece has now been relocated outside the Anglo American Building in Main Street, Johannesburg.



Moses



“Unconditionally acclaimed by child, adult or connoisseur ... [a work] unbound by time, fashion or ‘isms’”
Herman Wald, on his sculpture *Stampede: The Impala Fountain*, 1960



Moses – the singularly most important of the Hebrew prophets – obsessed Herman Wald a great deal. The prohibition of the Second Commandment against “graven images” was something that Wald sought to interrogate. Since the Ten Commandments, he argued, had been carved on tablets of stone: they were both three-dimensional and monumental, qualifying in an ironic sense as enduring works of art in themselves. Moses was thus, in a way, the very first Jewish sculptor. Wald even went so far as to state his belief that too literal an interpretation of the Second Commandment had led to a diminishment of Jewish cultural life.



A famous landmark, Wald’s *Diamond Diggers’ Fountain* is synonymous with the city of Kimberley, South Africa’s diamond-mining mecca. Situated in its Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Gardens, it consists of five life-size mine workers in bronze, each personifying a principal mine in the area. Arms raised in unison, they support a huge diamond sieve through which a single jet of water rises. Referencing the concept of the heroised worker seen in monumental public sculptures in Communist Eastern Europe, Wald bends this visual rhetoric to the praise of capitalism.

When Herman Wald was in England between 1933 and 1937, he encountered the work of the Vorticists, who had earlier used a fusion of Cubism and Italian Futurism to create a mechanised vision of the human form, partly as a dark comment on the mechanisation of killing in the First World War. Wald adopted this aesthetic in a number of his own works. *Unity is Strength*, a public commission for a building society, embodies Wald’s vision for South Africa: of the different races pulling together for a better future.

Monument to the Six Million, which stands in Johannesburg’s Westpark Cemetery, is a major engineering achievement in bronze. It is recognised world-wide as a major monument to the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe. Six fists, each symbolising a million of the dead, emerge from the earth, each holding a ram’s horn trumpet (*Shofar*) through which they cry out the Commandment: ‘Thou shalt not kill’. The monument was close to Wald’s heart and he and his wife Vera lie buried next to it.



Diamond Diggers’ Fountain



Unity is Strength



Monument to the Six Million



Cover of a 1974 vinyl record cover showing Cantor Shlomo Mandel in front of the Aron Hakodesh of the Berea Synagogue. Photo: Paul Vink

Wings of the Schechinah: the Sculptural Art of Herman Wald tells the story of an artist who contested orthodox interpretations of the Second Commandment against ‘graven images’, but who, at the same time, produced expressions of Jewish spirituality of a high order in his synagogue commissions. The huge wings of beaten copper he made in 1967 stand within the ancient sculptural tradition of Bezalel, who was tasked by Moses to make the Holy Ark of the Covenant.



Like many of the modern sculptors that he encountered in his wanderings as a student in Europe, Wald was preoccupied with sculptural approaches to the human form. During the four years he spent in England (1933-1937), he became familiar with the work of three important sculptors: Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore and Frank Dobson. Virtually all of Wald's works produced in Europe have been lost and we only know of them from photographs. Many of these have been included in this exhibition to give visitors some idea of the scope and range of his work. It is perhaps this range and diversity that critics perceived as a weakness rather than a strength.



Torsos



First Consciousness



Job I



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel

Gassed (1939) is a work that Wald made in South Africa as a warning against a repeat of the horrors of the First World War (1914-1918), when poison gas was used as a weapon in trench warfare. This contorted human figure, made in February of 1939, prophesied the outbreak of war in September. It was a war that would lead to the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe and the murder of Wald's Hungarian family at Auschwitz. In some ways *Gassed* prefigures Wald's other works that deal – either directly or through literary allusion – with the Holocaust. Works such as *Job* and *Cain* relate this, as does of course his *Monument to the Six Million*.



Gassed

Erotic and literary themes abound in Wald's work, and in this sense it can be seen as being part of the Symbolist tradition in European art, which was little understood or appreciated in South Africa. In Wald's work the human body becomes a vehicle for spirituality and abstraction; a merging and interpenetration of male and female. This is especially seen in his *Man and his Soul*, *The Lovers* and most remarkably in *La Femme*. The latter, a late work, is reminiscent of the highly abstract yet allusive work of Constantin Brancusi. It is highly phallic, but at the same time unmistakably female.



Man and his Soul



The Scholar



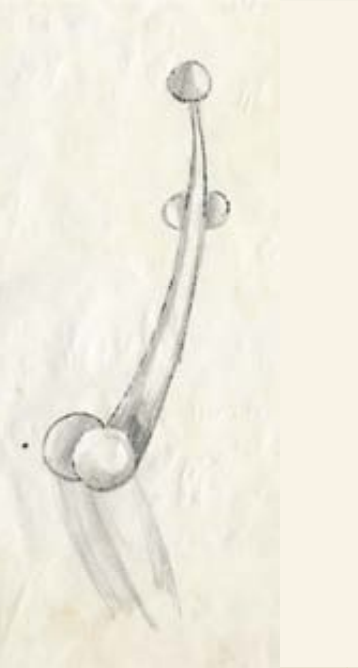
Religious Discussion

A notable aspect of Wald's work dealt with subjects that he thought would appeal to a specifically Jewish clientèle. This was a series of sculptures on the theme of traditional Jewish life, largely based on his memories of his childhood in Hungary. Although Wald's rabbinical family was fairly prosperous, the Jewish community of which it was a part was a highly diverse one, often at odds with itself over matters of theology and the interpretation of tradition. The appeal of many of these sculptures is essentially nostalgic, reflecting on a Jewish communal life that was essentially wiped out by the Holocaust. In making them, Wald resorted to a loose and expressive style of modelling.

Wald's 'African' works form only a small part of his artistic output. Like many artists of European origin, he felt the attraction of the so-called 'exotic' when he came to Africa. Attracted by the colour and quality of local South African hardwoods, he carved a number of pieces on African themes, with highly-polished surfaces and flowing concavities, such as *Mother and Child III* (1955-65). The latter approximates the totemic quality of European prehistoric objects that he had seen in European museums. Apart from carving techniques, Wald also tackled African subjects using modelling and casting techniques, as in works such as *Zulu Protector* (1968-69). Here, once again, his evocation of the totemic seems strongly in evidence.



Mother and Child III



Drawing of La Femme



La Femme

In 1951 Wald was commissioned to carve a choir screen for a new synagogue in Springs. This was the first of his large-scale religious works. The commission was significant and symbolic in personal terms as it reminded him of the difficulties he had as a youth in convincing his Rabbi father of his decision to become a sculptor. He was also an accomplished singer and had sung behind many such choir screens in European synagogues. Designed for an architectural setting, the central subject of *Sanctum* is an apotheosised seven-branched *Menorah* candlestick, with the tablets of the Ten Commandments.



Birth of an Idea

Abstraction was dominant trend with the international *avantgarde* in the 1950s and 60s when Wald was most active as a sculptor. Like many practising sculptors he opted to work in a variety of figurative styles, with occasional forays into abstraction. The latter only really took place late in his life, between c.1968 and 1970. Works such as *Birth of an Idea*, *Tête à tête* and were all produced just before his untimely death at the age of 64. They evidence his experimentation with techniques such as ceramic slip-casting and resin casting. They have seldom, if ever, been exhibited in public before.



Tête à tête

Selected for inclusion on the exhibition of the South African Academy in 1944, *Russian Girl* is one of the few surviving works by Wald carved in marble. Its idealised features of what seems to be a worker peasant girl recall the spirit of Socialist Realism predominant in official Russian art under Stalin at the time, best represented by the work of the sculptor Vera Mukhina. This optimistic and idealistic socialist ideal was also embraced by the farmer-worker settlers who flocked to Israel when it was founded in 1948. This accounts for the perceived significance of this work in the early 1950s, when it was used on the cover of the magazine, *Jewish Affairs*.



Russian Girl