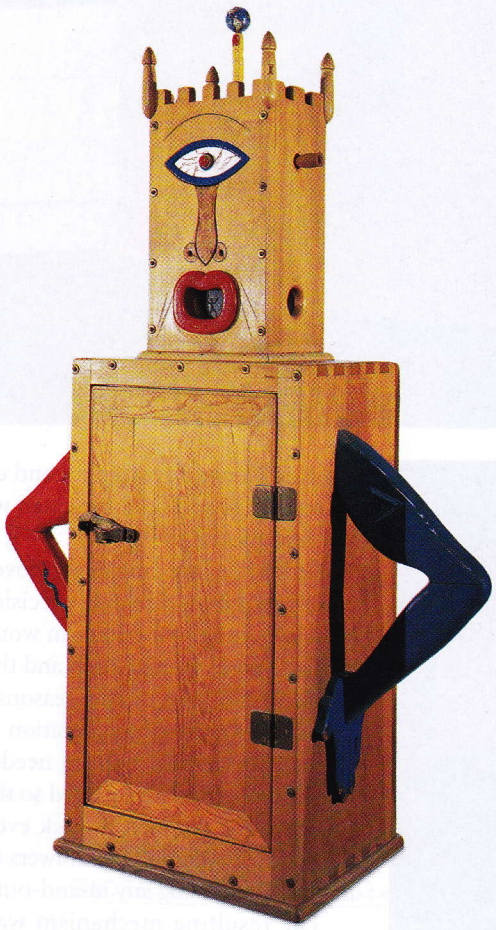
H.C. Westermann

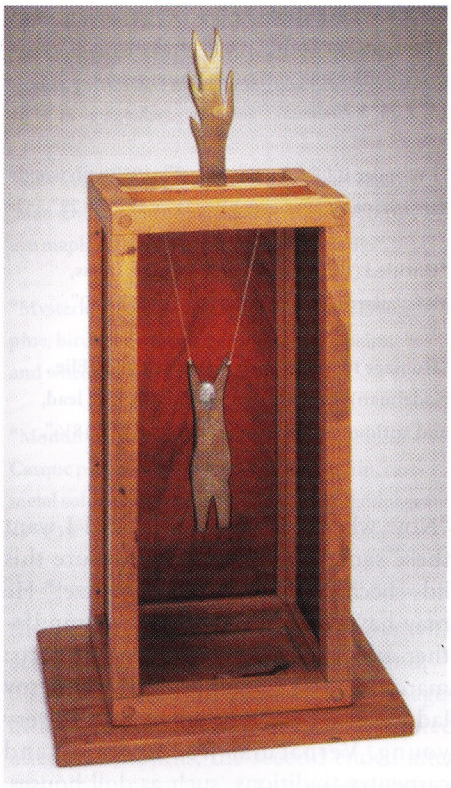
Master Carpenter of the Subconscious

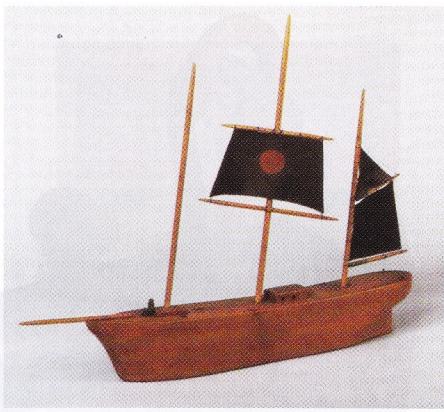
BY SUSAN HAGEN

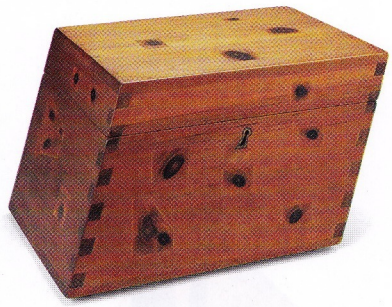


The great 20th-century artist Horace Clifford Westermann (1922-1981) has always been regarded as an artists' artist: a hardworking idealist with a vast body of work filled with good ideas. Now, in *H. C. Westermann,* the first major retrospective in more than 20 years, his work has been crisscrossing the country for the past year or so—and for the first time it may win the appreciation of a larger audience. Luckily, the show's curators, Lynne Warren and Michael Rooks of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, opted to put together an enormous and untidy show, choosing not to sand off the rough edges of Westermann's *oeuvre* or squeeze it into neat categories of art history.

It's fitting, too, that the exhibition is making a giant swirling one and a half-way trip across the U.S., as Westermann's work really captures American life of his time. While he's sometimes been labeled an outsider artist, Westermann was in fact an educated artist who regularly exhibited his work from 1958 on—for example, he had 36 solo exhibitions during his lifetime, including 16 at Allan Frumkin's galleries in New York and Chicago. He continuously enjoyed a convivial professional relationship with many of his peers. Yet, he was always his own man. Westermann was one of the first Modern American artists to incorporate regionalism—even though his work evolved out of an international style of Modernist and Surrealist art—he lived and put down roots in California, Illinois and Connecticut and he drew something from all these places that went into his work. I like to think of it as *terroir*, a wine term describing the expression of the unique flavors of a specific environment,







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soil, minerals, climate, weather, topography, and so on. Through this process, Westermann developed an idiosyncratic and authentically American mode of expression. The flavor of the soil in all of these places went into the accumulative flavors of his increasingly complex art.

It's impossible to understand Westermann's work without a few facts about his life story, because, throughout his life, real experience dovetails at every point with the themes and the methods of his work. The exhibition illustrates these themes by grouping work from different periods together, yet there's a loosely chronological progression to the show. Westermann was born in Los Angeles and graduated from Fairfax High School, and studied liberal arts at Los Angeles City College. He was nicknamed "Cliff" and friends called him this for the rest of his life, although he decided to sign his work "H. C." He was extremely handy—at age 16 he built an addition to his family's home using salvaged materials—and was also gifted at drawing. He left college after a year and worked briefly as a gandy dancer on the railroad and a construction worker until, in 1942, he signed up with the Marines at age 19. He was a wiry, muscled, hard-drinking fellow, sporting a number of tattoos.

OPPOSITE PAGE—
"Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea" [open and closed views] (1958); pine, bottle caps, tin toys, glass, metal, brass, ebony, and paint; 56½" x 38" x 14½".

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
"A Soldier's Dream" (1955); maple, stained glass, brass, and string; 29¼" x 15" x 11½".

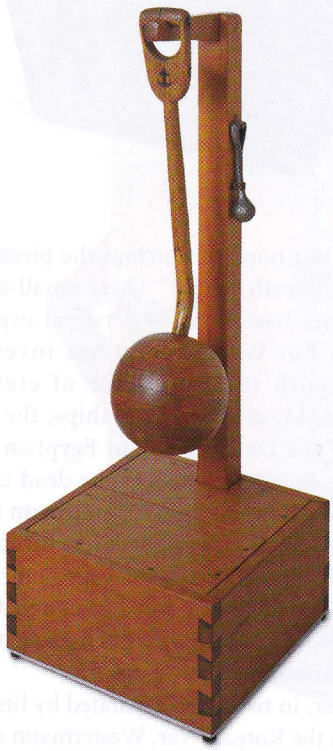
H.C. Westermann framing the house in Brookfield Center, Connecticut, c. 1969.

"Death Ship of No Port" (1957); pine, canvas, bronze, wire, and paint; 24¼" x 30½" x 3⅝".

"Imitation Knotty Pine Box" (1966); pine, knotty pine, brass; 12½" x 20¾" x 13".

Westermann's experience in the U. S. Marine Corps was probably the greatest single influence on his character and his life. He fought in the Pacific theater of World War II, serving as a gunnery mate on the U.S.S. Enterprise, and a few years later he re-enlisted, serving in the Korean War. He participated in major battles, spent time in the brig, and witnessed kamikaze attacks, burning ships, and the death of thousands of soldiers. Many of his sculptures were based on these experiences, but none so much as the pieces he called "Death Ships." These small-scale ships are based on his personal experiences, but Westermann has invested them with the resonance of eternal themes. Mysterious ghost ships, the legend of the Dutchman, and Egyptian and Native American boats of the dead come to mind. In these ships Westermann used allegory for his own purposes: inventing his own symbols, combining them with opposites to devise a dialectic, and tempering serious main themes unexpectedly with humorous subthemes.

Later, in two stints separated by his service in the Korean War, Westermann studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on the G.I. bill. It's interesting to note that there were several cutting edges exhibitions at the Art Institute during this time that he would have seen. One was a show of American abstract and Surrealist art, and another, *Twentieth-Century Art from the Arensberg Collection*, included many pieces by Marcel Duchamp (now part of the Philadelphia Museum of Art) that he reportedly went back to see many times. Duchamp is well-known as the father of Conceptual Art, and Westermann seemed to readily absorb his notion that art was fundamentally about the expression of the ideas and intentions of the



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT—
"Nouveau Rat Trap" (1965); birch plywood, rosewood, metal, and rubber bumpers; 13" x 34" x 7¾".

"I Wonder if I Really Love Her?" (1957); plywood, varnish, paint, and graphite; 21" x 19½" x 22".

"Untitled ('J & C Box')" (1959); pine, brass, glass, mirror, and enamel; 16¼" x 13" x 10".

"Homage to American Art (Dedicated to Elie Nadelman)" (1966); Douglas fir, ash, cast lead, and antique shovel handle; 48¼" x 18" x 18¼".

artist. Westermann had a unique understanding of Duchamp's premise and, not without a certain irony, built a vast body of work that made a point of giving physical substantiality to conceptual art.

During his years in Chicago, 1947-1950 and 1952-1961, he made a living as a carpenter and handyman. He channeled this experience directly into his artwork, making many wood sculptures so solid and sturdy that you could drive a truck over them. Over-the-top craftsmanship, overbuilding, and excessive durability was his usual method, sometimes to ludicrous effect. Westermann believed in doing a job well and often became irritated with clients who didn't appreciate quality craftsmanship. On one piece he carved the words: "Walnut—and there isn't much left you know." Once he got started on his commentary he figured he'd add the important information: "Now when this piece is shipped I want these same 2 screws used to secure this lid—because they are the right size!" He may have been inspired by his grandfather and uncles' woodworking projects: marquetry boxes, coffins, and a little toy ladder made for him when he was very young. Vernacular woodworking and carpentry traditions, such as doll houses, ship models, patent models, log cabins, cabinets, furniture and jewelry boxes, also informed his work.

Although he utilized traditional woodworking and carpentry techniques, Westermann clearly worked in the realm of sculpture. His work shows the influence of Cornell and Giacometti's surrealist tableaux, DuBuffet or Miro's distorted personages, Duchamp and the symbolic objects of Dada. The piece titled "Imitation Knotty Pine Box" (1966), is rather remarkable in that it uses impeccable craftsmanship to undermine the expectations of traditional techniques. The opposite occurs in "Nouveau Rat Trap" (1965)—where fancy, swirling forms on a rosewood base make up a decidedly mundane functional object. Either way, the joke's on us, and we love it. Westermann's work has been misunderstood as being naive—but the show demonstrates quite well that it has a complex set of influences. Pop imagery like cars, mechanical gadgets, Coca-Cola bottles, cornball jokes, and the American dream weave their way through his work. Themes inspired by contemporary film and literature, as well as current events, also can be found in many of his sculptures. His work is both folksy and sophisticated (like Elie Nadelman—an early 20th-century sculptor whom he admired), and enormously appealing to

CLOCKWISE FROM NEAR RIGHT—
"30 Dust Pans" (1972); plywood, oak, various woods, galvanized sheet metal, and brass; 46" x 45" x 32¾".

"Ed's Varnish" (1976); pine, 3 one-quart cans of 'Man-O-War Ultra Spar Marine Varnish', bird's-eye maple, brass, and ink; 9⅞" x 18½" x 8½".

"Mysteriously Abandoned New Home" (1958); pine, birch, vermillion, redwood, glass, paint, and wheels; 50⅛" x 24⅞" x 24⅞".

"Monument to Martha" (1960); pine, Colonial Casque pine molding, plywood, mirror, tin, cast-metal soldier, plastic decal, and paper découpage; 47" x 19" x 19".

the average viewer, as well as those with academic and art historical background.

Westermann had two brief marriages at an early age. The first was annulled after two months; the second ended after two years when his wife, complaining of neglect, took their infant son and moved to Florida. But then his life changed when he met Joanna Beall, a fellow student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Joanna was a painter and the daughter of Lester Beall, Sr., a well-known graphic designer based at that time in Chicago. Beall and Westermann were married in 1959 and had an extraordinarily compatible relationship. For decades she provided the inspiration for many of Westermann's pieces. For example, "Untitled ('J & C Box')" (1959), has silhouette portraits of the two of them side by side on the top of the box. In 1961 couple left Chicago and moved to Joanna's parents' property in Brookfield Center, Connecticut. Except for short stints in San Francisco and Boulder, Co they both lived there for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps as a result of his mother's death when he was only 19 and the devastation he experienced in war, Westermann was deeply sentimental and used his work to express his affection not only for his wife, but also for family, friends, and humanity itself. Close relationships with other friends and family members inspired many pieces. "Monument to Martha" (1960), a sculptural fantasy edifice, was made to honor his sister. Throughout his life Westermann kept in touch with friends and family with expressive letters that often included sketches of work-in-progress, caricatures, or illustrations of his political diatribes. A surprising number of his pieces were made as gifts for specific individuals. For instance, "Ed's Varnish" (1976), is a box containing three cans of varnish with an inscribed note on the inside: DEAR ED- NOT ONLY MAY YOU BORROW A CAN OF VARNISH BUT YOU CAN KEEP THESE—FOR YOUR CABIN IN THE DESERT. Westermann made dust pans as gifts for friends and associates. Out of this he developed "30 Dust Pans" (1970), an installation made of neat rows of hand-crafted dust pans arranged on the top of a crate. (This installation bears a statement by the artist: "i made each one of these by hand and by that I mean I did not sub-contract them to a factory or pay some guy to make them for me. each handle

LEFT TO RIGHT—
"Suicide Tower" (1965); mahogany, brass, ebony, postcards, and metal; 43¾" x 15¼" x 13⅞".

"Antimobile" (1965); Douglas fir, marine plywood, metal bicycle pedal, and steel bolt with wing nut; 67¼" x 35½" x 27½".

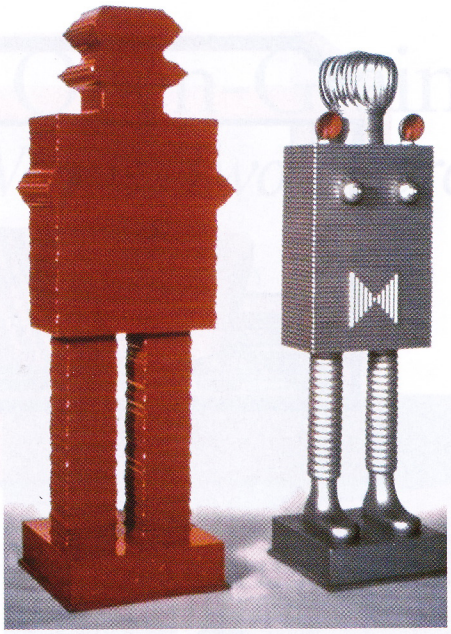
"The Big Change" (1963); Douglas fir marine plywood, masonite, and ink; 75⅜" x 20¼" x 20¼".

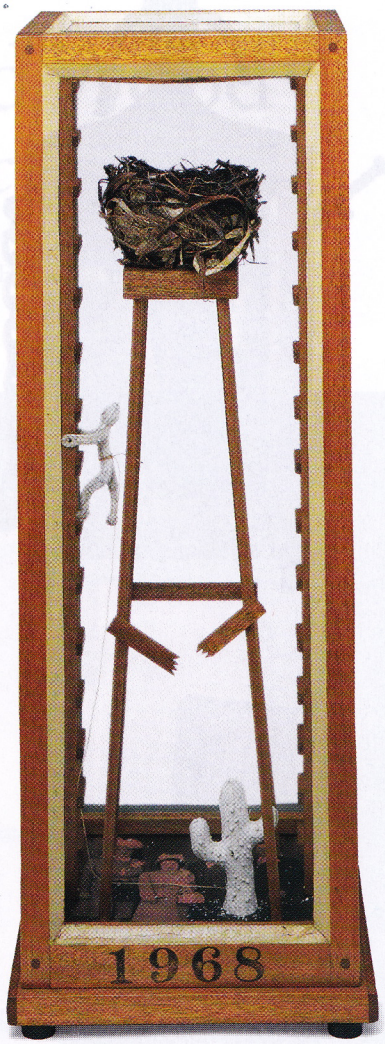
was formed and not made on a lathe.")

Westermann's approach to his sculptures was workman-like, but stemmed from extremely personal sources. His work is about interpreting the emotions coming out of his experiences—fear, anxiety, anger, love, compassion, bitterness, etc.—rather than a literal representation of the events of his life. He wrote: "I would most certainly prefer to die than to do one, just one, piece that I didn't pour everything conceivable, into." One sculpture has an engraved inscription: "from where ol Cliff lives & that's the heart." His work was filled with feeling, but ideas are always part of them, as is their solid, quirky physical presence. Westermann's life-long obsession with physical fitness and body building may have predisposed him to make particularly strong well-made objects with a proudly physical nature. As a youth he frequented "muscle beach" in Santa Monica and, later, after getting out of the army in 1946, he worked as a professional acrobat for a short time. Later, he shared this passion for exercise and acrobatics with Joanna.

Westermann always worked with imagery, such as houses, figures, ships, or boxes that were, technically speaking, not real series but multiple recurrent subjects. Woven throughout this imagery are ongoing themes of domesticity, identity, and the psychology of relationships. Westermann used the house form (always boxy with a pitched roof) to stand for many things, but most often it was a kind of psychological portrait of an individual in distress. "Memorial to the Idea of Man if He Was an Idea" (1958) is an ordinary cupboard transformed into a hypothetical portrait of a universal ideal. The piece "Mysteriously Abandoned New Home" (1958) seems to explore an existential crisis in the American Dream, as well as to hint at the pain Westermann must have felt when his wife and son left him. Many of these pieces turn the universal struggles in domestic life into a classic epic theme containing both tragic and comic elements, with a tension between the individual's need for independence and the need for companionship, the desire for safety and security frustrated by human nature.

Ideas of Modernity and mechanization pervade Westermann's *oeuvre*, especially as personified in his sculptures of personages and robots. Some, like "Flying Thing (Male)" (1958) and "Angry Young Machine" (1959), are absurdly anthropomorphized nonfunctional machines. You can see the influence of sleek Modernist sculptures by artists such as Henry Moore, Elie Nadelman, and Jean Miro—





LEFT TO RIGHT—
"Machine for Calculating Risks" (1962); wood, linoleum, metal, glass, bowling trophy, clockworks, enamel, plastic, and paint; 24¼" x 10" x 9".

"Swingin' Red King" (1961) and "The Silver Queen" (1960); mixed media; ("Swingin' Red King": 83¾" x 29¼" x 25"), ("The Silver Queen": 79¾" x 20⅞" x 21⅛").

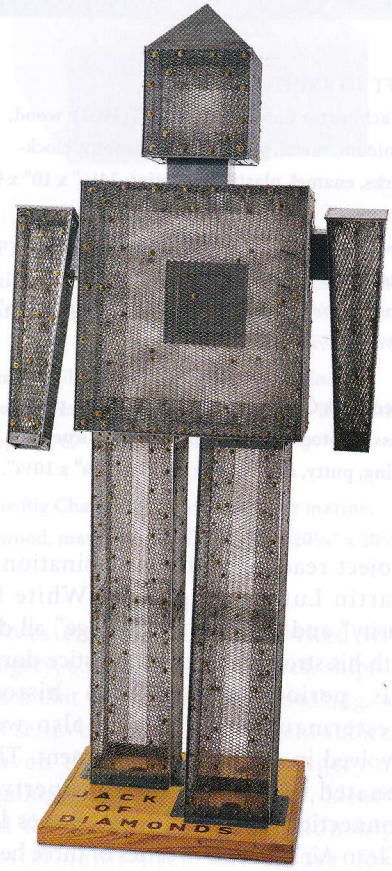
"Red Rock Canyon" (1968); mahogany, plate glass, photograph, lead, enamel, bird's nest, string, putty, and rubber; 27¾" x 10¼" x 10¼".

abstract, simplified forms based on life—but Westermann, with tongue-in-cheek, applies a handyman's aesthetic. His "Machine for Calculating Risks" (1962) speaks both to the dialectic of Cold War politics and the quirky ingenuity of machine-age patent models. In the two giant robot figures, "Swingin' Red King" (1961) and "The Silver Queen" (1960), Westermann compresses their big, groovy personalities into pared-down box forms covered with oodles of fancy decorative moldings.

Westermann considered himself "just an average Joe" and a citizen-artist. He was patriotic, and believed in honor and personal integrity. But even though he served in both World War II and the Korean War, he was very critical of American Cold War policies and the Vietnam War and expressed this in several sculptures and drawings, including "Brinksmanship" (1959) and "Death Ship Run over by a '66 Lincoln Continental" (1966). He was also active in the civil rights movement, and "Walnut Log" (a deeply symbolic sculpture sent to William T. Wiley sent in support of a collaborative project reacting to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.), "White for Purity" and "A Little Black Cage" all deal with his strong feelings of injustice during this period of American history. Westermann and his wife also were involved in the ecology movement. They donated 14 acres of their property in Connecticut to a land trust. Pieces like "Clean Air" (1964), (a series of three heavily-glazed empty glass cases, one within the other), "Red Rock Canyon" (1968), "Wet Flower" (1968), and "Object from a Dying Planet" (1971), each comment on the environmental crisis which was just beginning to be widely acknowledged.

One of Westermann's final projects was a house and a pair of studios that he and his wife built themselves in rural Connecticut. (An essay in the exhibition's catalogue describes this project in detail.) Designed by Joanna, the house is simple, well-conceived, and beautifully made. It was begun in 1970, finished only two months before Westermann died, and he never lived in it. Here he completely indulged his love of fine workmanship and vernacular architecture. For more than 10 years they worked on it, along with the occasional carpenter or tradesman deemed up to snuff. Wonderful details include: a relief carving of a handsaw over his studio door, every corner post in his studio joined with mortises and tenons, post and beam construction with scarf joints, massive ship-lapped oak floorboards made from trees removed from the site, carved gargoyles over the front porch and studio, etc.

Westermann continued to work actively in the studio throughout this time and many of the processes that he used on



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
"Korea" (1965); pine, glass, rope, brass, and found objects; 34½" x 16⅛" x 8⅜".

"Death Ship Run Over by a '66 Lincoln Continental" (1966); pine, plate glass, ebony, U.S. dollar bills, putty, brass, and ink; 15⅝" x 32½" x 11¾".

"Jack of Diamonds" (1981); wire lath, sheet metal, oak, pine, and vermillion; 79¾" x 36¾" x 23⅝".

"Scarf Joint" (1970); Douglas fir, ink; 10½" x 3½" x 3½".

the house were isolated and repeated in pieces of sculpture. For example, "Scarf Joint" (1970) was a life-size demonstration of the joint (as well as a birthday gift), and "Jack of Diamonds" (1981), a huge male figure made of galvanized wire lath, corner bead, and sheet metal and standing on a oak, pine, and vermillion marquetry base, demonstrated an imaginative use for the material he used as a base for the hand-plastered walls of the house. "Jack of Diamonds" is a wonderfully complex piece. It might very well be an allegorical self-portrait, with interwoven references to the symbolic Jack of Diamonds card, the Jack-of-all-trades, and "The House that Jack Built," as well as to the diamond-shaped pattern of the expanded metal lath. The piece was Westermann's final work of art, and its bare skeletal presence hints at his growing awareness of his own mortality. Westermann died on November 3, 1981, only a few days after the opening of his one-person exhibition at Xavier Fourcade, Inc. in New York.

Now 21 years after H. C. Westermann's death, art historians are still struggling to understand the work and impact of this quirky American genius who somehow fused Modernism, Surrealism, and Conceptual art with popular culture, and injected it with a whole lotta heart. He has influenced several generations of artists, from the Chicago Imagists and Hairy Who? in Chicago, funky West Coast artists such as William T. Wiley and Robert Arneson, to neo-conceptualists like Bruce Nauman and Richard Artschwager. Even though this retrospective exhibition is huge and unwieldy, it will surely allow a new generation of artists and art lovers, and perhaps a wider public, to discover first-hand the range and depth of H. C. Westermann's achievement.

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Susan Hagen is a sculptor and writer; she lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.