



Donald Locke completes the sculpture which takes the form of three separate rooms. Next to him is the Phoenix bird (close-up at right). In the etagere at rear are other examples of Locke's work.

Guyanese sculptor looks to Arizona for his ideas

Putting Guyanese sculptor Donald Locke in a foundry or an art studio is like turning a kid loose in a candy store. Every object delights him and every odd piece of discarded rubble becomes a found object, a possible artistic addition to the work at hand. He's never bored and never boring, both artistically and personally.

"I don't look for inspiration," Locke said in his British-accented sing-song speech. "I look for objects and materials and money."

Locke has been in the United States a year working at Arizona State University on a Guggenheim grant as an artist-in-residence. The geography of Arizona has fascinated Locke, and now he is realizing a project that had its roots in work in London: A Phoenix bird, derived from the legend, cast out of bronze. The evolution of his sculpture has come to the present period, and his work takes on environmental proportions and meanings.

The connection of the artist to his environment has not escaped Locke, and he traced much of his work's progress from the sociology of Berlin and New York to the geography, geology, climate and architecture of Arizona.

"You can't get great art in a vacuum," he declared, "except maybe for El Greco in Toledo."

To Locke, the Phoenix bird is a "metaphor for an attitude to life. It's tough, and to kill this thing you have to go into the ring with machine guns. It's like Arizona. Arizona is tough — it's got a couple of six-guns on its hips. It's proud, and this is what the myth symbolizes."

The birds — three of them — will be a part of a

small three-room sculptural exhibit which ideally would be set up within a large museum space. Spectators would walk through these Locke-produced rooms to see the work, and in some cases, as when they sat on the chairs in the rooms, would become part of the work itself.

Locke noted that ideas are everywhere. "It's just a matter of pulling out of the air the ideas which belong to you — seeing it, recognizing it and developing it."

Locke also has great faith in the future of Arizona in general, and the Valley in particular, as a powerful, exciting arts center.

"Artists here still feel that New York is the big thing — oh, not so much as 10 to 20 years ago. My instincts tell me that it may be the center now, but not for all time, not with the influx of writers and novelists and painters and sculptors into Arizona. My instincts tell me it's happening here.

"The thrust of art is into the Southwest, just as it was New York after the war and California after that," Locke asserted.

Locke was born in a "remote village in the British Empire" in 1930. "I can remember the first airplanes flying over the village where I was born. I heard this noise and we all ran out to see it." Then in 1969 Locke was in London for the moon landing — he and the aeronautics industry both had come a long way by that time.

Locke studied art in Great Britain in the mid-50s, and for a time wouldn't be caught dead in his native South American country. "I was being

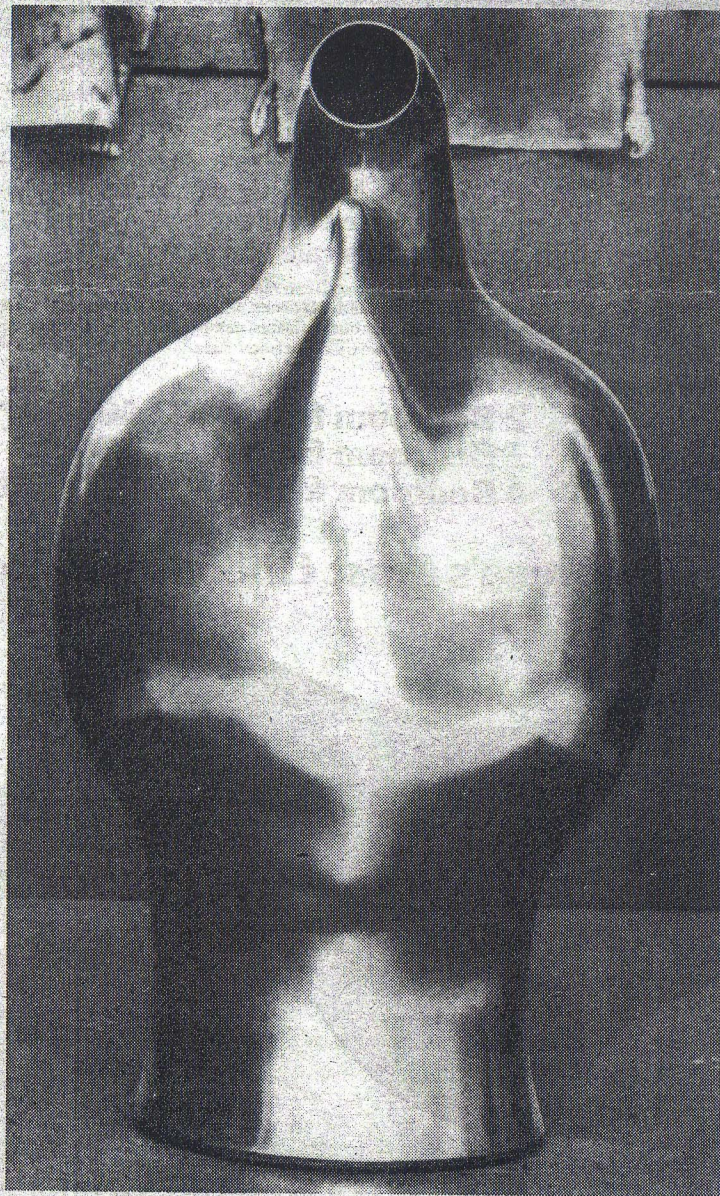


PHOTO: SUZANNE STARR

strangled. I had studied art in London. What was I doing back in Guyana?"

He did five pieces of sculpture in three years, and "when I returned to London I was like a hungry man." He completed 40 pieces the year of his return.

Locke's sculpture is both sensual and sensuous, and there is a certain inherent eroticism in the forms, although he is loathe to address it. Talking too much about such work — he favors black small rounded shapes sheltering or cradling cylindrical columns — detracts from the enjoyment of the viewer. It is the viewer who will bring to the art his own ideas, and involving the viewer seems to be one of Locke's greatest talents. His current three-room piece does just that, and only a fool would try to predict where it will lead the artist. Right now he is making small casts of native fetish-like figures out of aluminum. How has his work changed over the years?

"It has become more professional, and I ascribe this to the American artists I met the first time I was in Edinburgh in 1961 and 1962.

"All the important breakthroughs in ceramics in the United States were known in Edinburgh, the breaking of the classic traditions of ceramics — the 'clay can and clay can't' school of thought."

Locke was studying drawing, painting and history of art. "There was a crazy madness going on I couldn't understand at first. But within a few months, a short time, I was converted. I began to see what they were doing. They weren't afraid to make fools of themselves.

"The American potters didn't understand problems; they understood solutions.

"I think the more interesting of the European artists in my view are those who have made contact with this American approach, drive, philosophy."

Locke paused a minute to reflect upon what he was saying, and then changed his mind: "It isn't a philosophy in a sense, it's a drive.

"I discovered American art at a time when American artists had not discovered American art. Nobody was talking about Pollack and Kline. I honestly thought it was the greatest thing that had ever happened — the New York School. It changed my approach to my work, in answer to your question."

Upon arriving in Arizona, where the work of Beth Ames Swartz and Merrill Mahaffey captivates him, Locke "noticed work by artists whose work I'd never seen. And, I was struck by the fact that the work was good."

Arizona, according to Locke, is going to attract artists from a wide international background, which he calls a ring, a circle.

"There is a very powerful international style, but when I came here I found artists who were not in that ring.

"There are two groups of artists here," Locke stated, "the internationally known, whose work could have been done anywhere, and those artists whose work could only be done in the Southwest — the cowboy artists, the tourist trade artists."

Great artists, visual and otherwise, "would want to come here for the same historical reasons Americans wanted to travel to Paris. In the last century Paris was *the* great center."

Having been here a year, Locke, whose work can be seen locally at Ianuzzi Night Gallery, has fallen in love with the surroundings and the people; his productivity as a creator has virtually skyrocketed, so much so that he is applying for U.S. citizenship.

He has a youth, an energy, and a *joie de vivre* that certainly belies his age. How does he do it?

"I never worry, and I drink a very good class of vodka," he responded with a grin. □