

HOSTLER
BURROWS



RALPH DRAZIO (American, 1922-2004)
TOTEM, ca. 1970
Mixed woods
102" H x 19" D

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Ralph Dorazio (1922-2004) was an American modernist sculptor who drew inspiration from the New York City avant-garde scene in the 1960s and 70s. Dorazio collaborated with modern dance pioneer Erick Hawkins and composer Lucia Dlugoszewski, designing sets, props, costumes and musical instruments for their performances, which served as artworks in their own right. He was recognized namely for his consummate craftsmanship and devotion to the organic nature of wood, and produced many sculptures within that medium, which embody the music and movement of the time.

Dorazio was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1922. In 1947, he moved to New York City after his service in the Second World War. There he undertook to study painting and sculpture, and was apprenticed to both Jose DeKreeft and Arthur Keissler.

Dorazio came to sculpting as his primary pursuit. He found that painting was lacking in a certain depth and dimension he desired to create, and would often remark that his paintings could be improved and perfected if only he could bend them. Dorazio loved working with wood especially, and guided by the types of wood he used, intimately familiar with the defining characteristics of the texture and color of each variety, he would extoll the secret qualities of the medium, sculpting it into shapes that expressed the wood's very essence.

Dorazio lived and worked with his wife Mary in the same studio on 23rd Street for over forty years, and it was there that he designed sets and costumes for Erick Hawkins Dance Company, which also commissioned works from artists such as Isamu Noguchi, Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell. Many of Dorazio's wooden sculptures, however, were resultant of his private creative endeavors, and he expressed no intent or desire to sell them. Dorazio relied on his teaching roles at Pratt University and the Fabrizio Art School for income.

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Both in the public and private realms, Dorazio's work embodied a singular appeal: while at once totemic and dynamic, they beckoned the viewer to understand Dorazio's treatment of the wood to the end of pure artistry. Hawkins perceived that perfectly:

Stage objects are worse than useless, however... I am satisfied only by the approach of artists like Isamu Noguchi and Ralph Dorazio, who have known the principle that [the artwork they produce for the stage] must be beautiful in its own materials, in its own right.¹

Far from a prop, Hawkins treated Dorazio's work as its own artistic entity, akin to one of his dancers. Dorazio approached the material as he saw it: elegant, simple and beautiful. Bearing this in mind, he choreographed the innate sculptural qualities of the wood as much as Hawkins did choreographed the movement of his dancers.

¹ Cohen, Jeanne, Selma. *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*. Pp 49-50.