

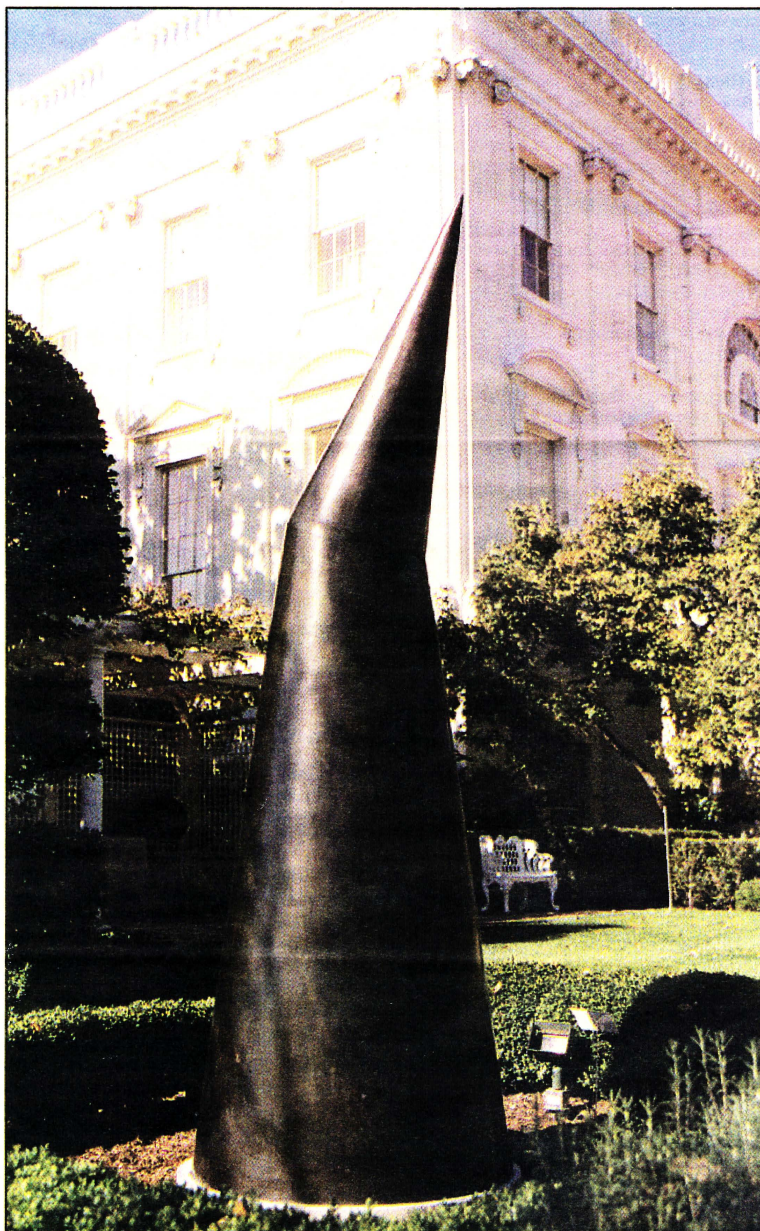
# The Washington Post

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1996

W H I T E H O U S E

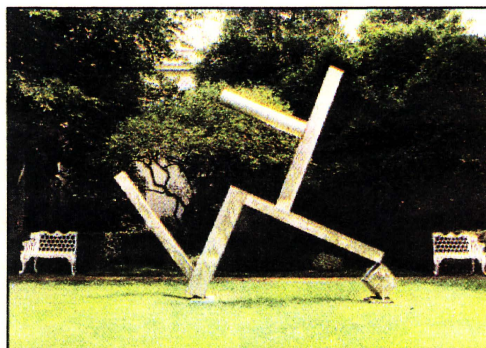
## A Test of Tradition

*The Continuing Attraction of Contemporary Sculptures*



Robert Therrien's untitled 1985 bronze sculpture was lent by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTOS



A stainless steel sculpture by the late David Smith dances between benches on the White House lawn.

By Sarah Booth Conroy

**B**efore President Bill Clinton extolled a "Bridge to the Future" and Candidate Robert Dole touted one to the past, Hillary Rodham Clinton bridged the moat between art of past and present at the White House.

Her footbridge is a series of 20th-century American sculpture exhibits in the White House First Ladies Garden. The works, shown in four installations starting in October 1994, were chosen respectively from museums in the Midwest, Southeast, Southwest and Northeast, each on view for six months.

The fifth in the series—selected from Washington's National Gallery of Art, the Hirshhorn and the Museums of Women in the Arts and of American Art—opens the first week in October and continues through March 1997. Earl (Rusty) Powell, NGA's director, is organizing the exhibit. Mrs. Clinton inaugurated the White House exhibitions of contemporary art—mindful, she said, of onslaughts against government support of artists as well as cuts in appropriations for the arts and humanities endowments.

She admitted to another reason. "I always loved sculpture. My husband and I spent our first date in an art gallery's garden filled with American sculpture."

And still another: Since the first exhibit was installed, after days doubtless filled with unsolvable stresses and pressing problems, Mrs. Clinton has been often sighted, sitting on a bench in the First Ladies Garden, looking at the sculpture, perhaps for answers, or at least consolation.

True, Mrs. Clinton said, the sculpture causes "discussions, even arguments" among the million or more public visitors, who see the display through the

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# Sculpture

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glass walls of the East Colonnade. Yet visitors' responses, for or against, she believes, make the point that art—the vision of “power to imagine and create”—should be accessible to all.

By placing the exhibit in the garden rather than the house, Mrs. Clinton admits, she has tried to extend the time boundaries of the White House, but carefully, not to offend tradition.

Most of the sculptural works shown are a long way from the small statue of a demure girl with a watering can, which initially presided over the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden. After Lady Bird Johnson instigated the rose garden's completion, she renamed it the East Garden. Horticulturist and philanthropist Rachel Lambert Mellon, of Upperville, Va., was responsible for the rose garden design in collaboration with a Washington landscape architect, the late Perry Wheeler. Irvin Martin Williams, head gardener, executed it during the Johnson administration.

Neither the sculpture nor the contemporary artcrafts displayed earlier by the Clintons are part of the White House permanent collection. After six months, the sculptures go back to their museums. The crafts will end up in the Clinton library but will be lent to other venues, including, by request, the White House.

Longtime White House Chief Curator Rex Scouten said that in the beginning he had anticipated “trouble” over showing the contemporary works in the garden. “But the exhibits have been received extremely well,” he said. “The only criticisms . . . have come from those who didn't understand that the sculpture wasn't going to be part of the permanent collection. The exhibits have certainly exposed a lot of people to sculpture—about 1,250,000 a year.”

“The response has been fabulous,” said J. Carter Brown, a member of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House. “Some people were skeptical at the beginning at the idea of showing sculpture of diverse taste, the work of living artists, at the White House.” However, he said, by selecting work from different regional museums, installing the exhibits in the garden and limiting the time each exhibit is in place, “the objections were defused.”

So far, 47 pieces by some of the country's best-known sculptors have stood in the garden—ranging from Mark di Suvero, George Rickey, David Smith, Georgia O'Keefe, Donald Lipski, Alexander Calder and Louise Nevelson, to new artists



OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO

**Copper and steel “Vertical Void” by Carol Hepper was lent by the Orlando Museum of Art.**

who've only recently made it to major museums.

The sculptures range widely. A mahogany mother and child by Elizabeth Catlett, in the second show, was perhaps nearest to a classic work. The current display, closing Sept. 27, includes, as well more classic sculpture materials, Mrs. Clinton

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noted, found objects—“twigs from the back yard, old tires, pennies, leaves and sardine skeletons.”

To calm the qualms of the Secret Service, Lipski's two steel balls—mooring buoys inset with corroded pennies mounted (heads up on one, tails on the other)—were escorted by National Gallery of Art conservators to a nearby naval ordnance center to be examined by a sonar scanner. They were pronounced not explosive.

Scouten said rain and wind don't affect the works. “The biggest problem has been birds.”

Thinking through past efforts to show support for American artists, White House associate curator Betty Monkman said that in the past, President's House encouragement of arts—except

concerts—was smaller and shorter.

Mrs. Clinton's project represents a warming trend toward living American artists—though certainly only on the edges—for the White House. She credits her friend, Arkansas designer Kaki Hockersmith, a member of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, for the sculpture exhibitions. “We agreed that the garden looked as though it had been landscaped for sculpture,” she said. “So with Kaki's idea and [National Gallery of Art director emeritus] J. Carter Brown's arm-twisting,” help was enlisted of the Committee, the White House Historical Association, the Association of Art Museum Directors and the foundation of philanthropists Iris Cantor and the late B. Gerald Cantor.

The sculpture exhibit is an example of the increased support, advice and consent of the White House Preservation Committee in this administration. It was not as active during the Bush and Reagan terms.

On March 7, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson by Executive Order established the Committee for the Preservation of the White House overseeing “decor and arrangements best suited to enhance the historic and artistic values of the White House.”

The State Floors' red, blue and green parlors, East Room and State Dining Room are frozen in time to the Federalist period, the first third of the 19th century. (The White House was first occupied by John and Abigail Adams in November 1800.) The permanent collections of furnishings, objects and art—except for portraits of presidents and wives past and present—are limited to that time period, and approval by the committee.

The sculpture exhibits broaden rather than limit art at the White House. Mrs. Clinton believes in her bridge of art. “Today, we confront challenging decisions about the kind of people we are, the society we wish to have, the country we will live in, as we move into the 21st century,” she said. As for the Clintons, she aims to “celebrate the genius of American artists . . . art reflects the depth of human emotion and experience.”

*Sarah Booth Conroy writes the Chronicles column in The Past's Style section.*

*Twentieth Century American Sculpture in the White House's East Garden can be seen from the East Wing Colonnade on the regular White House tours most Tuesdays through Saturdays. Visitors during the Oct. 12 and 13 Garden Tours will have a closer look at the new Fifth Exhibit. Admission to all White House tours is free. Call 202-456-7041 for details.*

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