

# Sculpture for International Sculpture Day

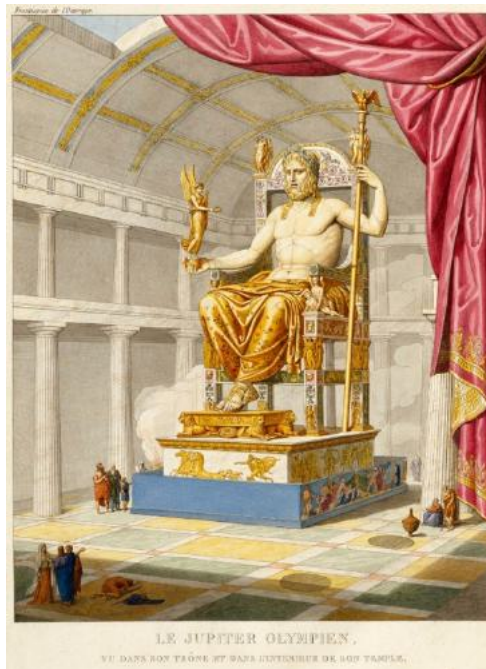
By Kathy McShane

Today, April 25, 2026 is International Sculpture Day which takes place annually on the last Saturday of April. The objective of this international celebration is to advance the creation and understanding of sculpture and its unique contribution to society.

This piece is intended to provide a small sampling of sculptors and their work to illustrate the evolution of the medium over the centuries.

**Pheidias** (c. 480-430 BC) was a sculptor from Ancient Greece. His statue of *Zeus at Olympia* was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was a chryselephantine statue, over 40 feet tall. Chryselephantine sculptures were built around a wooden frame to which were attached ivory slabs to represent skin, sheets of gold leaf to represent garments, armor, and hair, and other details. Semi-precious and precious stones were sometimes used for such details as eyes and jewelry. Created c. 435 BC, *Zeus at Olympia* featured the Greek god sitting on a cedarwood throne embellished with ebony, ivory, gold and precious stones.

The statue was lost or destroyed before the end of the 6th century AD, with conflicting accounts of the date and circumstances. Most historians believe it was transported to Constantinople following the forbidding of pagan cults by the Emperor Theodosius. Details of its form are known only from ancient Greek descriptions and representations on coins and art. The 2<sup>nd</sup>-century geographer, Pausanias, left a detailed description of the statue. The French archaeologist and art historian, Antoine-Chrysotome Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1845) produced what is considered to be the most influential modern reconstruction of the statue in his 1814 treatise, *Le Jupiter Olympien*.



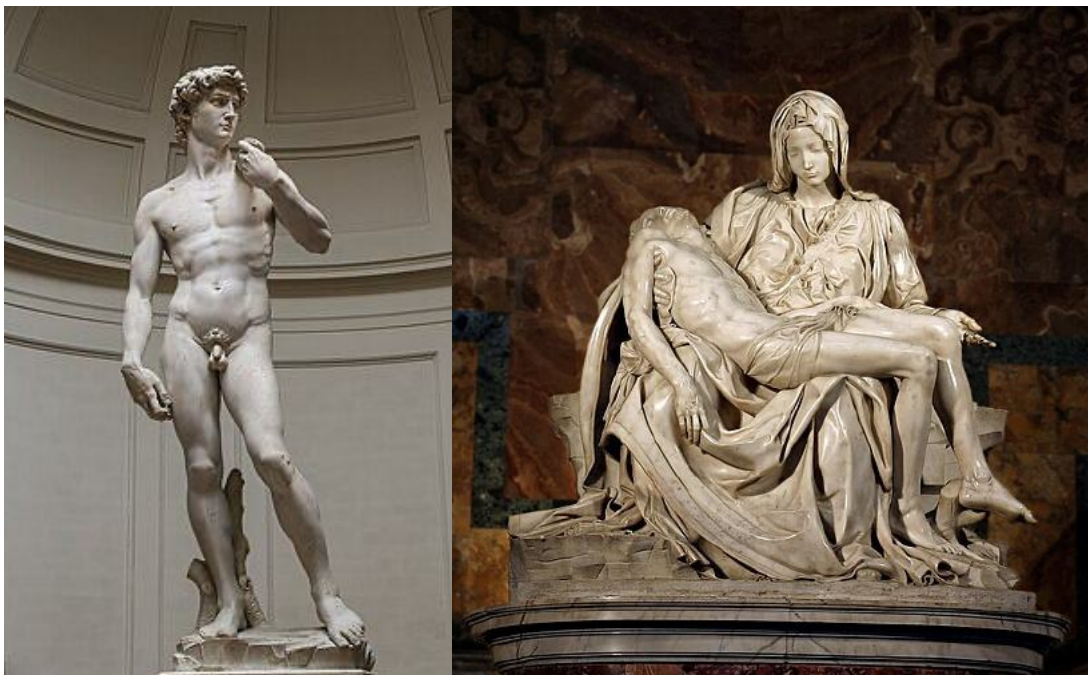
LE JUPITER OLYMPIEN.  
VU DANS SON TRÔNE ET DANS L'INTÉRIEUR DE SON TEMPLE.

**Donatello** (Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi) (1386-1466) was an Early Renaissance sculptor who worked in both marble and bronze. The artist was heavily influenced by Classic Roman sculpture. Donatello's bronze *David* (c. 1440), now in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, is Donatello's most famous work. It is arguably the first major work of Renaissance sculpture and is the first known free-standing nude statue produced since antiquity. The statue was commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici for the courtyard of his Palazzo Medici.



**Michelangelo** (di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni) (1475-1564) was considered the greatest living artist in his lifetime. In addition to being a sculptor, the High Renaissance artist was also a painter, architect and poet. As such, he is known as a *uomo universale* (universal man). While creating in multiple media, Michelangelo thought of himself as primarily a sculptor, one who worked in marble his entire life.

Among his best-known sculptures is the universally recognized *David* (1501-04). The original 19-foot-tall statue is in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence. The only work actually signed by Michelangelo is the *Pietà* (1498-1499) which is found in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. The statue has been damaged several times, including in 1972 when it was badly damaged with a hammer by the Hungarian geologist Laszlo Toth. Toth claimed that he was Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. The sculpture is now protected by a glass plate against further attacks. Both *David* and the *Pietà* were completed before Michelangelo reached the age of 30.



The Italian Baroque artist, **Gian Lorenzo Bernini** (1598-1680), was arguably the best sculptor of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was also a gifted architect, painter and city planner. Bernini also wrote plays, designed the sets, directed and acted in them. He was a prolific and successful artist, benefitting from the patronage of several popes. With his broad range of talents, Bernini, like Michelangelo, has been called a *uomo universale*.

Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* has been called the greatest single example of the sculptor's mature art. The *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* is the focal point of the Cornaro Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. Carved out of white marble between 1647 and 1652, the sculpture was, according to Bernini, created based on Theresa of Avila's own account of her spiritual experience. Bernini's sculpture depicts the moment an angel is about to pierce Saint Theresa's heart with a fiery spear and, according to Saint Theresa, leave her filled with the love of God. The sculpture has not been without controversy: the artist has been accused of indecency by introducing a daring degree of eroticism to the Saint's mystical experience.



**Antonio Canova** (1757-1852) was an Italian sculptor, referred to by the Metropolitan Museum of Art as the greatest Neoclassical sculptor of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He was renowned for his carving talent, including his ability to make marble look as soft as real flesh. His patrons were varied and included popes, Napoleon Bonaparte and, in the latter part of his career, British royalty. He was widely mourned when he died. His hand was preserved at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice; his heart was placed in a tomb built by Neoclassical sculptors based on Canova's own design.

One of Canova's most emblematic pieces is *The Three Graces* (1814-1817), which depicts the three daughters of Zeus, each of whom possesses a gift to bestow upon humanity (mirth, elegance, youth and beauty). The sculpture, on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, was commissioned by the Duke of Bedford, who praised "the morbidezza, – that look of living softness given to the surface of the marble, which appears as if it would yield to the touch".



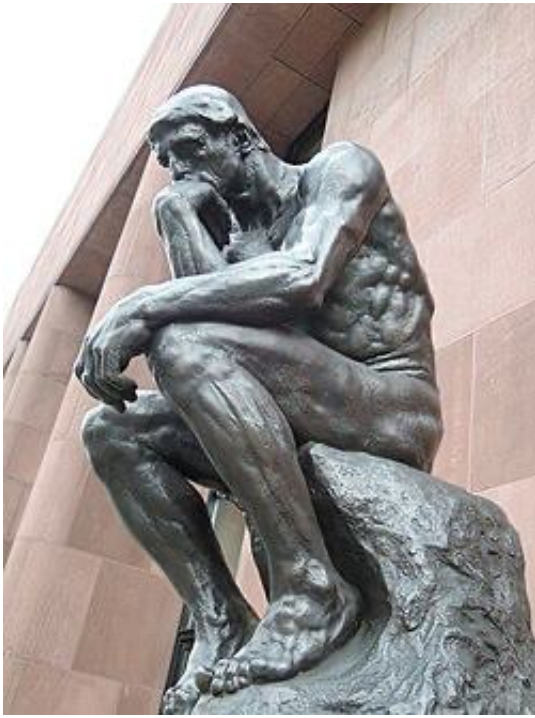
The French artist, **Edgar Degas** (1834-1917), is considered to be one of the founders of Impressionism, although Degas himself rejected the characterization, preferring to be called a realist. He is particularly associated with the subject of dance. Indeed, over half of his works, both sculptures and paintings, depict dancers. Only once did Degas exhibit his sculptures publicly. *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*, shown below was exhibited in the 1881 Impressionist show in Paris (although not particularly Impressionist in style). The dancer was modeled in wax and wore a real bodice, stockings, shoes, tulle skirt, and horsehair wig with a satin ribbon. Degas' unorthodox use of materials, as well as its realism, astonished Degas' contemporaries. Upon Degas' death in 1917, approximately 150 previously unseen sculptures were found in his studio, many in various stages of deterioration.



**Auguste Rodin** (1840-1917) is generally considered to be the founder of modern sculpture and considered by some art critics to be the greatest portraitist in the history of sculpture. His work proved to be controversial as it departed from the prevailing themes and decorative style. Nevertheless, his naturalistic approach to sculpting the human form eventually won him favor from the artistic community. By 1900, he was the preeminent French sculptor of his time.

Rodin's most important works are universally recognizable: *The Kiss* (1882), *The Thinker* (1904), *The Burghers of Calais* (1884-1889), *The Gates of Hell* (1880-1917). *The Thinker* was originally designed as part of *The Gates of Hell* (Dante's Inferno); some commentators believe it was intended to represent Dante; others have concluded that it was supposed to be a self-portrait. *The Kiss* was also supposed to be part of the *Gates of Hell*, with the couple modeled after the two lovers Paolo and Francesca from The Divine Comedy. *The Burghers of Calais* was a commissioned monument commemorating an event from the Hundred Years War when six prominent citizens of Calais offered their lives to the English King Edward VII in exchange for sparing their city. These four sculptures are depicted below.





**Frederic Remington** (1861-1909), according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was “a chronicler par excellence of the old American West”. Theodore Roosevelt said of Remington, “He is, of course, one of the most typical American artists we have ever had, and he has portrayed a most characteristic and yet vanishing type of American life. The soldier, the cowboy and rancher, the Indian, the horses and the cattle of the plains, will live in his pictures and bronzes, I verily believe, for all time.”

*The Bronco Buster* (1895) was Frederic Remington’s first sculpture. It was also the first sculpture of an American cowboy cast in bronze. The sculpture was copyrighted and more than 275 authorized bronze casts were produced by New York foundries. It became the most popular small bronze sculpture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the authorized casts is displayed in the Oval Office of the White House.



**Constantin Brâncuși** (1876-1957) was a Romanian pioneer of modern abstract sculpture. According to the Tate Museum, Brâncuși is the patriarch of modern sculpture. After moving to Paris in 1904, the sculptor spent several weeks in the studio of Rodin, but was convinced he needed to free himself from Rodin's influence, reputedly claiming, "No other tree can grow in the shadow of a great oak." Also, according to the Guggenheim, "I felt that I was not giving anything by following the conventional mode of sculpture." According to the Nasher Sculpture Center (Dallas, TX), Brancusi's *The Kiss* (1907-8) was his "' road to Damascus' moment in which he distinguished himself from the towering figure of Rodin through the technique of carving directly into stone and cultivating a pristine and sensuous style that drew on the examples of African tribal and ancient Cycladic figures." The Nasher Sculpture Museum has one of the plaster casts in its collection; the original is in the Craiova Art Museum in Romania.



**Augusta Savage** (1892-1962) was the seventh of fourteen children, born to a poor Methodist minister who strongly discouraged her interest in art. Savage once said, "My father licked me four or five times a week and almost whipped all the art out of me." During the mid-1920s, Savage earned a reputation as a portrait sculptor. Her bust of her nephew, entitled *Gamin* (1929), won her a fellowship to study in Paris. The statue was made with white plaster covered with brown paint mixed with shoe polish because bronze was too expensive.

Savage was commissioned to create a sculpture symbolizing the musical contributions of African Americans for the 1939 New York World's Fair. The resulting *The Harp* was inspired by the lyrics of James Weldon Johnson's poem *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. *The Harp* was Savage's largest work and her last major commission. Unfortunately, the sculpture was destroyed by a bulldozer after the close of the fair. In fact, approximately 70 of the approximately 160 documented works by Savage have been lost because Savage never had the means or support to cast them in more durable material.



**Alberto Giacometti** (1901-1966) was a Swiss sculptor as well as painter, draftsman and printmaker. His early style reflects the influences of both Cubism and Surrealism, although he was expelled from the Surrealist movement by its leader André Breton due to his return to representational modeling. Giacometti's sculptures during the late 1930s and early 1940s were most often minuscule. He would start with a large figure and work it down to perhaps three inches. In Giacometti's own words: "Working from life, I ended up creating tiny three-centimeter sculptures. I did it despite myself. I couldn't understand it. I started big and ended minuscule. Only the minuscule struck me as a resemblance [to the model]. I understood it later: a person is not seen as a whole until one draws away and the person grows tiny."

By the end of World War II, he had changed course. "In 1945 I swore to myself that I didn't want to let my figures get smaller and smaller, not even by an inch...You don't feel your weight. I wanted – without having thought about it – to reproduce this lightness, and that by making the body so thin."

Giacometti's 1960 *L'Homme Qui Marche I* (*The Walking Man I*) is perhaps his most famous sculpture. The sculpture and a portrait of the artist appeared on the 100 Swiss Franc note from 1998 to 2021. In 2010, it sold at auction for \$104 million, surpassed in 2015 by the sale of his 1947 *L'Homme Au Doigt* (*The Man with the Finger*). At a price of \$141 million, the painted bronze *L'Homme au Doigt* became the most expensive sculpture ever to sell at auction. These two sculptures are depicted below.



**Barbara Hepworth** (1903-1975) was a modernist British sculptor and one of the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one of the few women sculptors to achieve international prominence. She was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1965. Hepworth was the first to sculpt the pierced pieces that are characteristic of her work (as well as of Henry Moore's). Her New York Times obituary said, "For many museumgoers the angular, wraithlike Dame Barbara Hepworth was the lady who put the hole in modern sculpture and made it her signature. The momentous event occurred in 1931, when, in a flash of daring, she pierced a hole in a small carving in order to give the figure a sense of flow and to lead the viewer's eye around it."

During her lifetime, Hepworth created some 500 sculptures, many of them during the 30 years she lived in the St. Ives artists' colony in Cornwall. In St. Ives, she worked in a secluded garden, surrounded by her sculptures. The garden is now part of the Barbara Hepworth Museum (which is part of Tate St. Ives). The link below is to a video that will show you some of the pieces in the sculpture garden. Hepworth died in a fire in her studio in 1975, widely believed to have been caused by her smoking in bed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP-w22KmAN4>

The first photo below is of Hepworth's first "pierced" sculpture (*Pierced Form*) carved from pink alabaster (1931), which was subsequently destroyed by German bombing of London during World War II. The second is of the 21-foot bronze sculpture *Single Form* (1961-1964), commissioned as a memorial to the United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld who died in an airplane crash in 1961.



**Henry Moore** (1898-1986) was, according to the Henry Moore Foundation, “arguably the most internationally celebrated sculptor of the period.” The British sculptor is renowned for his semi-abstract bronzes. Often his pieces are abstractions of the human form, frequently reclining. Some of his pieces are monumental in size; his largest (*Large Reclining Figure*, 1984) is over 30 feet long.

In 1977, Moore and his family established the Moore Foundation to encourage public appreciation of the arts (and to mitigate the artist’s and his estate’s tax burden). Today, the Henry Moore Foundation manages the artist’s former home at Perry Green in Hertfordshire as a visitor destination, with 70 acres of sculpture grounds as well as his restored house and studios.

One of Moore’s large sculptures was actually stolen from the grounds of the Moore Foundation. In 2005, the two-ton sculpture was hoisted with a crane onto a flatbed truck; it has never been recovered.

Moore’s sculptures typically have simple names. When his niece asked him why this is the case, Moore responded, “All art should have a certain mystery and should make demands on the spectator. Giving a sculpture or a drawing too explicit a title takes away part of that mystery so that the spectator moves on to the next object, making no effort to ponder the meaning of what he has just seen.”

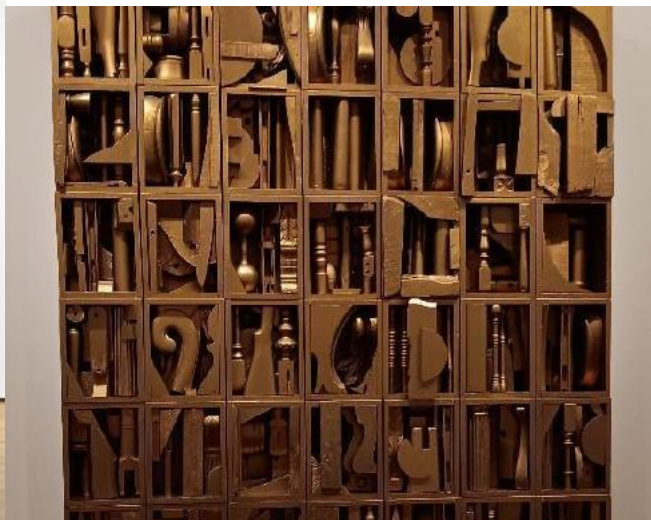
The two sculptures shown below are Moore’s *Reclining Figure*, installed at NYC’s Lincoln Center in 1965 and *Mother and Child-Hood* (1980) located at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London.



**Louise Nevelson** (1899-1988) was an American sculptor, a pioneer of environmental sculpture, known best for her wall sculptures. *The New York Times* called her “an artist of the first rank, and among the most arresting people of her time.” She apparently knew she was going to be an artist from an early age. When asked as a nine-year-old child what she wanted to be when she grew up, Nevelson replied, “A sculptor. I don't want color to help me.” However, she would be a practicing artist for 30 years before she made her first sale. During her lifetime, she was almost as well known for her theatrical attire and personality as her art. In its obituary for the artist, *The New York Times* said, “she was to the end of her days a spectacular figure for whom no combination of clothing, headgear and jewelry could be too startling.”

Her assemblages were often made of found objects. As Nevelson herself said, “When you put things together, things that other people have thrown out, you're really bringing them to life – a spiritual life that surpasses the life for which they were originally created.” Nevelson’s pieces were typically monochromatic, often black. As she once observed, “But when I fell in love with black, it contained all color. It wasn’t a negation of color. It was an acceptance. Because black encompasses all colors. Black is the most aristocratic color of all.... You can be quiet and it contains the whole thing.”

The first photo below is of Nevelson’s *Sky Cathedral* (1958), found at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City., The sculptural assemblage stands over 11 feet tall and 10 feet wide and is comprised of pieces of wood that the artist joined together, creating close to 60 compartments, and then coated in black paint. The second photo is of *Dawn* (1962), which features numerous found objects, including baseball bats, rolling pins and bits of broken furniture.





With a career spanning eight decades from the 1930s until 2010, The French-American artist, **Louise Bourgeois** (1911-2010), is one of the great figures of modern and contemporary art. She is best known for her large-scale sculptures and installations inspired by her memories and experiences.

Inspired by the Surrealists, in the early 1940's after emigrating from France to the US, Bourgeois created a series of totemic sculptures that evoke the human form and were referred to as Personages. The artist explained that the sculptures were a way of recreating all the people she had left behind. In an early piece (1941) shown here, entitled *Quarantania*, the figures not only represent a family of human figures, but also represent shuttles, one of the tools that Bourgeois' parents used when they restored tapestries at their family-owned business.

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Bourgeois started crafting her iconic spider sculptures late in her career. Her 30-foot-tall spider statue, *Maman (Ama)*, 1999, includes a sac containing 32 marble eggs and its abdomen and thorax are made of ribbed bronze. According to Bourgeois, "The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother."



**Claes Oldenburg** (Swedish-American, 1929-2022) is known for his public art installations, frequently featuring replicas of everyday objects. He is also known for his soft sculpture versions of everyday objects. *Floor Burger* (1962) marks Oldenburg's journey to making soft sculptures that were focused on "everyday items presented on a magnified scale. It stands 4 feet, 4 inches tall, by 7 feet in diameter. *Floor Burger* (originally titled *Giant Hamburger*) is made of canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes, painted with latex and Liquitex. The piece's acquisition by the Art Gallery of Ontario was not without protest from the public, who viewed the sculpture as not appropriate for the gallery. The soft sculpture is iconic because it was the first time sculpture had been associated with Pop Art.



The Japanese artist, **Yayoi Kusama** (1929 - present), is one of the most popular contemporary artists in the world. She works primarily in sculpture and installation, but is also active in painting, performance, film, fashion, and literature. Her work is so popular that visitors to museums line up for hours only to be allowed to view one of her installations for a minute. Part of the explanation for her popularity is Instagram: viewers take selfies at her installations and post them. Kusama has lived voluntarily since 1977 at the Seiwa Hospital for the Mentally Ill in Tokyo as a result of her obsessive-compulsive neurosis.

Kusama is famous for her repeating polka dot patterns. She has been called the “Princess of Polka Dots”. Apparently, her obsession with polka dots is tied to a childhood trauma. She also has a passion for pumpkins, which she views as representative of stability, modesty and comfort. The piece here (*Pumpkin*, 1990) combines pumpkins and polka dots.



The piece here is one of three gargantuan flowers that were part of a 2023 solo exhibition at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York City, entitled *I Spend Each Day Embracing Flowers*.



The American sculptor, **Deborah Butterfield** (1949-present), is best known for her semi-abstract depictions of horses constructed with reclaimed and found materials including wood and recycled metal. Butterfield credits her birth on Kentucky Derby day as the inspiration for her passion for horses. Originally Butterfield created life-sized forms using mud, clay, and stick, then transitioned to using scrap metal and found steel. Later, the artist started to cast her wooden assemblages in bronze, while preserving the texture and form of the original material. In a 2004 article in the *New York Times*, art critic Grace Glueck said, "By now Deborah Butterfield's skeletal horses, fashioned of found wood, metal and other detritus, are familiar to almost a generation of gallerygoers. Yet they still have a freshness, which comes from the artist's regard for them as individuals. In fact, training, riding and bonding with horses, as she does at her Montana farm, she thinks of them as personifications of herself ... They seem to express the very spirit of equine existence." The photo below is of Butterfield's 2002 sculpture, *Styx*, made of driftwood and cast in bronze.



The work of American artist **Jeff Koons** (1955-present) deals with popular culture and everyday objects. The artist cites Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol as his biggest sources of inspiration. Among his sculptures is a 43-foot-tall topiary sculpture of a West Highland White Terrier puppy, executed in a variety of flowers executed on a transparent color-coated chrome stainless steel substructure. The sculpture (*Puppy*, 1992) was originally installed at Arolsen Castle in Germany, dismantled and re-erected in Sydney, Australia, then purchased by the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation and installed outside the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. The sculpture is covered by approximately 38,000 flowers, which are changed twice a year: begonias, impatiens, and petunias in the spring and summer and pansies in the fall and winter.



Koons is closely associated with his balloon animal sculptures. Between 1994 and 2000, he created a series of stainless-steel Balloon Dogs, each a different color (blue, magenta, yellow, orange and red). The Balloon Dogs are part of the artist's *Celebration* series, comprised of 16 sculptures and 16 photorealistic paintings. *Balloon Dog (Orange)* is pictured here.