ROUSSIL, Robert
(b. Montréal, QC, 1925)

Robert Roussil\(^1\) attended the elementary school École Saint-Louis-de-Gonzague where his teacher Henri Bisson introduced him to drawing. At the age of eleven, he had an after-school job making deliveries for a pharmacy, but two years later he quit school to make deliveries full-time; his father was unemployed on occasion and Roussil was needed to help his family out. At seventeen years of age, he enrolled in the army (Régiment de Maisonneuve) and was posted in England, Belgium and Holland. Leaving the army three years later, he took advantage of a three-year bursary to study (rather than taking a job in the public service), opting to enroll directly in courses in fine arts, with an interest in sculpture, at the School of Art and Design at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; here he won two scholarships and a first prize for sculpture. He also studied at the Montreal Artists School\(^2\) (c.1946) – his teachers included Arthur Lismer, Goodridge Roberts, Louis Archambault, and Jacques de Tonnancour. He became interested in working with stone in 1945, but then turned to wood a few years later. In the summer of 1949, Roussil had his first solo exhibition at Le Librarie Tranquille. That same year, he completed his first major work, *La famille*, but the controversy generated by the nude figures in this sculpture, despite being based on his own family, eventually led to his losing his teaching post at the Museum School. By 1953, Roussil was gaining much attention from collectors as well as being sought out for public commissions; his first monumental public sculpture, commissioned by a Toronto firm, was *Galaxie humaine* (1956), made of wood and measured more than seven meters high. It was also the first piece by Roussil to be dismantled (and later lost). In 1956, Roussil moved to France – a voluntary exile – where he set up a studio and workshop at Tourrettes-sur-Loup in an old mill ten miles from Nice in the south of France. He found freedom and liberty of expression there, but made several trips back to Montreal over the years to execute commissions and hold exhibitions. In 1964 he organized the first international sculpture symposium in Canada (Montreal), and the following year he had his first retrospective, *Vingt ans de sculpture*, at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal where he showed sculptures made in wood, bronze (and other metals), stone, ceramics, and plaster.\(^3\)

For Roussil, scale was important for his large public commissions, but he only referred to his “small” sculptures as anything being smaller than two meters in height. He never stuck with

---

\(^1\) Robert Roussil was born in Montreal, QC, on August 18, 1925.
\(^2\) The Montreal Artists School was founded in 1946 by Ghitta Caiserman-Roth and Alfred Pinsky and run until 1952.
\(^3\) Along with his sculpture, Roussil also exhibited paintings and drawings in gouache, water colour, ink and charcoal in his retrospective, *Vingt ans de sculpture*, at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, November 18, 1965 – January 2, 1966. He also published his *Manifeste Roussil* at this time.
one material – he worked in bronze\(^4\) when he could, and the same for wood, stone, etc. Whatever he had on hand he worked with, and when he had more than one material to choose form, he’d work with all available. The two bronze sculptures by Roussil being presented for acquisition here, *The Dove* (1960) and *The Eagle* (1965) were made during his significant *bird* period of the 1960s; the organic shapes of his bird sculptures of various media immediately follow the artist’s exploration of figurative works where his treatment of wood informed his use of bronze. Thereafter, Roussil’s bird-like figures and his large-scale public installations shared the same vocabulary of line, composition and shape regardless of scale. He worked in small scale with both hollow-cast (or lost-wax casting) and poured bronze for two distinct effects as evident in the two sculptures discussed here: *The Dove* has light, soft, peaceful curving lines and *The Eagle* is heavy, rough, strong and powerful. Both sculptures show his excellent handling of this difficult medium, especially in relation to his subject matter.

Robert Roussil’s *bird* works were sculpted at the same time he was working on massive, outdoor public sculpture commissions both in Canada and abroad. The organic language used in his small bronze works informed his large-scale works and vice-versa. While most artists choose one scale or another, Roussil was successful for both and was recognized internationally for his contribution to sculpture.

---

**Please cite in the following manner:**

Christopher Davidson, Acquisition Proposal for Robert Roussil’s *The Dove*, and *The Eagle*, accession #45469 and #45470, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.

---

\(^4\) At the beginning, Roussil did not have his own foundry in his studio and opted to send his gelatin moulds to the Marinelli Foundry in Florence, Italy. In correspondence to Max Stern dated 5 October 1961, Roussil states that he “Will soon have my own foundry.” (File notes from Charles Hill) We can presume that Roussil had *The Dove* cast by someone else (most likely at the Marinelli Foundry), but it is entirely possible that he poured *The Eagle* himself at Tourrettes-sur-Loup. He destroys the moulds after completing each bronze sculpture.