

Richard Hunt and the University of Chicago

The artistic odyssey of sculptor Richard Hunt is intricately woven with the intellectual and architectural landscape of the University of Chicago (UChicago), creating a relationship that spanned his life and profoundly shaped his creative vision. Hunt holds a unique distinction within this environment: he remains the only non-white public artist with art displayed across the University of Chicago campus.

From his formative years as a teenage employee to his later status as a venerated master, Hunt's connection to the institution was lifelong. The university's emblem, curriculum, Gothic architecture, and intellectual milieu all served as powerful catalysts for Hunt's exploration of transformation, mythology, and the African American experience.

Biomorphic Beginnings: The Zoological Lab and Cobb Gate

The earliest threads of this connection were spun between 1951 and 1957, when Hunt worked part-time as a technician in the University of Chicago's zoological laboratory. Hunt began working at UChicago as a high school student from Englewood and continued his employment there during his undergraduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

During these years, his daily environment deeply informed his creative subconscious:

- **Architectural Inspiration:** He regularly passed through the Gothic Cobb Gate, with its medieval winged gargoyles, on his way to work.
- **Scientific Inspiration:** His time in the lab had the most profound impact, directly informing his visual vocabulary with biomorphic and zoomorphic forms that would persist throughout his career.

The University of Chicago marks the true beginning of Hunt's fascination with biomorphic forms. This fusion of biological and mechanical elements is evident in significant early works held by the Smart Museum of Art, such as *Organic Construction, Number 10* (1961) and *Winged Hybrid Figure, Number 3* (1965), which reflect the "hybrid figures" he developed by combining organic and industrial elements.

The Myth of the Phoenix: Resilience and Rebirth

This intellectual and visual development was further cemented by the pervasive presence of the phoenix, the central visual element of the University of Chicago. Depicted on the university's coat of arms alongside the Latin motto *Crescat Scientia, Vita Excolatur* (Let knowledge increase so that life may be enriched), the firebird resonated deeply with Hunt.

Hunt's fascination with religious symbolism and mythology—sparked during his youth by watching a crucifixion mural being painted at his church—found a potent metaphor in the phoenix. Rising from the ashes, it symbolized life emerging from destruction and ascendancy over hardship. Author Joseph A. Bailey, II, M.D. described the African American connection: “The phoenix has come to signify a race of people who rise from destruction and are vigorous enough to start anew.”

The theme of rebirth and transformation became a recurring motif in Hunt's oeuvre, inspired in large part by his daily exposure to UChicago's emblematic phoenix and its powerful connotations of resilience within the African American experience.

The Smart Museum of Art and the Monumental *Why?*

Just as the university marked the beginning of Hunt's biomorphic journey, the Smart Museum of Art marked its own institutional beginning with Richard Hunt. When the Smart Museum opened in 1974, Hunt's cast-bronze sculpture, *Why?* (1974), was the very first work installed outdoors by the museum. The history and impact of *Why?* are multi-faceted:

- **The Commission:** The artwork was commissioned in profound memory of revered UChicago professor Samuel Nerlove.
- **The Intercollegiate Link:** This specific work serves as a grand artistic bridge, linking together three premier educational institutions—Northwestern University, UCLA, and the University of Chicago—with a version of *Why?* featured prominently on each campus.

Artistic Lineage: Hunt and John Henry

Standing outside the Smart Museum alongside *Why?* is a sculpture by John Henry. Henry was Hunt's very first studio assistant, beginning their collaboration at Hunt's Cleveland Avenue studio in Chicago before Hunt purchased his famed Lill Avenue space. Hunt later invited Henry

to set up a foundry to produce cast works at the Lill Avenue studio, where Henry worked closely alongside Hunt throughout the 1970s.

Institutional Leadership and *Becoming*

Richard Hunt's foundational relationship with the university matured substantially over the decades. From 1977 to 1997, Hunt served on the Visiting Committee on the Visual Arts, solidifying his role as a vital contributor to the institution's artistic direction.

This lifelong engagement was punctuated by public pieces that bookend his monumental career. Decades after *Why?*, Hunt installed *Becoming* (2021), a welded bronze sculpture gracing the courtyard of the Disciples Divinity House. Installed just two years before his death, *Becoming* represents the enduring nature of his artistic vision—a concept he described as an ongoing conversation between metal's inherent strength and its capacity for fluidity.

Conclusion

The relationship between Richard Hunt and the University of Chicago is a powerful narrative of mutual influence and enduring legacy. From early exposure to zoological forms and Gothic gargoyles to his later institutional leadership, the university provided a vital crucible for Hunt's development. The symbol of the phoenix, echoing personal and collective transformation, was integrated seamlessly into his exploration of rebirth and resilience. As modern visitors and students pass by *Why?* and *Becoming*, they engage with more than mere metal; they encounter the tangible, lifelong dialogue between a world-renowned pioneer and the institution that helped shape his genius.