

Jason Seley

May 20, 1919 — June 23, 1983

About a year and a half after becoming dean of the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning at Cornell University, on July 1, 1980, Jason Seley learned that he had cancer of the lungs and that the condition was beyond the reach of surgery. Another person in such a condition would have resigned and withdrawn from society and would have spent his remaining days in harrowing self-pity. Jason Seley, however, continued to come daily to his office, fulfilled his duties, came often to the Statler, and met his colleagues and friends—and invariably with affability, a gracious smile, and warm civility. He continued to live and work as if he had all of life before him, though Clara, his friends, and associates knew that he must have been suffering excruciating pain. His conduct and bearing during the last year and a half of his life recall a memorable passage in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, written as if to fit Jason's case:

A life is manly, stoical, moral, or philosophical, we say, in proportion as it is less swayed by paltry personal considerations and more by objective ends that call for energy, even though that energy bring personal loss and pain....Even a sick man, unable to be militant outwardly, can carry on the moral warfare. He can willfully turn his attention away from his own future, whether in this world or the next. He can train himself to indifference to his personal drawbacks and immerse himself in whatever objective interests still remain accessible. He can follow public news, and sympathize with other people's affairs. He can cultivate cheerful manners, and be silent about his miseries. He can contemplate whatever ideal aspects of existence his philosophy is able to present to him, and practice whatever duties, such as patience, resignation, trust, his ethical system requires. Such a man lives on his loftiest, largest plane. He is a high-hearted freeman and no pining slave.

During those agonizingly difficult months and days we knew that there moved among us a very special person, a high-hearted freeman who did not pass up the opportunity to live on his loftiest, largest plane. And during the very last several days, when he was bedridden in the hospital and knew that his hours were counted, Jason talked as a man who had achieved reconciliation, peace, and a comfort that was above and beyond all earthly frustrations and indignities. The state of his mind during those hours can again best be described in the words of William James, written as if he had observed Jason Seley:

In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday. The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away.

All his life Jason Seley moved among men and women as one concerned with their interests and problems, and yet one was aware that he all the time preserved a secluded center from which there radiated an inner, secret core of happiness, privacy, and ideality.

Seley was born in Newark, New Jersey. At Cornell, where he received his B.A. degree in 1940, he was influenced to become a sculptor by Kenneth Washburn. During the years 1943-45 he studied modeling under Ossip Zadlkin at the Art Students' League in New York. During the years 1947-49 he and Clara, whom he married in 1942, were in Haiti, where he taught a class in lifemodeling at Le Centre d'Art, of which Albert Mangones, a friend from his undergraduate days at Cornell, was one of the founders; and it was in Haiti that Clara turned from dancing to painting and sculpture. Seley's first exhibition was in 1946 at the centre. (This was in the days before "Papa Doc" Duvalier, when there was artistic ferment in Haiti.) In May 1947 he was back in New York for his first exhibition there, and then the Seleys went back to Haiti, returning to the United States in 1948. During the following year Seley had a Fulbright scholarship in France, where he studied sculpture at the Atelier Gaumond at the École Rationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts. The Seleys traveled in Italy, where Jason looked for and found the equestrian statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni, by Andrea del Verrocchio, an exact and full replica of which stands in Lincoln Park in Newark, which Jason had often seen. "I have been enamored of that statue," he said, "ever since I can remember." Years later Jason was to make his own replica of this statue, which became a part of the Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection at the Empire State Plaza in Albany. The Seleys returned to the United States in September 1950. In 1953 they went back to Haiti for a six-month period, and in September of that year Jason began the academic aspect of his life as a sculptor by becoming a faculty member at Hofstra College. He taught at Hofstra to 1965; then he taught sculpture at New York University from 1965 to 1967. In 1968 he came to Cornell as professor of art and chairman of the Department of Art. He held the latter Position to 1973, and in July 1980 he was appointed dean of the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning.

At first, and for many years, Seley used clay, terra cotta, and plaster as the principal materials to make largely figurative sculpture. Starting in the early 1950s his work became less figurative, and building directly in plaster became more frequent. He also started to use found objects in armature construction. In 1956 Clara found a bumper from the rear of a 1949 Buick Dynaflo, the beauty of which attracted her. They bought it for one dollar. Two years later Jason "saw an armature form in it," and the result was *Random Walk*. As he viewed this piece of sculpture, he "felt that the work was stronger and more volumetric than the work that immediately preceded it." At that point, he said, "I consciously sought out bumpers, using them as armature forms on which to build directly

in plaster.” After a time Jason realized that by this use of the bumpers he was, in fact, obscuring the qualities of the forms that had attracted him in the first place, and so in the winter of 1958-59 he learned to weld and performed welding after that. His work then expressed the material he was using and allowed it to reveal its identity, and this led to his becoming known as the “bumper sculptor.” On one occasion, in 1963, Jason Seley explained his use of bumpers: “I employ auto bumpers, which are, to me, inspirational. I move them around. Put them together. Add. Subtract. Then, if all goes well, something exciting begins to happen. It is like a voyage of discovery, like going somewhere one has not been before.”

In 1968, in reflecting on his own work, he made this significant statement:

I work, I believe, inspired by the nature of my time and place. To me an automobile bumper is an offering of nature's abundance. I am as much concerned with its prehistory as the wood-carver with the growing tree. The bumpers I use are chromium-plated steel of high quality. The individual pieces come in interesting and exciting preformed sculptural shapes that are as much a source of inspiration for me as the irregular shapes of fields tones were for John Flannagan. I use them with the care, thought, and reverence that their infinite grace merits. I do not think of myself as an “automobile” or “junk” sculptor, nor an “assembler.” I am a sculptor facing the challenge of the means and materials of my choice, just as my contemporaries and predecessors face, or have faced, that challenge of their own methods and media.

More recently, in 1980, Jason said:

Almost from the outset my conscious aim and endeavor was to transform the material but to have that transformation take place without obliterating the identity of the material. I did not want to destroy its prehistory....The complete bumpers are used as much as possible, but because of the way the various parts relate to each other as a totality, transformation takes place. That has always been a very conscious thing with me.

These reflections on his own methods and directions throw light on new phases of his work that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1965 he conceived the idea that one could show how many things of the world could be made out of bumpers; for example, how ancient statues could be copied, how articles of furniture could be made, or even an entire automobile. And Seley did make such things, which have been widely exhibited. But Seley saw this development as a change in his aesthetic position. “The point was no longer,” he said, “the bumper with its history exposed but rather the use of it as an art material. Since I was no longer committed to the history of a bumper—that identity was no longer essential to me—I had no reason to preserve the shape of a ‘59 Buick, a ‘47 Cadillac, or a ‘66 De Soto. It was about 1977 that I first used the sheet steel painted black and consciously destroyed the identity of the bumper by destroying its form. In my doing this, bumpers became truly an art material, similar to unopened tubes of paint.” Thus it came about that bumpers became, in Jason’s hands, “welded chromium-plated

steel.” Now he could say about a bumper that he was “not concerned with its prehistory any more than the wood-carver is concerned with the tree. The material I use is chromium-plated steel of high quality. The pieces of steel have interesting and exciting precast sculptural shapes that are a great source of inspiration to me.”

Thus it can be seen that Jason’s artistic development was not arrested at the point where he discovered the use of car bumpers in sculpture. Eventually the bumper became, in his conception and in his hands, fluid material that flowed into artistic forms of great beauty, expressing or suggesting the artist’s sensibility, imagination, wit, and wisdom.

Like other artists, Jason had predecessors and contemporaries whose works he admired and from whom he received inspiration. Most notable among them were Donatello, Bernini, Rodin, Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore, and David Smith.

Though dying at the peak of his powers, Jason had lived long enough to have won wide acclaim and recognition. He was the recipient of many awards and commissions; he was an artist-in-residence at various colleges; he had lectured at over thirty colleges and universities; his work was selected for numerous American, foreign, and international exhibits; his sculptures are in the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum of Sculpture at the Smithsonian, and in other museums and collections; his work was represented at the White House Festival of Arts in 1965. His appointment as dean at Cornell was a recognition of the esteem and affection he had won among his colleagues and students and a reflection of the international fame that he had won. And in the three years he served in that office he helped to unify the college’s diverse interests and intensified the loyalty and enlarged the generosity of its alumni.

Fame, let it be said, rested upon him lightly. Jason was always, in his relations with every person, gentle and affable. He passed no harsh judgments. His native wit was often an expression of irony and imaginative play, but he never allowed it to become satirical, and it is unthinkable that he ever would have permitted himself to say anything malicious. One hesitated to pass on to him any bit of nasty gossip. His encyclopedic memory was always a cause of amazement.

We and future generations of men and women at Cornell will have as reminders of Jason Seley the generous gifts he has given to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art and the furniture he designed and welded for the office of dean of his college. But of no less substance will be the real yet intangible evidences of the fact that he was a person who supremely merited our profound respect, gratitude, and affection.

The major part of Jason Seley's life was devoted to an aesthetic gratification that was pure, clear, and disinterested. It was, to use Plato's terminology, an unclouded contemplation of images of eternity seen in the guise of the furniture of earth—beasts and men, chairs and automobiles— which became to him transparent ideas that were freed from the limits of time, space, and will; from pathos and pathology; from change and death.

Somewhere at his college there ought to be inscribed in bold letters Jason's artistic *apologia pro vita sua*, which he stated in one memorable sentence: "I just know I do sculpture because I don't quite know how I'd live through my life if I didn't do it."

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