

Jean Jacques Porret:

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MAKING HIS WAY IN INDUSTRY AND ART

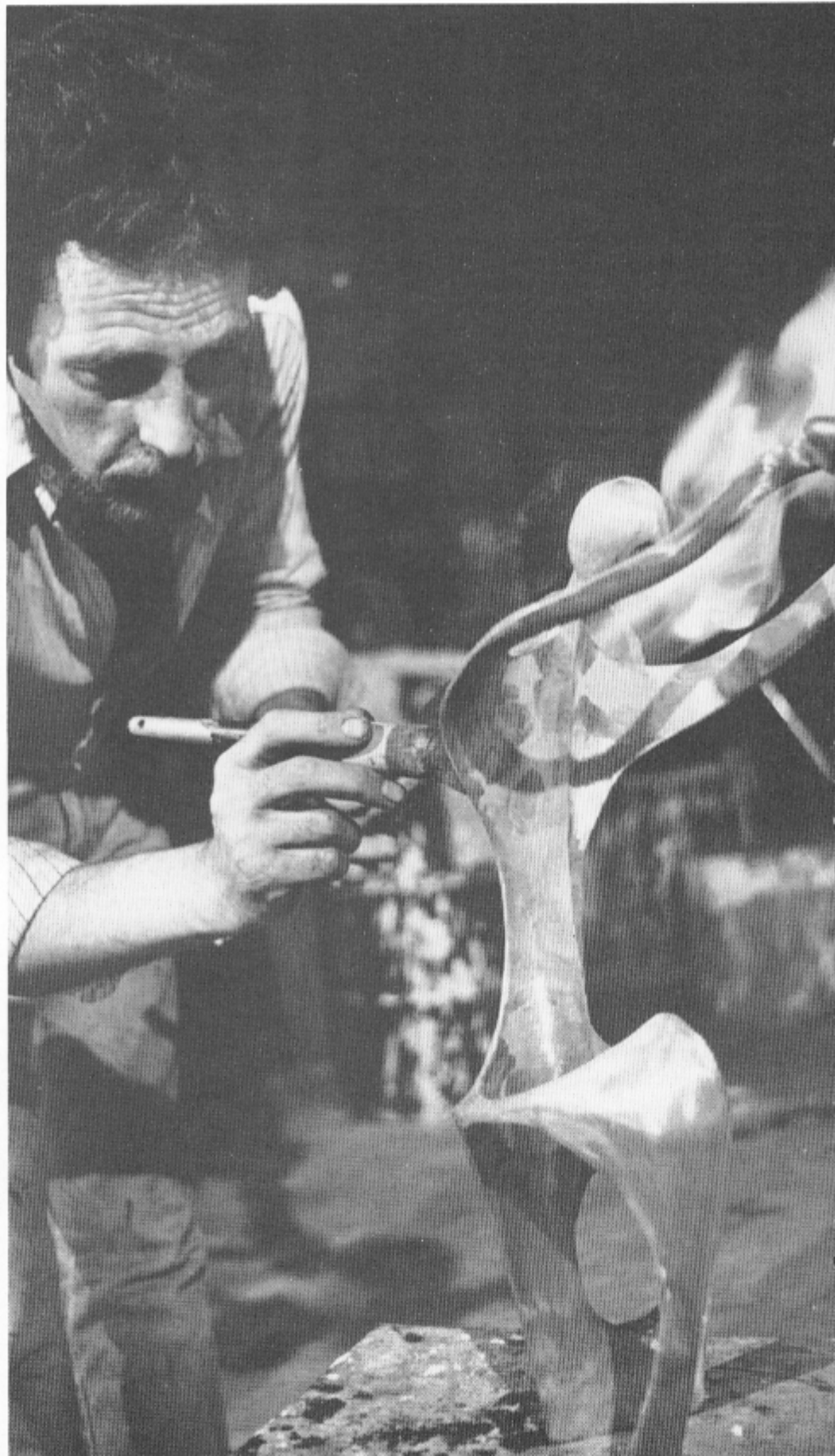
During a typical workweek at Grotnes Machine Works, Jean Jacques Porret effectively fits the mold of the modern international businessman. Armed with a mechanical and industrial engineering background, he represents Inland's machine building subsidiary around the globe as manager of International Operations. Jetting to Europe, Japan or Australia is common. He conducts meetings in several languages—to meet the demands of his audience—and has become proficient at foreign customs and currencies.

But Porret is somewhat of an enigma compared with other businessmen who suffer the travails of jet lag. When weekends arrive and spare time becomes available, he assumes the rather relaxed role of an accomplished sculptor working in the lost-wax technique of casting bronze. The time-consuming process is a dying art.

Porret agrees that the trappings of the international business community in which he works—jumbo jets, marathon work sessions, and high-speed communications—clash sharply with the painstaking techniques required for sculpting in bronze.

"These two sides of my life strike a perfect balance," says the Swiss-born Porret. "Around 1967, shortly after I came to the United States, I found myself working 14-hour days nearly all the time. Life was just work. I was successful in the machine tool industry, but I wasn't really enjoying life. I needed a diversion to get my mind off business, and I also wanted to do something creative with my hands. Within a few weeks, I decided I wanted to sculpt in bronze."

Although Porret wasn't permitted to attend classes in bronze sculpting—he lacked a portfolio—he learned the technique on his own and swiftly became a



Color is added by Porret to one of his bronze sculptures by simultaneously brushing on acid and heating with a torch. The bronze work of art is now in its final production stages.



Porret refined his technique and style with the help of sculptor Tony Fortunato—a bronze-working veteran trained in Italy who now lives in Chicago.

"I have about a dozen works at various stages of progress most of the time," he said. "To help hold down costs and for greater convenience, I joined a fine-art bronze foundry with Fortunato. The foundry gives me studio space so I can have total control over my work."

The Grotnes manager admits that 99 percent of his original concept sketches are pitched into the wastebasket, but when the right idea hits he knows it.

"The creative spark first becomes a rough sketch, and that's long before it's cast in bronze," said Porret. "Most of my works are of people in the abstract. After I've completed a cast, I will often add color by brushing on acid and heating with a torch simultaneously."

Inland's part-time sculptor has clients in America, Europe, and Japan. To protect his patrons, a certificate and seal accompanies every sculpture. Each piece also is signed, dated, photographed, and registered as an original bronze after the mold is destroyed. Porret bronzes are seen regularly by patrons of Zorines—a private Chicago nightclub where some of the artist's works are displayed in the dining area.

"When I am out of town on business, I make a point of visiting the art museums," he said. "They provide inspiration, as does much of the work I do at Grotnes. I don't make any money sculpting. It is, however, my therapy. Knowing that my sculptures will outlive me provides a comforting whiff of immortality. I believe everyone wants to leave something behind." ■



In photo at top left, Porret pours molten bronze into a plaster mold packed in sand. The Grotnes manager of International Operations is shown above discussing one of the nearly dozen bronze pieces he has at various stages of progress. Porret and Zorine's owner Arnie Morton (below) decide on display location for his bronze at the posh Chicago nightclub. The work is appropriately titled: "Disco Dancers."

recognized authority in the field. His works sell for up to \$3,000, and many of his bronze pieces are exhibited at Peter Miller Art Galleries in Chicago. Also, a recent edition of *Encyclopedia of Bronzes* devoted two pages to Porret.

"He (Porret) is an independent thinker," says the prestigious book. "His sculptures might be described as a naturalistic-modern blend in which forms are simplified to their essential rhythms and elements."

Those are words of praise and growing interest in Porret-the-artist. Such success and recognition were totally unexpected, however, he notes.

"I knew nothing about sculpture or bronze when I started," said Porret. "In the early days my primary sources of knowledge were sculptors interested enough to answer my questions. I soon knew the basics and began to sculpt."

Porret's early mentor was Mario Spampinato. With his assistance, Grotnes' weekend artist learned the lost wax method of casting in bronze.

"Lost wax sculpture is a slow, multi-step process that is endured only because of the fine results," he said. "The original design is done in clay, which later is reshaped into wax. A plaster cast is made for the molten bronze by melting away—or losing—the wax. Packed in sand, the plaster mold is filled with molten bronze. When the bronze has cooled, the plaster is removed."

