

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | ART

Antique Muses Stir a Modern Orpheus

By JORI FINKEL OCT. 17, 2008

Walla Walla, Wash.

WITH its grand marble staircase, inner and outer peristyles and Roman gardens, the Getty Villa in Los Angeles seems a fitting backdrop for a small army of Greek gods, Roman warriors and Etruscan vases. But in two weeks visitors to the villa, which houses the antiquities collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, will encounter a sculpture from a very different time and place.

With a nod to classical themes, the sculpture represents the head of a poet. But this particular head — a bald one with a scratchy beard and deeply creased brow — looms large at seven feet tall. It is made out of white plaster instead of clay or stone. It is modern in scale and feel.

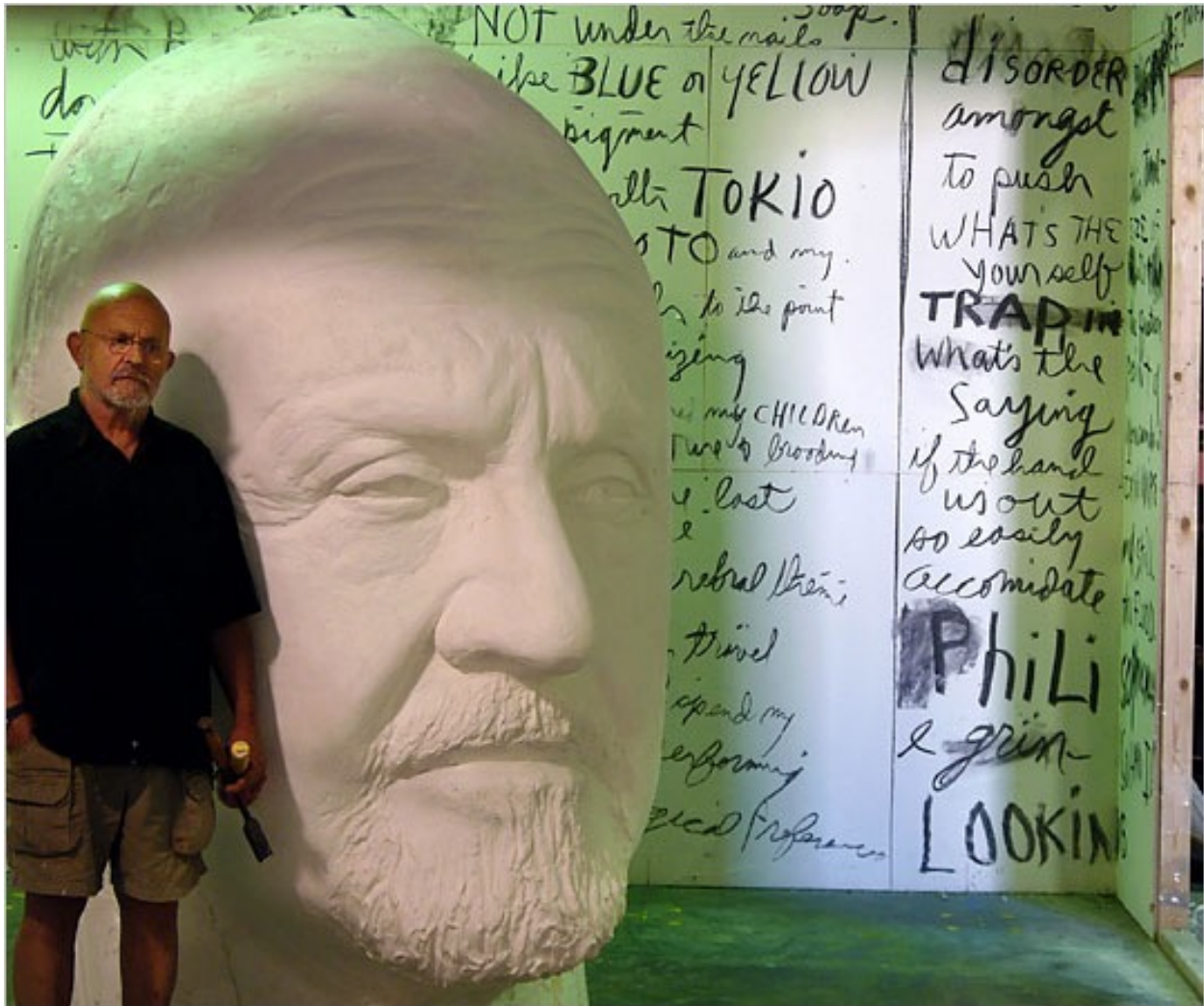
And for many in the art world the monumental head is recognizable. It belongs to the American artist Jim Dine, who for the last 50 years has made his name as a highly successful painter, printmaker and sculptor while more quietly (and less lucratively) honing his skills as a poet.

The self-portrait will be the centerpiece of an installation called “Jim Dine: Poet Singing (The Flowering Sheets)” that opens at the villa on Oct. 30. Mr. Dine has also written out a poem in charcoal on the gallery’s white walls and recorded it on a soundtrack that will play on a loop in the gallery.

The installation, billed as the first contemporary-art show at the villa, is something of a gamble for both the artist and the Getty. By putting his face on this project so prominently, Mr. Dine seems to be daring his critics, some of whom have dismissed his recent work as too classical or conventional, to take him on. And it is unclear how the art world will view this contemporary undertaking at the villa, which reopened in 2006 after a long renovation as the Getty’s new showcase for antiquities.

The Getty Museum’s director, Michael Brand, said he saw Mr. Dine as a good fit because of the artist’s interest in antiquity “and also memory, which is a major theme of the villa.” He added: “We don’t want the villa to become a mausoleum of old art. We want it to continue to be revitalized and reinterpreted.”

Yet for Mr. Dine, who says he might destroy the site-specific piece after its run at the villa, the project also represents a chance to meditate, at the age of 73, on two of his greatest passions over the years — sculpture and poetry.



Jim Dine at a warehouse near Walla Walla, Wash., with his self-portrait and a mockup of his poem "The Flowering Sheets." Credit Diana Michener for The New York Times

Born and schooled in Cincinnati, he got his big break in the art world after he moved to New York in 1958 and began staging so-called Happenings. In one memorable performance he wore silver paint and silver clothes to play the role of an automobile in a car crash. After that his focus returned to art objects, and his work was lumped in with that of the Pop artists. He resisted the label. "Pop Art is concerned with exteriors," he likes to say. "I'm concerned with interiors."

In effect he has taken the Pop artist's cool obsession with serial imagery — treating pop culture as a series of combinations and permutations on the same theme — and put it to more handmade, emotional, even soulful ends. Most famously he has taken the popular image of the Valentine-style heart and reworked it in numerous patterns, colors and mediums over the last 40 years. Another favorite subject has been unoccupied bathrobes, usually read as surrogate portraits of the person missing from them. The London curator Marco Livingstone has suggested that this repeated focus on certain motifs takes the place of a signature style for Mr. Dine, who is known for his versatility.

But few collectors who own a Dine heart print or bathrobe painting realize the extent of his interest in poetry. He first took to the genre when he was a teenager. "I had dyslexia, and I had difficulty reading," he said. "The only thing I could read was poetry because it was short. And it moved me always. Poetry was my prose."

Today he and his wife, the photographer Diana Michener, sit on the board of the Bowery Poetry Club in New York. He counts poets as friends. And he writes his own stuff: a sort of excitable, conversational and oblique montage in the spirit of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Ron Padgett and other so-called New York School poets.

"I've been a poet my entire life — have been encouraged by these generous people, Robert Creeley, O'Hara, Ashbery, Padgett," Mr. Dine said in an interview in his studio in Walla Walla. He was rolling a lump of clay in his hands into various rings and rods (he called it "doodling") with an energy that verged on compulsive.

"Creeley came up to me once when Ted Berrigan and I gave a reading in London in the late '60s, and he said, 'But you're a poet.' It was an amazingly generous and affirming thing to say."

He has introduced his poetry into his artwork, for example exhibiting photographs of his poems at his New York gallery, PaceWildenstein. And his recent sculptures of Pinocchio show a literary bent that is out of step with trends sweeping contemporary art. But the Getty project might be his most ambitious attempt yet to bring poetry into the museum.

The project originated in 2007 with an invitation from the Getty to him to respond in some fashion to its antiquities collection. It imposed few restrictions except for the time: fall 2008. As Mr. Dine remembered it: "The Getty kept pushing me for details: What's going to be on the walls? Do we have to have frames made? When are you going to make drawings?"

"But I'd already done that," he said, referring to his 1980s drawings inspired by Greek and Roman sculptures in the Glyptotek Museum in Munich. "Instead I realized I wanted to integrate my poetry and plastic arts."

Throughout the conversation his studio was humming with activity. Two colleagues from Pace Editions in New York were peeling new Pinocchio prints off the printing plate as his assistant returned phone calls. Ms. Michener, who keeps a studio next door, was preparing lunch for the group: a salad with lettuce and beets from their garden. "It's always busy," Mr. Dine said. "That's the way I like it."

Looking tan and compact in a black polo shirt, khaki shorts and red Crocs, he moved from one task to the next with the athleticism of someone half his age; he had biked to work in extreme heat that morning. He said he discovered this Washington farming town in 1983, long before it became a magnet for winemakers and tasters, when the Bay Area artist Manuel Neri suggested he try the Walla Walla Foundry for fabrication. Mr. Dine began spending more and more time there, to the point where five years ago he bought a studio in town and a home on the outskirts. (A self-proclaimed wanderer, he still keeps places in New York and Paris as well.)

The Walla Walla Foundry played a big role in the Getty project, not only fabricating the individual sculptures for Mr. Dine but also giving him space in its Oregon warehouse, right across the border, to build a crude mock-up of the Getty Villa gallery. We drove to see the room, which had the same proportions as the museum although not its black terrazzo floor or oak-molding elegance.

He stood in front of that massive plaster sculpture of his own bald head, which was flanked by two female figures carved of oak. (He said he planned a total of four for the installation.) One held a lyre above her head and seemed to be lost in some ecstatic moment; the other, wrapped in a swirl of robes, appeared to be dancing. "What I really wanted to do is locate the sculptures in the space, to see if they could hold the



In the villa, a Greek group from the fourth century B.C. featuring a poet as Orpheus with sirens that helped to inspire Mr. Dine's installation, opening on Oct. 30. Credit J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection

space, to see if they worked with the poem," he said.

He based the female figures on Greek terracotta sculptures dating from before 100 B.C. that he had spotted at the Getty Villa. Each of the originals stands about eight to nine inches tall. In Mr. Dine's reimagining they stand a striking eight feet tall and weigh over 750 pounds. The foundry used a laser scanner, computer modeling software and a milling machine to make the jump in scale. Mr. Dine finished the surface by hand with a chisel, chainsaw and electric sander.

In the villa, a Greek group from the fourth century B.C. featuring a poet as Orpheus with sirens that helped to inspire Mr. Dine's installation, opening on Oct. 30. Credit J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection

"The challenge of blowing them up this huge is that they can be very ugly," he said, circling one of the figures. "Every little bump becomes a tumor. But I knew that blown up they were going to be beautiful."

Once the large figures were completed, he tried painting them in bright colors "as the Greeks originally did," giving one a red robe and the other a yellow lyre. But he decided that it looked fussy and sandblasted off the color, leaving just traces of it on the wood. "The work is more austere this way," he said, inspecting the new patina. "And it feels to me more like something that has survived from ancient times."

As for the monumental likeness of his head, Mr. Dine sat still long enough to let the foundry personnel scan his face. They milled a version in polystyrene foam, which Mr. Dine covered with plaster so he could shape the surface. The only major alteration, he said, is that he took his glasses off. "I didn't want a caricature," he said.

Over all the composition of figures echoes another work at the Getty Villa: a sculpture of a poet "in the guise of Orpheus" flanked by Sirens. Rainer Mack, the Getty education manager who oversaw the Dine installation, describes the museum piece as a homage to Orpheus' powers as a poet. "According to mythology the Sirens have such a beautiful voice they are dangerous," he said. "But the only one who has a more beautiful voice—the only one who can charm the Sirens, is Orpheus."

For Mr. Dine this piece is cautionary as well as celebratory, warning us that muses and sirens are close relatives. "It's kind of like the Hindu goddess Kali—a creative force can also be a destructive one."

The poem written on the Getty walls, "The Flowering Sheets," also deals with the dangerous undercurrents of inspiration. The poem appears in a limited-edition project to be published later this year by Steidl, for which Mr. Dine created a book a week, calling on his writings, paintings, photographs and more over the

space of a year. (The 52 books that make up the project, called “Hot Dream,” are to go on display at PaceWildenstein in December.)

Ten stanzas long, “The Flowering Sheets” collapses time and space as an aging artist reflects on raw pigment mixed with Tokyo & Kyoto and my anguish to the point of realizing I abandoned my children for texture & brooding over the last decade my cerebral theme has been travel.

The poem ultimately offers fleeting visions of antiquity – and glimpses, however partial, of sculptures not unlike those at the Getty. “Once brightly painted/I am/a southern Italian/singer and prophet,” reads one fragment, while another conjures up a figure who is “lured by sailors dressed as/singing beauties.”

Mr. Dine expects the various charcoal smudges, cross-outs, and erasures on the walls to become integral to his piece, much as they did in his celebrated “name painting” from 1969, in which he wrote out in charcoal the names of everyone who ever mattered to him in the order in which he had met them. (The names become more famous –Leo Castelli, Jasper Johns, Red Grooms and so on – as you read on.) “Writing is a lot like drawing,” he said. “I find my calligraphy expressive.”

But he also knows that poetry often gets a bad rap for being elitist or inaccessible. “A lot of times people are not comfortable with poetry. And they’re going to say, ‘What’s this got to do with the artwork?’ I’m going to say, ‘Everything.’ ”