

Public Art of the University of Houston System

By Mercedes Del Riego



“Only Open to the Public”

Benches by Scott Burton, pink granite (1985). Best known for blurring the boundary between utilitarian objects and art, Burton was a minimalist sculptor inspired by the Bauhaus and abstract movements. This set of two benches sit nondescriptly in front of the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design.

All photos courtesy of Public Art UHS unless otherwise noted.

Every day, University of Houston (UH) students sit on the two granite benches in front of the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design building completely unaware they are resting on a sculpture created by Scott Burton in 1985. This artwork is one of the nearly 700 pieces in the Public Art of the University of Houston System’s (Public Art UHS) collection that are found at the University of Houston, its satellite campus in Sugar Land, as well as throughout the remaining UH System universities: the University of Houston-Downtown, the University of Houston-Clear Lake, and the University of Houston-Victoria.

UH became a public institution in 1963, a period when the city was experiencing tremendous growth. At the same time, a group composed of Aaron Joseph Farfel, who was an investor and philanthropist on the Board of Regents, UH President Philip G. Hoffman, and art history professor Dr. Peter Guenther made the case for bringing the best contemporary art to the university for the public’s enjoyment. In 1966, the UH Board of Regents agreed with this group and voted to dedicate one percent of new construction budgets to acquiring art for the university.¹ Guenther, seen as a passionate visionary who could provide the historical

perspective for the public art that the campus sorely needed, became director of the Public Art Acquisition Committee in 1969.²

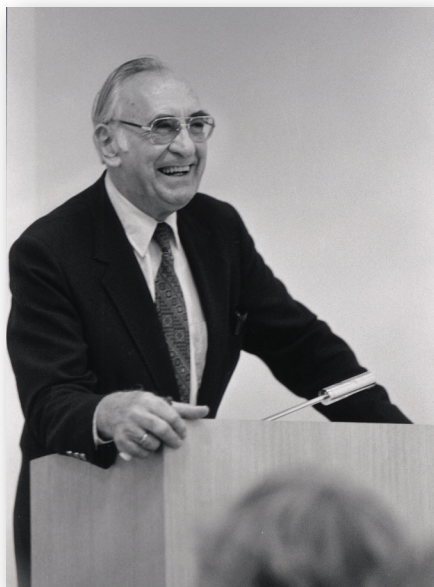
Peter Wolfgang Guenther

Peter Guenther's father, Alfred Otto Hugo Günther, was born in Dresden, Germany, in 1885.³ He was an expressionist poet and a prolific journalist in Germany from 1913 until the Nazis categorized him as "jüdisch versippt," indicating he was married to a Jewish woman.⁴ In 1936 the Gestapo banned Alfred Günther from writing and publishing. Well known within the worlds of German expressionism and the Bauhaus, Günther was a close friend of famous Bauhaus sculptor Gerhard Marcks.

Alfred had "very good anti-Nazi credentials, and both [father and son] were very literate and highly attuned to the principles of democracy," according to historian Irene Guenther, Peter's daughter and history professor in the UH Honors College. These credentials helped Alfred become an approved publisher and writer in the American occupation zone of post-war Germany, while Peter eventually gained American citizenship through a State Department program that assimilated educated Germans into the United States to enhance American-German relations following World War II.⁵

Peter Guenther moved his family of six from Stuttgart, Germany, to San Antonio, Texas, where he worked at a lumber company because the records proving he had earned his doctorate in Germany had been destroyed. After receiving an M.A. and while completing his Ph.D. at The University of Texas, he taught art history at the Witte Museum and, then, in a full-time position at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. President Philip Hoffman appointed Guenther as assistant professor of art history at the University of Houston in 1962 at the age of forty-two.⁶

In his role as head of the UH Public Art Acquisition Committee, Guenther recommended and the university



The University of Houston appointed Peter Guenther director of the Public Art Acquisition Committee in 1969.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, UH Photographs Collection, ark:/84475/do0648ff97h.

Orbit 1 (1969) by Masaru Takiguchi was the first artwork purchased for the Public Art UHS collection over fifty years ago. Takiguchi, a Japanese artist and educator, was a visiting lecturer at UH in 1968, 1970, and 1973, and eventually relocated to Houston permanently.



acquired the sculptures *Orbit I* and *Orbit II* by Masaru Takiguchi in 1969, as the first public art pieces for indoor display. Inspired by modernist art, the smooth and shiny sculptures, carved out of camphorwood, flow without a beginning or an end. Despite being crafted from a warm, inviting wood, both have a cold temperament typical of modernism. In 1971, UH bought the first piece intended for strictly outdoor display, Gerhard Marcks's *Albertus Magnus*, which stands in front of the John M. O'Quinn Law Building. *Albertus* reads Aristotle, presumably, with a pensive smile while sitting on a stool.

Fond of legendary figures, Marcks also sculpted *Orpheus* in 1959. Gerhard Marcks's gallery in Bremen loaned the bronze to the university with the idea that it would travel America, but Guenther had his eyes set on making it a permanent addition at UH. He placed the statue in the Ezekiel Cullen Building where it could subconsciously influence the Board of Regents until they finally bought the statue in 1971, causing Guenther to exclaim in his journal, "It worked!"⁷ The university installed *Orpheus* in the Fine Arts Building courtyard, where it remained for many years until it was placed in storage during the building's renovations in 2014. The statue unfortunately has not reappeared; however, plans are underway to redesign the area between the Fine Art and Architecture buildings and to position *Orpheus* in that space.

Peter invested in art that caught his eye, and he spent his personal time and money to ensure it found its way to UH. For example, he visited Francisco Zúñiga in Mexico in 1971 and handpicked a bronze sculpture fresh as "it was coming out of the foundry, and it was still warm," Irene recalled her father writing in the notes he kept.⁸ Titled *Orante/Mujer Con Las Manos Cruzadas (Woman Praying/Woman with Her Hands Crossed)*, it was acquired in 1972. The woman sat on a pedestal in the entrance to Charles F. McElhinney Hall until



Peter Guenther acquired the bronze Orante/Mujer con las Manos Cruzadas (Woman Praying/Woman with her Hands Crossed) by Francisco Zúñiga for UH in 1972. Zúñiga portrayed indigenous women in calm everyday moments of life usually wearing a rebozo, a shawl typical of femininity in Mexico.

it was removed for safekeeping in 2021 to begin building renovations. Plans are underway to re-site *Orante* outdoors at the new Student Life Plaza adjacent to the E. Cullen Building. Like many of Zúñiga's other sculptures, *Orante* displays the essential being of a Mexican woman with dignity and realism.

By the time Peter Guenther retired in 1990 as professor emeritus, he had served as chair of the Art Department for thirteen years and had curated two pivotal exhibitions for the Blaffer Gallery, one on the Norwegian expressionist Edvard Munch and the other on German Expressionist prints and drawings. Additionally, he left a beautiful legacy on the campus that included not only the public art he helped acquire but also thousands of enlightened students and a scholarship fund for art history graduate students. Former Houston mayor Kathy Whitmire gave him the keys to the city and proclaimed November 19th as Peter Guenther Day. A grove of six oak trees was planted near the Fine Arts Building, one for each of the Guenther family members. According to the dedication that was read during the tree planting, oaks were chosen for their long life and symbolism

of wisdom. With no plaque marking the trees, however, their history likely goes unnoticed by students, just as they fail to recognize that the benches in front of the College of Architecture are works of art.

In 1977, the Texas Legislature created the University of Houston System, which offered new opportunities to expand the public art collection across all of its universities.⁹ Throughout the seventies and eighties, artists from all over the world carved out a space throughout the University of Houston System making the Public Art UHS collection international and aligning it with the System's current values of inclusion, diversity, and freedom of expression.

The Vision of Public Art Today

When Public Art UHS celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2019, UH President and System Chancellor, Renu Khator, identified it as one of the System's strategic initiatives. Under the leadership of Dr. Maria C. Gaztambide, the institution transitioned from "collection development, commissioning, object conservation and long-term exhibitions to an all-encompassing arts organization with all core museum functions, including temporary exhibitions, robust public programming, research, education, and broad community outreach."¹⁰ This new focus is reflected in its vision statement: "Public Art UHS is committed to creating a collaborative ecosystem where publicly accessible art, higher education, and diverse communities converge."¹¹

As executive director and chief curator of Public Art UHS, Gaztambide is the link between the artist and the public, understanding the artist's intentions and the public's perception, and the gaps displaying an artwork can fill in the public's knowledge of art, people, and history. "[Art] makes history and culture very personal, and that is something

that cannot be conveyed in books," she explained.¹²

Joining UH in 2018, she served as associate director of the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston for twelve years, in addition to previously holding positions at Tulane University, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico. Her vision is to go beyond the static



Orpheus (1959) by Gerhard Marcks won the hearts of the UH Board of Regents.

art collection by “bringing in the community, doing research, offering educational programs for a variety of different audiences ... transforming Public Art [UHS] into a literal museum without any limitations.”¹³

Today, its expansive collection is a treasure not only for the UH System universities, but also for community members and visitors who can enjoy the artists’ creativity in one of the region’s most diverse and publicly accessible art collections. UH is interested in working with internationally renowned artists as well as emerging local artists, indicated curator Michael Guidry, who earned his master’s in fine arts at UH in 1996 before becoming a curator at the New Orleans Museum of Art and later joining Public Art UHS in 2005.¹⁴

Guidry’s responsibilities at Public Art UHS include administration, acquisition of new art works, and maintenance and conservation of the existing art collection. A former graduate student of Guenther’s, Guidry recalled, “Peter Guenther started the whole thing,” adding that he never imagined he would help to redefine the collection his professor once handpicked.

Compared to a museum, Guidry says administrating the art collection of a public university requires patience to navigate through “significant red tape” to get approvals. Things take time, require extensive planning and sometimes you have to change course. One of the easiest installations Guidry experienced to date was *The Statue of Four Lies* by The Art Guys, Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth. Installed in 2010 by the Cougar Village 1 dormitory, the statue is a tongue-in-cheek joke on the popular *John Harvard* statue nicknamed the “Statue of Three Lies” at Harvard University and was created with



Artist Luis Jiménez crafted *Fiesta Jarabe* (Fiesta Dancers) (1991-1993) of colored fiberglass. It features a couple dancing to a traditional Mexican hat dance called “*Jarabe Tapatío*.” Dressed in traditional folklore attire, the couple speaks to sensuality, oppression, and fate.



Located at the University of Houston-Downtown, *Cloud Deck* (2010), by Jacob Hashimoto is crafted of bamboo, rice paper, aircraft cables, and lead weights.

Photo courtesy of © Morris Malakoff.

the intention that students would decorate the figures and take pictures with them.¹⁵

Conservation is another part of the work undertaken by Public Art UHS, and two large-scale outdoor pieces were recently painstakingly restored. First, Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez’s *Double Psychromie* was taken apart, repainted, and relocated at a new location within the Arts District, adjacent to the Graduate College of Social Work, the Fine Arts Building, and College of Technology. The long serpentine artwork draws in all passersby with its masterful use of color. Like a magical accordion, it changes colors as the viewer moves around it. In 2019, Public Art UHS also restored Pablo Serrano’s *Spiritus Mundi*, a piece that UHCL has owned since 1977.¹⁷

The sculpture stands about ten feet tall, with polished bronze on one side and rough, matte black patina on the other side. It deals with humanistic ideals of man as a being of possibilities who only needs to connect with others to awaken his potential. When all the buildup was removed from the sculpture, Pablo Serrano’s handprints could be seen purposefully cast all over the bronze showcasing man’s ability to create and transform. Like other Public Art UHS pieces, it is truly worthy of inclusion in any highly regarded museum.

In April 2022, Public Art UHS launched its Object Laboratory, in collaboration with the UH School of Art. It is a space where art historians, curators, and other art professionals learn about digitization and object handling, and other tools museums use. Monthly workshops and events connect students and the public to the creation of art. Public Art UHS’s temporary public art program has two recurring exhibitions by



Spiritus Mundi by Pablo Serrano, bronze (1977), University of Houston-Clear Lake, Bayou Building. Although the sculpture appears to exhibit the duality in life between dark and light, the Latin title translates to “spirit of the world,” signifying the collective consciousness of the world that is driven by creativity. On the black patina are castings of hands, twigs, and Serrano’s asthma medication, contrasting the idyllic shiny smooth interior of the sculpture.

way of commissions. The Grove Commission gives artists a year of exposure in Wilhelmina’s Grove at UH and commits them to working with students and the community through hands-on learning experiences. The second program, Yardworks, gives emerging Texas artists the opportunity to install a temporary public art exhibition at UH through a \$20,000 grant.¹⁸

Public Art at UH today goes beyond the outdoor sculptures found in the courtyards and across campus. It includes any type of art that is publicly displayed outside of museums and galleries, according to Guidry and Gaztambide. Significant collections include works by Edward Hill and Suzanne Bloom, who go by the moniker MANUAL, and Polaroids and prints by Andy Warhol, which were the subject of a recent temporary exhibition curated by Gaztambide that was on view at UHD and UHCL. Together with its exceptional collection, initiatives such as this enable Public Art UHS to claim its place as a uniquely twenty-first-century museum that serves a diverse public across Southeast Texas and is “only open to the public.”¹⁹ **HH**

Mercedes Del Riego earned her bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Houston. Born in a lush tropical valley of Cuba, she lived in the Houston area for over twenty years before moving to Austin. A true antiquarian, when she is not flipping through old newspaper clippings, she is filling her sketchbook or caring for cats and dogs at the animal hospital where she works.



Oliver Twist, archival pigment print (2010). Artists Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom, who collaborate under the moniker MANUAL, have created numerous works of digital art and photography throughout the years.

Photo courtesy of MANUAL.

The Public Art UHS collection is open to visitors free of charge. If you are interested in a self-guided tour or a staff-led tour, visit <https://publicartuhs.org/tours/>.