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Russell Barnett Aitken

Russell Barnett Aitken (1910-2002) was another of the Viennese-influenced Cleveland artists. He worked at Cowan as a student and went to Vienna and Berlin in 1932 and 1933 after graduating from the Cleveland School. On his return, he briefly established the Pottery Workshop with Whitney Atchley (later head of ceramics department at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco). In 1935 he opened a studio in New York.

Like Schreckengost, Aitken created stylized and humorous figurative sculpture. His imagery was typical of the Cowan style, featuring mythological characters (Europa and Bull, Virgin and Unicorn), blacks (he collected African sculpture), Viennese-style elongated females, and animals. He used western themes and was particularly fond of horses. Aitken's work was distinguished by "The gangly, awkward but appealing quality" of his figurines, said to imitate "his own tall, thin frame and youthfulness."¹ His timid colts, shy fawns, awkward calves and the like were enormously popular and were frequent prizewinners.

One of his best-known works, *Student Singers* (1934), derives from his experiences in Vienna, when he was an honorary member of the dueling society Corps Hilaritas. Here three rounded, simplified, jolly figures, dressed in the uniforms of the society, sing and sway while holding foaming mugs of beer, their legs and swords uniting the composition through repeated diagonals that create a sense of rhythm.

A sculpture called *The Futility of a Well-Ordered Life*—a spoof of a painting by Salvador Dalí—stirred much attention and helped Aitken win a Carnegie Foundation grant in 1935, when it was included in a Surrealist exhibition at a New York gallery. It's a half-length nude whose breasts

are clocks. A cutout from her torso sits beside her hip, on the base, while a vase is inserted in her empty middle. The press praised this work and described Aitken as “a born wit with a natural gift for the trade he plies” and as working “with ingenuity and skill. He promises to be one of America’s master *kleinkunst* makers.”¹ But after service in World War II, Aitkin worked in other materials. His career in clay lasted little more than 10 years.