

Chillida

Trembling Irons II

A work by Eduardo Chillida recently acquired by the
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



Giovanni Carandente

**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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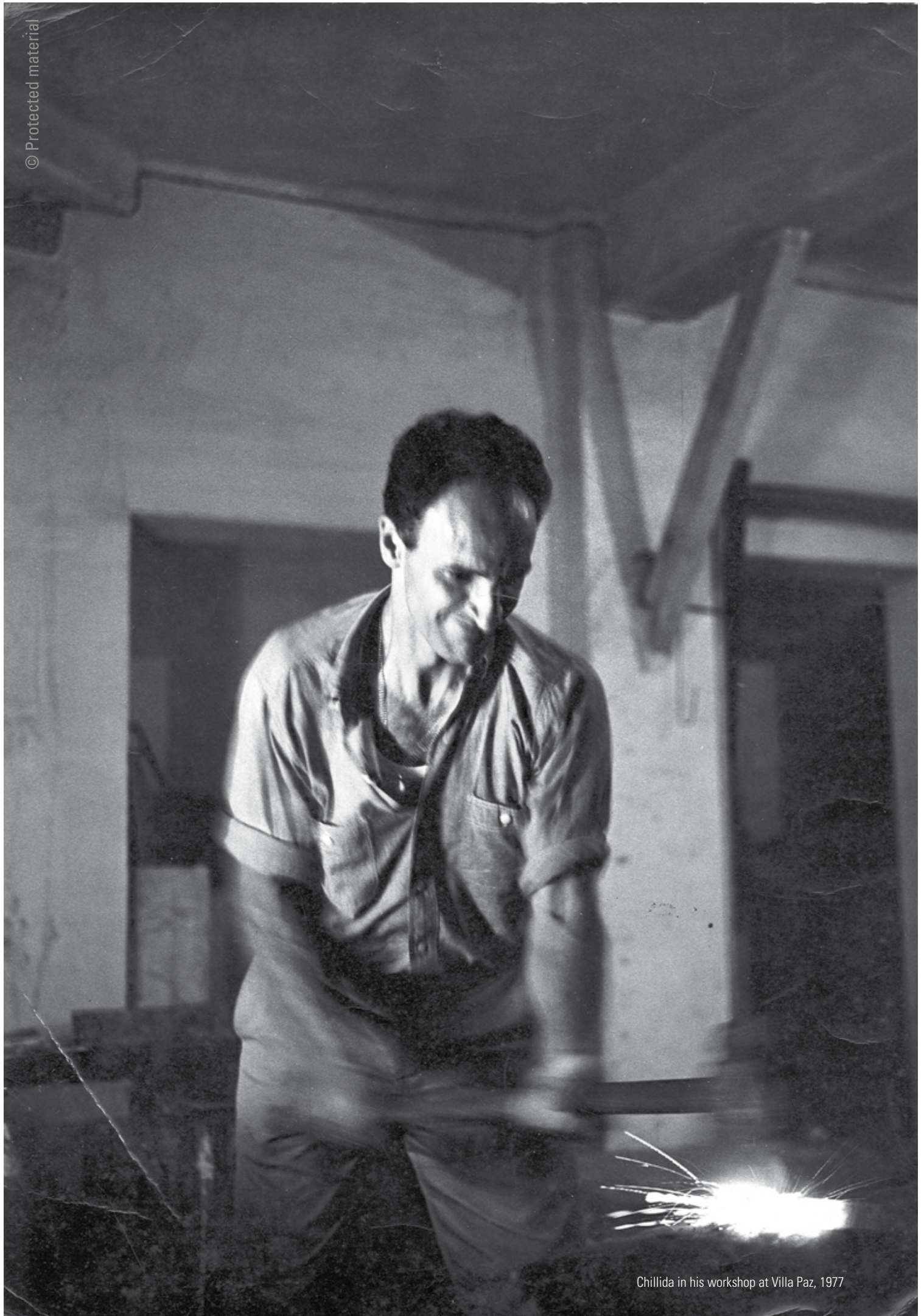
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Chillida in his workshop at Villa Paz, 1977

"The clarity, the sureness, the rigour of Chillida's forms come from the vitality and the energy consumed in their creation."

James Johnson Sweeney

"Iron is an austere material and the reverence Chillida shows towards it is equally austere."

Octavio Paz

"From space, and its brother time, beneath the overpowering weight of gravity, the material touched, appreciated as if it were a slow measured space, my Ignorance amazed."

Eduardo Chillida

"The clarity, the sureness, the rigour of Chillida's forms come from the vitality and the energy consumed in their creation." James Johnson Sweeney's concise critical reading of the early works of the great Basque sculptor dates from 1961¹. Later, in 1966, when he was director of Museum of Fine Arts of Houston, Sweeney organized an exhibition of the artist's work. Chillida's monumental granite sculpture *Abesti Gogora V* still stands outside the museum's old facade, with its admirable extension by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe².

"Iron" as Mexican poet and Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz³, another illustrious and highly appreciative critic of Chillida's work, once wrote, "is an austere material and the reverence Chillida shows towards it is equally austere." Between 1952 and 1956, in the early stages of his career, the sculptor produced a series of works in which "iron [...] is ground and sharpened in smooth jets that bend and curve or leap off to conquer space."

1 *Derrière le Miroir*, no. 124, March 1961. James Johnson Sweeney (1900-1986), US writer and art critic. Director of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1949-1952); and of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Texas (1961-1968).

2 In 1965, Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida told the director of the Houston Fine Arts Museum (Texas) of his plans to create a monumental sculpture in granite. The Museum, which had acquired *Abesti Gogora I*, a sculpture in oak, four months earlier, gave him the go-ahead. Installed on the grass of the Museum's South Garden, the sculpture weighs approximately 45 tons. It is one of the largest he ever executed.

3 Paz 1979.



1. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)
Trembling Irons II, 1956
Iron, 28,5 x 63 x 25 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 03/44

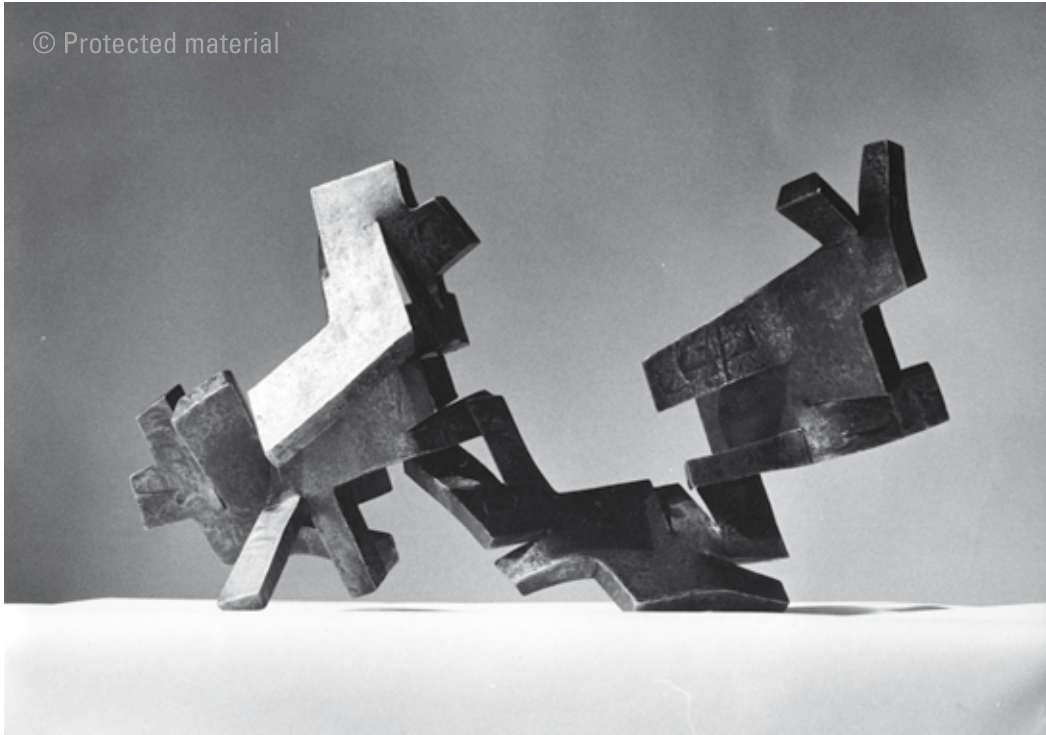


2. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)
Trembling Irons I, 1955
 Iron, 29 x 30 x 30 cm
 Private collection, Madrid

Chillida was 32 when he cast the second version of the series *Trembling Irons* [fig. 1]⁴ (there are two other versions, the first dating from 1955 [fig. 2] and the third from 1957 [fig. 3]). By then his iron forging technique was as masterly as it was audacious; Chillida could handle the metal to produce scrolls and folds in what was then a highly unusual representation of abstract form, virtually unseen in modern sculpture until that time.

Some years previously, he had constructed the four doors of the Basilica of Arantzazu in Gipuzkoa from the same material, using scrap from the port of Zumaya. His first attempt at working on a monumental architectural scale, the doors bring to mind his earliest studies. "From space, and its brother, time," Chillida was to write about his work, "beneath the overpowering weight of gravity, the material touched, appreciated as if it were a slow, measured space, my ignorance amazed."

⁴ The work *Trembling Irons II* has been part of the following exhibitions: *Chillida*, Paris, Galerie Maeght, October-November 1956; *Eduardo Chillida*, Basel, The Kunsthalle, 3 March-8 April 1962; *Eduardo Chillida*, Wilhelm-Lehmbruck-Museum der Stadt Duisburg, 7 May-19 June 1966; *Eduardo Chillida. Plastik, Zeichnungen, Graphik*, Zurich, Kunsthhaus Zürich, 8 March-13 April 1969; *Chillida*, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 25 April-8 June 1969; *Chillida*, Pittsburg, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, 26 October 1979-6 January 1980; New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 21 March-11 May 1980; *Exposición Antológica de Eduardo Chillida*, Madrid, Palacio de Cristal, July-October 1980; *Cinq siècles d'art espagnol. 2. Le siècle de Picasso*, Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 10 October 1987-3 January 1988; *Chillida*, London, Hayward Gallery, 6 September-4 November 1990; *Chillida*, Berlin, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 11 January-24 February 1991; *Chillida en San Sebastián*, San Sebastián, Palacio Miramar, 29 June-13 September 1992; *Chillida*, Paris, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 19 June-16 September 2001; Schwäbisch Hall, Kunsthalle Würth, 11 November 2001-17 February 2002; Monterrey/México city 2002, no page numbers (Re-edition of catalogue for Paris 2001; the work was not included in the show); *Eduardo Chillida*, Madrid, Galería Guillermo de Osma, 15 December 2003-30 January 2004; *Gonbidatua. La Obra Invitada. The Guest Work. Eduardo Chillida*, Bilbao, Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, 25 April-26 June 2005. In relation to the bibliography, apart from the mentioned exhibition catalogues—Paris 1956, no. 27; Basel 1962, no. 11; Duisburg 1966, no. 13; Zurich 1969, no. 15; Amsterdam 1969, no. 14; Pittsburg/New York 1979, pp. 42, 43, 178, no. 47; Paris 1987, p. 204, no. 139; London 1990, pp. 84, 124, no. 3; Berlin 1991, pp. 61, 179; San Sebastián 1992, pp. 164, 439, no. 77; Paris 2001, p. 79; Schwäbisch Hall 2002, p. 34; Madrid 2003, pp. 13, 19, no. 3—, see the following monographs: Esteban 1971, pp. 70, 71, 76, 202; Barañano 1988, p. 14; Valencia 1988, pp. 24, 36.



3. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)
Trembling Irons III, 1957
Iron, 42 x 80 x 28 cm
Private collection, Madrid

With the success of these years, Chillida was soon singled out as one of the leading sculptors of the second half of the 20th century. New, intense works appeared, *Advice to space I*, *Music of the spheres I and II* (1953), *Echo I* (1954). The latter was exhibited, with *Watcher*, in the Duomo Plaza in Spoleto, in 1962, in the famous *Sculture nella città* exhibition, which included, among others, works by Arp, David Smith, Calder, Moore, Germaine Richier, Laurens and Marino Marini, among others.

Other absolutely captivating works followed, such as the first *Trembling Irons*, *Concretion*, *In praise of fire* and *Silent music*, all from 1955. *Chaining*, *Great Trembling* and the second *Trembling Irons* arrived the following year. This second version of *Trembling Irons* has now been acquired for Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection, which already possesses a rich, varied selection of the artist's works, including sculptures in iron, steel, bronze, marble, alabaster and cement, together with drawings, etchings, dry point, woodcuts, collages and several of his singular *Iurras* (baked clay with the severe compact Provençal earth known in Spain as *chamota*), where the assemblage of forms is particularly solid and intense. Altogether, the works in the museum span half a century, from the 1948 cast in bronze of *Torso* (the first version, dedicated to Perico Arana, is now sited on mount Urgull, overlooking San Sebastián, the original plaster being housed in Zabalaga, at the Chillida-Leku museum, inaugurated in Hernani, Gipuzkoa, on 16th September 2000) to the *Homage to Rembrandt*, an etching from 1998.

Despite being the most difficult material for a sculptor, iron was Chillida's preferred medium in the early stages of his career. With a long tradition of production and use in the Basque Country, iron is tough, as tough as the character of the Basques themselves. Iron requires hard physical work. As Octavio Paz noted⁵,

5 Paz 1979.



4. *Wind Combs*
Donostia-San Sebastián, 1979

in the art of iron the mediation between anvil, hammer and metal is achieved through the body of the smith-Vulcan, who brings into play all the energy the laws of nature place at his disposal. For Chillida at least, the culminating point of all that hard work were the three “prongs” of *Wind Combs* [fig. 4], sited on the rocky coastline facing the Bay of Biscay.

Chillida’s works gradually became larger and more architectural in nature. But the sense of monumentality in the large works the sculptor installed all over the world is no different from the sense we get from his whole *oeuvre*, even in his tiniest works. The reason is simple: from each cast, modelled or drawn form there emanates an extraordinary interior energy, an unbounded, vital force.

At the same time, the work of this artist continues to reveal itself as the last in time to possess and display the principles held by the great Renaissance mathematicians and humanists. The human scale is the objective of his works, the proportional relation between man and space. References to Luca Pacioli, Francesco di Giorgio, Piero della Francesca and Omar Khayyam were habitual in his reflections; they are the keys to this monumentality, one of the most influential in the sculpture of the recently concluded century. The emotion one feels in Gernika, the famous Basque town reconstructed from the ruins of Picasso’s *j’accuse*, as one looks at Chillida’s lay temple, to which he gave the highly poetical title *Our Father’s House* [fig. 5], is so intense that one inevitably gets the impression of standing before the most modern of the *Sanctuaries of Thought*. The surrounding space, on the hill rising from the bombed town (today once again a rather quiet, sleepy place), close to the site of the Basques’ symbolic oak tree, seems even narrower than it really is, because Chillida has angled it with the powerful dynamics of his architecture: an ellipse that shelters a small steel *ara pacis*. Inside the ellipse the space suddenly expands and is transformed into the spiritual infinite,

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5. *Our Father's House*
Gemika, 1988

like the *ermo colle*⁶ of Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi's *L'infinito*. A place, in other words, of sad, painful memories and a nostalgic meditation on peace.

A substantial recompense awaits anyone travelling along the coast all the way to Gijón, where the *Eulogy to the Horizon* [fig. 6] is sited. Immense and alone, the huge sculpture stands on a cliff overlooking the sea, and as one enters that magical, open space, one comes to understand the positive value of the *vacuum* the artist has captured, as a necessary counterweight to the plenitude of the curved, irregular form, so unexpected against the far line of the horizon.

Chillida used to say that when he stood at the centre of the Pantheon in Rome, under the oculus opened to the sky, he felt as if he were inside the vacuum of a column of light. References to the human scale, to infinitesimal calculus, to the musical succession of signs, the effective weight of mass and of vacuum are clearly vital to the proper understanding of his apparently enigmatic but in truth philosophically positive art.

In San Sebastián, where he was born, Chillida has pitched iron into never-ending fight with the spray of the waves crashing against the rocks. Although this might seem a rather romantic thing to do, it is in fact quite the opposite. It is Prometheus's ancient challenge to the forces of nature, fire, sea, sky and earth. *Wind Combs*, the three sculptures fixed to the rock of this particular *finis terrae*, at this extreme point of the Basque region overlooking the Atlantic, is like a symphony in three movements, with the constant rumour of the wind combing the waves that clash and interweave as they roll up against the three huge prongs: a sort of *perpetuum mobile* that varies with the seasons and the weather, in storms and mirror-like sea. This is also the place where the wind whips in off the water to penetrate inland.

6 Reference to the "barren hill" quoted by Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) in the first lines of his famous poem *L'infinito*.



5. *Eulogy of the Horizon*
Gijón, 1977

Time and space, rhythm and form, man and nature: what else could a great artist like Chillida have busied himself with? Relatively few materials were subjected to an incredibly rigorous working method. Iron, steel, granite and terracotta all provided him with a challenge, although for his monumental works he usually preferred cement, which, like Le Corbusier before him, he managed to ennoble. He used cement for *Meeting Point IV*, which hangs in the open air outside the museum.

Besides the traditional pencil or ballpoint pen drawing, in his graphic works Chillida also used an ingenious technique associated with the Cubist collage for his *Gravitations*, consisting in superimposed papers, hung with thread, heavy and dense like ancient parchment. Gravitare, levitate, weight and density, the mutual attraction between space and matter —according to the thread running from Empedocles to Newton— the vibrant energy that emanates from a block or a tangle of steel, immobility, are in Chillida the actual value of monumentality, to which the dynamism of the forms always responds. They are, in short, the intrinsic motives and the exemplary quality of an art that is unadorned, rigorous attractive and fascinating. These tensions and vibrations are, then, the permanent contrast of forms conceived to *disturb* space.

When Chillida forges iron or steel he brings to mind a few other great sculptors. The energy displayed is reminiscent of González and David Smith, the fantasy of Calder. But as far as the resistance of matter is concerned, one would surely say he is more daring. He is the only modern sculptor, for example, to revive the concept of dedication or inscription common to the steles and busts in classical art. The stele's simplicity and sobriety makes it the most noble of *memoria*, so evocative of human things. Chillida manages to express this concept with his knowledge of architecture. From the block of iron, bronze or steel comes, like an impulse of the material itself, a beam or shaft of visual energy.

In his youth Chillida worked terracotta, paying frequent visits to the talented French potters and ceramists who supplied a good number of artists, including Picasso. He learnt the open flame baking technique and how to use the peculiar *chamota* clay, rich in iron oxide, rough, porous and virtually as compact as stone. He went back to *chamota* clay in his last years when he discovered a huge seam of it in Grasse, France. *Oxido* and *Lurra* are the titles he gave to these extraordinarily severe, solid, closed forms inserted and locked into each other, some times marked by dark incisions as mysterious as hieroglyphs or knotted together like the fingers of powerful hands vibrant with force and energy, very much like the hands of the artist he so often drew. Chillida could use either hand at will to draw or model.

The artist's own thoughts help to shed light on these works:

"Space? The sculptures are a function of space. Now I'm not talking about space outside form, the space surrounding volume, where forms live. No. I mean the space the forms themselves create, the space that lives within them and is so much more active the more hidden it is. It might be compared to the life force that makes the form breathe in and out, which opens up the space of the vision inside it, impenetrable, hidden from the outside world. To my mind, it's not an abstract thing. It's a reality as physical as the mass or volume that surrounds it. That space should be perceivable just as much as the form within which it manifests itself. It has expressive qualities. It brings the matter that shapes it into motion, determines its proportions, measures and orders its rhythms."

Clearly, Chillida's *choroart* (the archaeological term is most appropriate here, basically because the Greek term *chora* corresponds exactly to the Basque *lurra*), so intense and closed off, responds to the energetically announced principles of spatiality. The space of these blocks is not just the space that surrounds them and which they challenge or defy; it is also the invisible space that they themselves surround and imprison. The "beauty" here is more tactile than aesthetic. Finding comparisons for such hermetic yet stimulating sculptures is not easy, although the archaic *kouroi* might just fit the bill. Like those ancient symbols of youth and virile force, Chillida's *lurra* eliminate all non-essentials to accentuate the images power, modulation and silent presence.

The darker areas of the asymmetric and virtually dynamic *lurra* (obtained by fire baking, which encourages the earth to sweat its mineral oxides to generate a variety of tones), correspond pretty well to the marks and bites of the *Gravitations*. It is in fact the same rhythm, or, perhaps more accurately, the same cadence the artist imprints on modelled and drawn works to endow them with virtual movement. But it is also a bundle of thrilling tensions that evolves on the ceramics and in the graphic works, in iron and steel, manifesting the same expressive force with which the artist highlights each descriptive incident. Chillida's blacks often have the same arcane, absolute value, the same sense of the sacral, we find in the works of Italian painter Alberto Burri.

Coming back now to iron and the inimitable early works, including *Trembling Irons II*, we see now how the opposition of iron to air, to space, is just one of the features —as Octavio Paz⁷ so rightly pointed out— of the universal opposition.

Space, the poet declared, is a battlefield, where combatants without number are in a state of permanent change. This is where sharpness battles against gravity, the solidity and weight of the raw materials defy levity, the *tremor* in which the forms spread into and over space, palpitating and snaking like tongues of fire, while in between the unmoving air breathes.

7 Paz 1979.

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