



the Secret Garden

The Umlauf Sculpture Garden is an urban oasis of art and greenery

Art framed by nature – this is what the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum is all about. Showcasing the work of renowned 20th century American sculptor Charles Umlauf, and other contemporary sculptors, this peaceful oasis in the middle of the city is one of Austin’s best treasures.

Located on Robert E. Lee Road just south of Barton Springs, these 8 acres were once considered the outskirts of Austin. When Umlauf first bought the property and stone house in 1944, people thought he was far away from the University of Texas, where he was a professor of sculpture for 40 years. For decades, Umlauf created his magnificent pieces in the hilltop studio overlooking the current garden and museum grounds as the city grew around him. In the 1950s, his wife, Angeline, began creating

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the unique garden space, planting native flowering shrubs around her husband's sculptures, which were moved to the garden as he finished them.

Umlauf retired from UT as professor emeritus in 1981 and four years later, he gifted the city of Austin with 168 of his sculptures, to share in public exhibition. But that wasn't his only generous donation. He also deeded his home and studio, along with 2.5 acres of property, to the city. He and Angeline remained in the house, and continued sculpting while his works were shared with the people of Austin in this beautiful setting.

Although Umlauf died in 1994, his legacy lives on in this transformed garden that is home to dozens of his

sculptures set amongst its trees, plants and ponds. A new museum was built on adjoining city property in 1991, expanding the grounds and ability to showcase Umlauf's art. A gravel walkway meanders through the property, allowing visitors to stroll in serenity and discover the pieces like an artistic treasure hunt. The garden is accessible for wheelchairs and strollers, and those who run the Umlauf have a very important mission in mind: they want the garden to be experienced with all five senses. The outdoor sculptures are all waxed so that they can be touched – particularly important for the visually impaired. The sounds of running water and rustling tree branches, the smell of the flowers and outdoors, and the vision of the

surrounding beauty are delightfully magical. Even taste can sometimes be accounted for in the numerous events that are hosted here.

“We have worked to bring this ‘secret garden’ public, as the city has grown up around it,” says Nina Seely, the museum's executive director. “Most museums are ‘don't touch,’ but Charles was all about the senses. It was so important to him, and we encourage that. He placed several of the pieces here in the garden himself.”

In fact, Charles Umlauf has the largest number of bronze sculptures on display in the state of Texas. The Chicago Art Institute graduate's work – ranging from detailed realism to lyrical abstractions – can also be seen





Nina Seely, Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum Executive Director and Katie Robinson Edwards, Curator.

across the United States, including the Smithsonian Institute and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In addition to bronze, Umlauf used exotic woods, terra cotta, marble and cast stone to create his sculptures. His subjects featured everything from family groupings (particularly mothers and children) and delightful animals to religious and mythological figures, and sensuous nudes.

“People don’t understand how incredibly difficult and complicated it is to make bronze sculpture,” says Dr. Katie Robinson Edwards, the museum’s curator. “The lost wax casting method is 4,000 years old. Immensely complicated, the process involves making a series of positive and negative molds, eventually pouring hot bronze into a double-walled shell of the sculpture.”

Born in Michigan to French and German immigrants, Umlauf moved to Chicago with his family during his childhood. There, he attended the Art Institute of Chicago and then the Chicago School of Sculpture. He moved to Austin in 1941 to join the Art Department at the University of Texas.

Umlauf was hugely influenced by Rodin and Michelangelo; his early work reflects a more classical German style, which then morphed into smoother, more voluptuous lines.

Umlauf’s style changed again as the time period moved into the late 1960s and ‘70s; his work became more sensuous, more sexualized, in keeping with the revolution of the times. “Some of his strongest work, to me, comes from the 1940s and ‘50s,” Edwards says. “But through it all, he comes back to classically inspired work.”

Edwards believes that people respond naturally to the three-dimensional aspect sculpture. “As humans, both we and our world are in 3D. When people come here, they walk around the sculptures, to see them from all angles. Sometimes it’s surprising what you see from the back or another side.”

In line with the museum’s mission to showcase the work of Umlauf and others in a natural setting, two seasonal and two cornerstone exhibits are put on each year. Some of these are of Umlauf’s work and some feature other contemporary artists.

“We are small, but we’re ambitious,” says Edwards. “Charles was ambitious, and so are we. When showing his



work or pairing it with another sculptor, we might look at specific themes such as flight or family.”

The newest exhibit is Margo Sawyer, opening May 6 and running through October 5. Sawyer is particularly interested in relationships between the experience of space and transcendence, translating the notion of ancient sacred space into contemporary vocabulary. The show will present several new installations that combine her interests of art and architecture.

“I’m thrilled about her show,” Edwards says. “She is fun to work with and brilliant, but she also does installations with a twist – contemplative spaces largely influenced by Hindu and Buddhist religions.” When the museum began working with Sawyer, Edwards expected that the artist would bring already completed works to exhibit; instead, much to the museum’s delight, she has created brand new works for the show.

“Margo is a very collaborative worker,” Edwards adds. “And she’s not only a great artist, but also a professor of sculpture at UT, like Charles was.”

And what does the future hold for the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum? Since Angeline Umlauf’s death in 2012, the organization has entered a new phase – one that Seely hopes will bring new growth and recognition for the future. The museum hopes to earn accredited status from the American Alliance of Museums, something that currently only the Bob Bullock Texas State History of Museum can boast in Austin. Seely said that they would also like to open Umlauf’s personal studio to the public sometime within the next five years.

“Ultimately, everything we do links back to our mission to encourage the understanding and appreciate of sculpture.” ■