

# Regeneration: A Sculpture by Alan Collins

by Marianne Collins

In his book *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, Jack Burnham writes that vitalism “has been traditionally allied to a concern for protecting religion . . . against the erosive effects of scientific rationalism.” But what are the problems a sculptor encounters when he produces work for members of a religious community, many of whom feel threatened by nonrepresentational art?

Recently, Andrews University commissioned Alan Collins, a member of the art faculty, to make a sculpture for the campus. Even though it was understood that Collins would have creative freedom, he had to face the fact that the university administration and staff are members of a denomination more conservative than the society in general in their attitudes toward the arts.

Collins, then, had to develop a form which his audience would feel did not violate any of its beliefs and which both the artistically educated and artistically naive could appreciate. It appeared necessary to include some type of iconography, as the community would more readily accept a nonfigurative sculpture, knowing that it carried a Scripture-based interpretation.

The site for the piece is the forecourt of a newly built complex of buildings for the chemistry, biology, physics and mathematics departments. The character of the buildings is massive with deep floor/ceiling slabs of exposed concrete alternating with wall treatments of fairly light orange-brown brick.

*Marianne Collins, a senior student of art history at Michigan State University, wrote this article for a professor at the university. Alan Collins is her father.*

The artist’s initial impulse was to take a strip of concrete from the severe, rigid facade of the architecture and tie it in a knot—a dynamic, curving, compressed form to contrast with the law and order of the building. Several knot forms proved too compressed and confining. The piece needed to be large enough for the site but not overwhelming to the human scale. So space was admitted and the ribbon opened up. A continuous band comprising two intersecting loops evolved, suggesting the joining and dividing of cells in the growth process.

At no point does the ribbon touch itself on its course from or to the ground. This adds to its visual dynamism or “spring” and suggests the course of the life span— “from dust we were made and to dust we return.” The twisting of the lower part alludes to the DNA spiral in the formation of protein.

This twisting, animated form seems intimately connected with the “life force,” a concept beloved by vitalists. And if this *élan vital* does not “denigrate the existence of man, nor nullify his divine origins,” to use Burnham’s words, then it should also be acceptable to the Adventist community.

The overall impression one receives, however, is more akin to a scientific model. The DNA spiral has a loose interpretation of a model for the atom. Collins has made use of the mathematical concept of the Mobius band and obviously been influenced by Max Bill’s various interpretations of the form. The huge, twisted rectangular-sectioned ribbon is reminiscent of Clement Meadmore’s monochromatic industrial forms and one is also reminded somewhat of Jose de Rivera’s tubular steel constructions.

At the same time, while dealing with formal problems, Collins, knowing that his audience was literary in bias, was watching for forms that

would symbolize some aspect of Biblical teaching known and accepted by all—a universal myth that would transcend mathematical or organic principles.

He felt that it would be right to set the form up, off the general patio level, on a slight mound making it separate but not inaccessible, suggesting the curve of the earth and fruitful shapes. But set on its twin stems, the piece would seem too isolated from the viewer. Collins explains: “It needed secondary, intermediate

forms that would reach out and engage the viewer with both tactile and visual contact. Since the plan of the stems was basically square, four additional forms were indicated. Orientation on the great North-South-East-West grid is strong in the midwest so I began by thinking of these subsidiary forms as the main points of the compass.”

However, the search for iconographic validity was still on and a fairly clear mandorla form was found imprisoned in the intersecting loops. This



*A model of Alan Collins' sculpture, Regeneration.*

is the symbol for Christ in Christian iconography as seen in manuscript illuminations and tympana sculpture on Gothic cathedrals. Now, an alternate significance for the secondary forms began to be apparent as the profile of a nuclear fission cloud, with its internal mandorla symbol, was recognized. They assumed the identity of the four primitive elements: air, earth, fire and water. Air is represented by the arch form; earth by the concave, receptor shape; fire by the twisting tongue moving from passive (horizontal) to active (vertical) at its outer edge; and water by the rippling, most graphic form of all.

Collins was prompted to use these element symbols because the great majority of Protestant Christians anticipate a second coming of Christ to this earth and Seventh-day Adventists in particular hold this belief as central to their creed. According to Old and New Testament prophecies this will be a purging by fire, not unlike that of nuclear fission, when the "elements shall melt with fervent heat." By making the element symbols take a basically horizontal position in relation to the "lifeforce" form in the center, the whole piece becomes a pictogram based on the scriptural doctrine of the second advent of Christ "*in the clouds*" (1 Thess. 4:17).

The initial impulse to use the same material used in the architecture—reinforced concrete—was followed up. The procedure was to build a finished full-size form that will be molded in laminated glassfibre and polyester resins. The mold will be designed in sections to allow removal of the form and the placement of adequate steel reinforcing rods in the mold. The full box section of the mold will be replaced a section at a time and a fill of low-slump concrete vibrated well in. When all sections of the mold are filled, it will be cut away and discarded.

Expanded polystyrene (styrofoam) has been used to build the form, pegged together with wood stakes and stuck with plaster of Paris. After being carved to near the final shape, it was skimmed with lightweight plaster rubbed smooth. The overall height of the work from patio level is 20 feet.

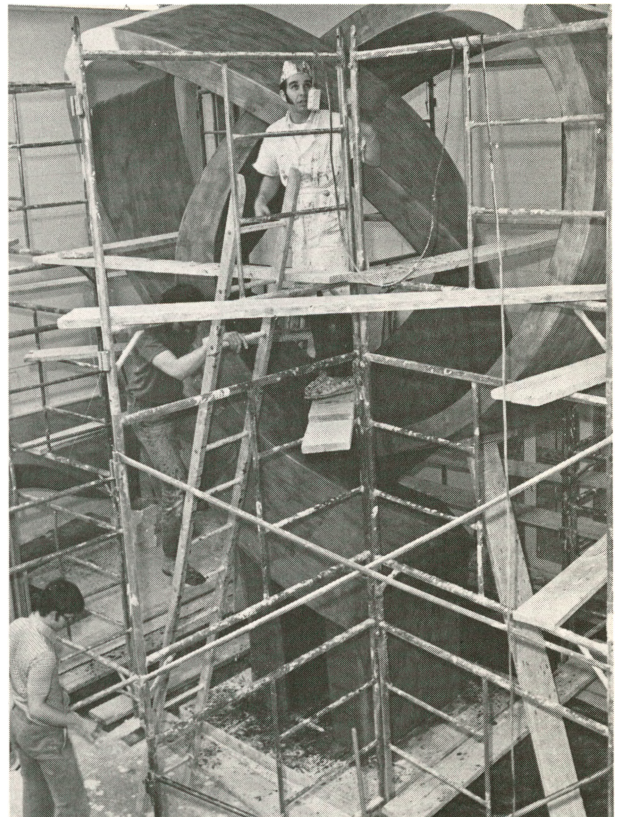
In designing the paving forms, it was felt that they should flow as people flow in unregimented movement. Large corpusclelike cells focus on the entrance steps in alternating coarse/fine concrete aggregates. In the paving of the upper entrance platform, the mandorla form is intro-

duced, again in a two-dimensional pattern of two intersecting circles. This is framed by a band of lettering reading, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth: and without Him was not anything made that was made."

Whatever the overall ethos or gestalt of the design—and some have likened it to a growing plant sloughing off a husk, an expression of the elusiveness of the scientist's problem, or have just waved their arms, saying "light, space, movement"—it has the alternative validity of being a piece of visual symbolic shorthand for a central tenet of faith. In the words of the artist:

Since we are committed essentially to verbal transmission of our faith, I will need to set down the biblical relationship of the various components in pamphlet form. This aspect of the work will depend on words, but many other nonself-descriptive works have relied on a title or subject, or even a great many words in the case of conceptual art. I would regard this as a valid means of gaining and retaining interest that might otherwise be "turned off."

In this piece, Collins seems to have visually pleased and educated his audience without compromising his art in any way.



Constructing Regeneration