Chicago-born Richard Hunt created this dynamic sculpture in 1958, only one year after his graduation from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. [See slide 14] He attended art classes there beginning at age thirteen. To help finance his education, he worked part-time at a zoology laboratory at the University of Chicago. There, he became fascinated with the concept of metamorphosis, the transformation from one physical state to another, such as a cocoon changing into a butterfly.

*Hero Construction* explores this theme. The sculpture consists entirely of found metal objects, urban scrap—old pipes, bits of metal, parts from automobiles—that Hunt discovered in junkyards or on the street. Not only were these metal discards cheap, but they gave the sculptor fascinating shapes that he could then manipulate in space. With blow torches, grinders, and other welding tools, Hunt transformed the metal cast-offs into the vital, not quite abstract, not-quite figurative form we see here.

In his choice of subject matter, Hunt links *Hero Construction* to some of the earliest works of art known to man. Eight thousand years ago, during the Neolithic Period (c. 6000-1500 B.C.), heroic hunters were painted on cave walls. One of the most popular figures in Classical and later art is Hercules of Greek mythology, the personification of physical strength and courage. Throughout the centuries, statues of heroes continued to be a staple in the history of art.

But how does one portray a hero now that machine guns have made charging into battle on horses seem ridiculous; or when tanks, rockets, and bombs have made individual feats of strength meaningless? Half-organic, half-man-made, Hunt’s gallant sculpture may be a model for the new hero of the technological age. Like a Proto-Schwartzenegger “Terminator,” Hunt’s hero may have been down and chewed to pieces, but he’s not out. Fashioned from junkyard cast-offs, the figure holds its chin high, thrusts out its semblance of a ribcage proudly, and plants its limblike appendages firmly on the pedestal-ground.

What Hunt calls the “reconciliation of the organic and the industrial” has been one of the sculptor’s ongoing themes. “I see my work as forming a kind of bridge between what we experience in nature and what we experience from the urban, industrial, technology-driven society we live in.” His *direct-metal* technique combines some of nature’s oldest materials—copper, iron, bronze—with the thoroughly modern practice of welding. His torch, in a sense, is his paintbrush; it is the instrument that shapes, or metamorphoses, his *medium*: “Artists no longer must imitate nature,” he once stated, referring to the traditional mode of representation used through the mid-nineteenth century. “But [they] are free to interpret it. Sometimes I try to develop forms nature might create if only heat and steel were available to her.”

* designates entry in Biographical Glossary
Hunt drew inspiration for his welded metal sculpture from such modernist artists as the American David Smith (1906-1965) and particularly the Spaniard Julio Gonzáles (1876-1942). Hunt once said that early works like the Art Institute’s sculpture resembled Gonzáles’s welded open-form pieces because both were nearly linear in the way they interacted with space. Both, as Hunt said, seemed “essentially drawings in space.” But according to noted art critic Hilton Kramer (b. 1928), Hunt took this modernist tradition even further. As Kramer declared in a 1963 review: “Hunt’s use of ‘line’ in sculpture—and by ‘line,’ of course, one means those slender masses of steel rod or tubing which are Hunt’s customary materials—is probably the subtlest and most elegant in current art.”

Within the five years between Hunt’s creation of Hero Construction in 1958 and Kramer’s glowing 1963 review, the artist won the Logan Prize from the Art Institute three times, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a year’s travel grant to study in England, France, Italy, and Spain. He had also begun showing and selling his work. One of his first buyers was the influential Museum of Modern Art, New York, which presented Hunt with a one-man exhibition in 1971.

Although Hunt’s work has grown larger and denser, he continues to fuse nature and technology, producing forms that are both abstract and organic. In 1967, he was commissioned to do a sculpture that was too big for his studio. Thus began what he calls his second career in public sculpture. In 1971, Hunt purchased a former Chicago Transit Authority power substation on Chicago’s mid-North Side. Outfitted with a full-sized crane, a floor that can support very large and heavy equipment, and forty-foot ceilings, his studio is perfect to accommodate his more monumental works. Assistants now help him transform massive flat sheets of bronze and steel into the more than one hundred public sculpture commissions that he has completed nationwide.

Deeply committed to Chicago, which has provided him with a constant source of inspiration, Hunt has produced over thirty public works in and around his hometown. These include Slabs of the Sunburnt West, 1973 [see figure 14], a memorial to Carl Sandburg* (1878-1967) at the University of Illinois-Chicago (a Ferguson Fund monument), and in Jonquil Park across from Hunt’s studio, Eagle Columns, 1989, that commemorates two Chicagoans of the 1890s—the liberal Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld and the poet Vachel Lindsay.

On Chicago’s South Side, in the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, is another monumental welded bronze work entitled Jacob’s Ladder, 1977. Suspended from the library’s twenty-seven foot high skylighted atrium are two massive claw-like arms, one of which dangles a flowing metal ladder.
Centered underneath is a large floor sculpture that suggests some type of ancient slablike altar. Like the words of its title, the familiar black spiritual “Jacob’s Ladder,” the sculpture refers to the link between heaven and earth. Furthermore, with its placement in a library in a predominantly black community, Hunt’s work implies that the way to reach heaven—to be set free—is through books and learning. (Hunt’s mother, who fostered in her son a love of books and music, was a librarian.)

Declared by critic Hilton Kramer to be “one of the most gifted and assured artists working in the direct-metal, open-form medium ... anywhere in the world,” Hunt is represented in collections here and abroad. These include in addition to The Art Institute of Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum; New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art; the National Museum of Israel in Jerusalem; and the Museum of the Twentieth Century, Vienna, Austria. Also, The Studio Museum in Harlem featured his work in a solo exhibition in 1997.

Nonetheless, Hunt has not forgotten that he grew up during the Great Depression in the Black Belt of Chicago—nor that the artworld remains predominantly white. He was particularly reminded after an artworld cocktail party in the early 1960s: “I suddenly saw that artists are like Negroes—as we were then called.... People really believe the artist is better off without any money, as whites believe Negroes are happier that way. Like most artists, most Negroes do not succeed in the larger world. Inner-city blacks drop out of school at rates similar to the rates at which art school graduates drop out of art. That was a moment of illumination. I’ve never forgotten it.”
Slide Four: Richard Hunt

1. What material did Hunt use for *Hero Construction* and how did he put it together? Why do you think Hunt called this sculpture *Hero Construction*? Would you give it a different title? Think about some of the qualities a hero displays such as strength, bravery and leadership. List other qualities. How does this figure represent those characteristics? What is this figure’s heroic deed?

Have students act as speech writers for this hero. Choose an issue for him to speak about. What will he say, where will he give the speech and who will be its audience? Will he call people to action? Have them write a brief one-page speech.

2. This sculpture is made up of found objects that originally served another purpose. Have students collect found objects of all materials, organic and manmade, and construct a sculpture. The sculpture can be a figure, machine, landscape, etc. Ask students to explain their choice of objects and what the new composite expresses.

3. Using images from magazines and newspapers, have students compose a college of a modern superhero. Have students write an account of the hero’s background and accomplishments to go with the collage figure. What physical and supernatural qualities will it possess?

4. Have students start an oral history project about a hero from their family, school, or neighborhood. As a class, develop questions to be asked and a list of people to be interviewed, and record responses using notes or a video or audio tape. Describe the occupations and actions of these individuals, citing specifically what makes them heroes.

5. Have students choose another work from this manual that represents a hero or heroic deed. Have students outline their reasons for their choice and present their argument to the class, discussing how the artist successfully portrays a hero or heroic deed. Have the class vote if they are persuaded.