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Harry Bertoia: Sculpting Mid-Century Modern Life

In a secluded barn in Bally, Pennsylvania, the din of approximately 91 sonic sculptures chiming together could have been mistaken for sounds of alien life. The sculptures were the creations of Italian-American Harry Bertoia (1915-1978), who designed famed modern furniture but also created sound art and sculpture.



Bertoia's sculptures, much like his furniture, revolved around the manipulation of metal and space—his pieces vary from clusters of vertical rods to flat gongs in every size. In the 1960s and 70s, Bertoia embarked on the creation of what he called his "sonambients;" free-standing sculptures composed of metal. Aesthetically, the sculptures resembled dozens of solid metal rods bored into a compact, metal platform. But because the rods were typically made of beryllium copper, a ductile type of metal used to make loaded springs and coils, the rods swayed when touched—hence making them "playable."

Bertoia was of the conviction that art be accessible to all, and his sonambients were no exception. "He envisioned many people having their own affordable Sonambient sculpture to play at their whim," says his daughter, Celia. The sounds they produce range from delicate and chime-like to booming and frenzied, like a rain hammering down on a galvanized roof.

Born in the small Italian village of San Lorenzo in 1915, Bertoia's artistic skills were recognized at an early age. According to family, a grade school-age Bertoia was enlisted by local brides-to-be to create their wedding embroidery patterns. At age 15, Bertoia moved to America to further his art education. He attended both the School of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts and the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Arts alongside design contemporaries like Charles Eames and Florence Knoll.

Both Eames and Knoll would later play pivotal roles in Bertoia's career. After Cranbrook, Bertoia would move to Southern California to join Eames in experimental plywood testing. Although he made considerable contributions to the development of the Eames chair, he did not receive credit, and the 1950s once again saw him moving cross-country. This time to Pennsylvania, to work for Florence Knoll's burgeoning Knoll Furniture company.



It was in California that Bertoia first learned how to weld and first began to experiment with metal sculpture. His lightning rod moment, however, came when a piece of wire he was working with snapped in two and the two ends struck one another, thereby creating a euphonic ping. Instantly, he was captivated. If two small wires could make such a prolific noise, what would larger wires do? What would a whole orchestra of wires do?