

George Jaholkowski (1914-1979)

Detailed Biography

George Jaholkowski was born Jerzy Wladyslaw Jaholkowski in Baku, Russia (now Azerbaijan) on the Caspian Sea on October 18, 1914, of a Polish father (Wladyslaw Jaholkowski from Hawryłkowicze in Poland) and French/Russian mother (née Okinczyc). After World War I, when Jaholkowski was five, they travelled by train to Brest-Litovsk in Poland. Later, he went to school in Warsaw, going on to the University of Warsaw where he studied in the combined faculties of Architecture and Fine Arts. He also studied Fine Arts at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris (1936-1937) and spent happy times on his uncle's estate, La Queyzie, in the Dordogne. His uncle was the eminent surgeon Dr Joseph Okinczyc. Jaholkowski obtained his degree in Architecture in 1939.

During World War II, Jaholkowski served first in the Polish Army, then the British Army and in the Polish Underground, taking part in the Warsaw Uprising. After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Jaholkowski was taken to Russia in the spring of 1940 with other Polish officers by train. Stalin's NKVD shot about 22,000 Poles, mostly POW officers, at the Katyn Forest and elsewhere. Jaholkowski escaped by jumping from the train, returning to Warsaw where he was captured by the Germans, interrogated and tortured. He escaped again, making his way to England. He was parachuted by night back into Poland as a member of the Polish Underground, injuring his back in the jump.

Jaholkowski ran desk "K", one of the "cells" of the Warsaw Command of the Polish Home Army or Underground, known as AK - *Armia Krajowa*, organising acts of sabotage. His pseudonyms were "Paczula", "Longin" and "D-5". He was awarded The Silver Cross of Merit with Swords on September 23, 1944 "for deeds of bravery and valor during time of war not connected with direct combat, and for merit demonstrated in perilous circumstances". Jaholkowski was highly reluctant to talk of the war – this information has mostly been gleaned from Polish reports, specifically one written by Dr Andrzej Krzysztof Kunert, a Polish historian, writer and lecturer, specialising in the history of the Polish resistance movement in World War II.

Jaholkowski spoke Polish, French, Russian and later, German and English. After the war, he served for three years in the Army of Occupation in Germany. He was demobilised in 1948 and went to London where he lived and worked while studying at Hammersmith School of Art, London (1947-1949). On August 27, 1949, he married his first wife, Agnes Virginia Irvine-Fortescue (the concert pianist, Virginia Fortescue, born 1922, B.Mus. University of Cape Town, 1957).

Jaholkowski spent seven lean years in London, working as a commercial designer and draughtsman, as work for an architect was hard to find. In 1952, he turned his hand to metal sculpture, though pursuing this course as an unknown artist was expensive. Wood and stone were almost unobtainable, and the cost of casting in bronze prohibitive. This led him to develop a unique method of sculpting directly in metal.

His first break came when the South African Tourist Corporation commissioned him to do the art for a display in London. Wild animals in the theme were executed in metal and his ability, craftsmanship and talent attracted comment and made an impact at the exhibition.

In 1955, Jaholkowski and Virginia Fortescue left England for South Africa, living in Plum Tree Cottage, Bucksburn Road in Newlands, near the Vineyard Hotel and in Mowbray. The artist and critic, Eduard Ladan, said in *The Cape Times* (September 20, 1979), after Jaholkowski's death, "I think we should consider ourselves lucky that he chose South Africa. He might as easily have gone to the United States where his work would have been appreciated at its full value."

After his arrival in Cape Town, Jaholkowski did further studies at the Michaelis School of Art, Cape Town (1957/1958) under Lippy Lipshitz and Maurice van Essche. When he came to South Africa, he found himself the only sculptor working directly in welded sheet metal, though Italian-born sculptor Eduardo Villa, who had settled in South Africa, was also continuing the European tradition of sheet-metal sculpture in the 1950s with his non-figurative works. George Jaholkowski's work, a combination of stylised realism and rising abstraction, attracted the attention of Irma Stern, who admired his work and persuaded him to prepare an exhibition.

Jaholkowski's first exhibition of metal sculpture took place at the South African Association of Arts Gallery in Cape Town in 1959. It was opened by Irma Stern, who also bought three further works. Jaholkowski was always grateful for the encouragement of Irma Stern, whose patronage launched him as a new artist. After this exhibition, the South African National Gallery in Cape Town bought one of his works, *Fighting Cocks*.

Art critic Harold Jeppe said of Jaholkowski's work in the Arts Review of the SABC, "These sculptures – or rather modelling in copper sheeting – are the finest things of their kind that I have seen in this country. They are done with rare imagination and craftsmanship and with an exceptional ability to draw in a medium beyond pencil and brush. At their best, these sculptures are magnificent."

Jaholkowski continued to work predominantly in metal, largely copper, and introduced the "patina" technique to South Africa. He worked first in cardboard, cutting and building until the work satisfied him. "Cellophane is my greatest friend," he told Ann Taylor of *The Cape Times*. It allowed him to assemble, take apart and to change, translating his ideas into three dimensions quickly.

When the piece satisfied him, it was taken apart and used as a pattern, like a paper dress pattern on copper sheet of various thicknesses. The copper was bent and beaten and then welded or brazed. The finished statue was polished smooth and patinaed with an acid or combination of acids to produce the green, black and bronze stains. To halt the effect of the acids, the copper was treated with a thin layer of beeswax to preserve the patina and prevent further colour change. The patinaed metal served to lend the sculpture the illusion of weight.

An engineer friend once suggested that Jaholkowski save himself time by devoting himself to creating models in cardboard, leaving the lengthy process of manufacture

in metal to a workman. Unable to convince his friend that the creative process continued throughout the forming and welding, Jaholkowski gave him a cardboard model to copy. After a good deal of effort the engineer brought back the pattern and agreed that the artist must execute the finished work.

Cape Times art critic Matthys Bokhorst said in his August 21 review of Jaholkowski's 1959 Association of Arts exhibition that Jaholkowski's reliance on cutting and bending allowed him "to retain the virginal smoothness of the metal surface which gives pureness and elegance to the curves. It also gives his statuettes – already transparent through the alternation of solid masses and empty spaces – a marked decorative effect, stamping them as natural complements to modern architecture and interior decoration.

"Jaholkowski derives great benefit from his past as an architect. In metal sculpture one often has to create negative volumes out of empty spaces framed in welded sheets of copper, just as an architect who thinks in terms of living spaces to be surrounded by walls. His far-reaching stylising of the human and animal figure is the natural result of his difficult and refractory technique.

"Jaholkowski is a past-master in the simplification of form and the reduction of movements, gestures and attitudes to their essentials. Sometimes these reduced forms are of great expressive power, such as in the *Ecce Homo* with a face reminiscent of Modigliani, the *Annunciation* and several of the smaller works (boxers, dancers and the like). Sometimes they are of an airy, playful nature, and in others rhythmic and decorative qualities prevail. The rhythm may be flowing and soft in the *Nude with Scarf*, strong and angular in the magnificent *Nude* and the *Reclining Figure*, dynamic in the *Dancing Mephisto*, and in the *Leda* enveloped by the wings of the swan, but it is always a feast for the eye. Special mention must be made of Jaholkowski's striking representations of animals. In a way this is his best work."

From 1958, George Jaholkowski exhibited in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Stellenbosch and Pretoria, the latter opened by Professor Meiring, then National President of the South African Association of Arts. His first exhibition in Stellenbosch was shared with Professor Maurice van Essche. Jaholkowski's last two exhibitions were in March 1975, during the Cape Town Festival, at the Atlantic Gallery and he participated in the prestige exhibition in the Cape Town Association of Arts Gallery, and in September 1975 at the Edrich Gallery, again opened by Professor Meiring.

His work was chosen for the 1960 S.A. Quadrennial and is represented in the South African National Gallery. Apart from commissioned works in South African corporate buildings and for corporations, many of his works are in private collections in Britain, Germany, the US, Spain, Mexico, Canada, Namibia, Belgium and Australia.

Corporate commissions included one from the Chamber of Mines to design the South Atlantic Trophy for the 1971 Cape to Rio yacht race, to be cast in gold and silver. Having never worked in precious metals, the artist collaborated with a gold- and silversmith. It took two efforts before the sculpture reached Jaholkowski's standard. The South Atlantic Trophy remained in a bank vault as a "floating trophy" while

Jaholkowski executed several copper replicas until the race was cancelled due to political pressure. The Cape to Rio was reintroduced in 1993.

The Rembrandt Art Foundation made a film of his works in 1961. A bust of Jaholkowski by Nell Kaye is in the Hester Rupert Museum in Graaff Reinet along with a donated work, *Mater Dolorosa*. The Clicks Group purchased his *Unicorn* as it represented their emblem. City Tramways commissioned him to make a sculpture for the entrance hall of Toll Gate House symbolising “speed of transport”. He did the set design for the opera *Bluebeard's Castle* by Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, performed in Cape Town in 1957.

He is represented in the SA National Gallery, Cape Town, The Hester Rupert Art Museum, Graaff-Reinet, and the University of the Witwatersrand (Schlesinger Foundation Donation), Johannesburg.

Ever since a leaking roof in his old studio produced a symphony of drips into different containers, Jaholkowski was fascinated by fountains, the reflections from moving water on polished metal. Jaholkowski designed the striking fountain, which took up three floors and appeared to be suspended in mid air, in the entrance of the Santam building, built in the 1960s. On a personal note, he designed a fountain and sculpture at his second wife Beth's Newlands home and enjoyed a sundowner on the patio, listening to the sounds of water, birds and frogs and inhaling the scents of nicotiana and jasmine.

Jaholkowski and Virginia Fortescue divorced in 1964 and Jaholkowski married Betty (Beth) Stewart (nee Chevens), b. 1923, a physiotherapist who left England to work in South Africa in 1947 and settled in Cape Town.

Jaholkowski was also an accomplished angler and deep sea fisherman. He held the South African record for bluefin tunny with a fish that weighed 585lb (265kg) and measured 7ft 9.5 inches long. It was caught from the tunny boat, Porto Fino in January 1964. Some of his happiest times were spent with friends at a fishing shack at Blombos in the Western Cape and he loved visiting Buffels Bay at Cape Point to fish from the rocks.

Said Eduard Ladan, “George Jaholkowski was a lover of music and nature; kind, generous and with a wonderful sense of humour. He was a loveable character.”

Jaholkowski died of emphysema at home in Newlands, Cape Town on September 13, 1979, aged 65. His ashes are scattered at Blombos. Beth Jaholkowski died in 2009, aged 86. Jaholkowski is survived by his stepdaughters, Linda Stewart Johnston of Tokai, Cape Town and Alison Stewart (Mills) of Sydney, Australia and his step-grandchildren, Mark Johnston, Sarah Johnston, Georgia Stewart Mills and Angus Stewart Mills.