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Phillip Levine, whose sculptures dot the Northwest landscape, dies at 90

Oct. 15, 2021 at 6:00 am

4-5 minutes

Phillip Levine, a sculptor of well-known public artworks that dot the region's landscape, died in Seattle on Sept. 19 at the age of 90.

A prolific artist who was professionally active for nearly 70 years, Levine is best known for accessible, large-scale bronze sculptures of the human form, with a timeless appeal matched by few of his contemporaries. Dozens of his bronze sculptures are on public display in the area, with even more in private collections around the world. Among his most famous works are *Dancer With Flat Hat* on the University of Washington campus near 15th Avenue Northeast, *Walking on Logs* on the approach to West Seattle, and *Leap* at Veterans Memorial Arena in Spokane. Alert and active to the end, but on dialysis and suffering from ill health, Levine chose to end his life under the Death with Dignity Act.

Levine was born March 1, 1931, in Chicago, the younger of two children. During the Great Depression, his family moved to Denver. After studying art at the University of Colorado, he moved to New York City, working in advertising while continuing to paint and study. In 1956, he met Rachael Ann Hesselholt in Denver. They were married the next year.

Rachael encouraged Levine's pursuit of a career in art, even when it meant living in public housing. Levine earned a Master of Fine Arts degree with a focus on ceramics in 1961 from the University of Washington. Rachael's teaching job at community college kept the family of five afloat between Levine's commissions.

"She was his greatest supporter and he referred to her as his rock," said Levine's son Aaron, a studio furniture maker.

In the mid-1960s, Levine began making human figures in bronze. His somewhat abstracted figures nearly always involve an element of balance and motion, conveying a sense of weightlessness despite their mass. He often melded mechanical elements with human forms, but never sacrificed their expressive nature.

"He respected that people would bring their own intelligence and sensibility to the work being viewed," said his son Josh Levine, a metal fabricator. Levine was a voracious reader (his small sculpture of Don Quixote is among Josh's favorite pieces) and a deep thinker who loved to discuss art. But his work had an emotional core, adeptly depicting emotional states through body language, according to [HistoryLink](#).

"My father's gift was his passion for life and his ability to infect others, not with his particular passion, but with passion itself," said Aaron. People often respond to his work interactively, dressing up the statues with signs and accessories. While he acknowledged, in a [1997 Seattle Times interview](#), that the impulse to adorn a sculpture comes from an emotional connection to the work, Levine was irritated by these whimsical interventions.

Levine received the Governor's Arts Award in 1997. That recognition, placing him in the company of Jacob Lawrence and

George Tsutakawa, was an important vindication of Levine's commitment to figurative art during an era in which it was out of step with fine arts trends. It was also a professional turning point. Levine made few large bronzes after the turn of the century. He continued working, however, making smaller, less physically taxing sculptures in the studio space he shared with Josh. In 2009, he released the photo book ["Phillip Levine: Myth, Memory & Image: Sculpture and Drawings."](#) In his later years, Levine also returned to painting, completing a portrait of his grandson Noah on his last day of life.

Levine is survived by his wife Rachael, his sons Joshua and Aaron, and four grandchildren. He is preceded in death by his youngest son Jacob, who died in a plane crash in 1987. His memorial was held online among family. An exhibition, also called ["Phillip Levine: Myth, Memory & Image,"](#) displaying Levine's works in bronze and on paper, is on view through Oct. 23 at Koplín Del Rio in Georgetown.

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