

# MURPHY SCULPTURE GARDEN

by John Ewing

As an early example of the “art park” genre of modern public space, the Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden at the University of California, Los Angeles, is still something of a rarity—a blend of art and nature where neither upstages the other. Nestled amid the garden’s softly mounded lawns, landscaped pathways, and *allée* of South African coral trees is one of the nation’s foremost collections of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculpture, with masterworks by artists such as Henri Matisse, Aristide Maillol, David Smith, and Deborah Butterfield. As important as these artworks are in their own right, they complement the other natural and built elements of the public garden, all integrated into a total environment that provides the University community with a pedestrian corridor and an oasis.

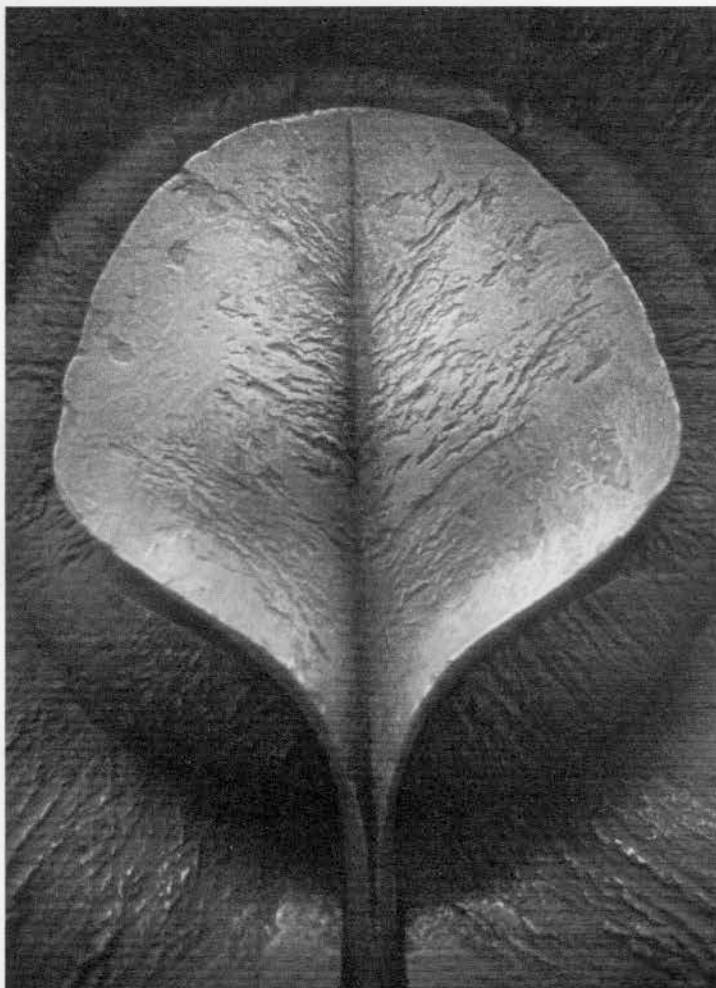
Such a balance of function and design never happens by accident. Opened in 1967 and now maintained by UCLA’s Hammer Museum, the sculpture garden’s success in both respects is owed to the vision and savvy leadership of Franklin Murphy, UCLA’s chancellor from 1960 to 1968. Though Dr. Murphy (a Kansas City cardiologist and formerly dean of the University of Kansas School of Medicine) served only eight years, UCLA witnessed some of its most significant growth under his chancellorship, including the addition of eighteen buildings and creation of the Franklin D. Murphy

Sculpture Garden. Located on the northern edge of the campus and surrounded by five buildings, including the University’s Charles E. Young Research Library and Dickson Art Center, this five-acre, rectangular site was originally an unpaved, pot-

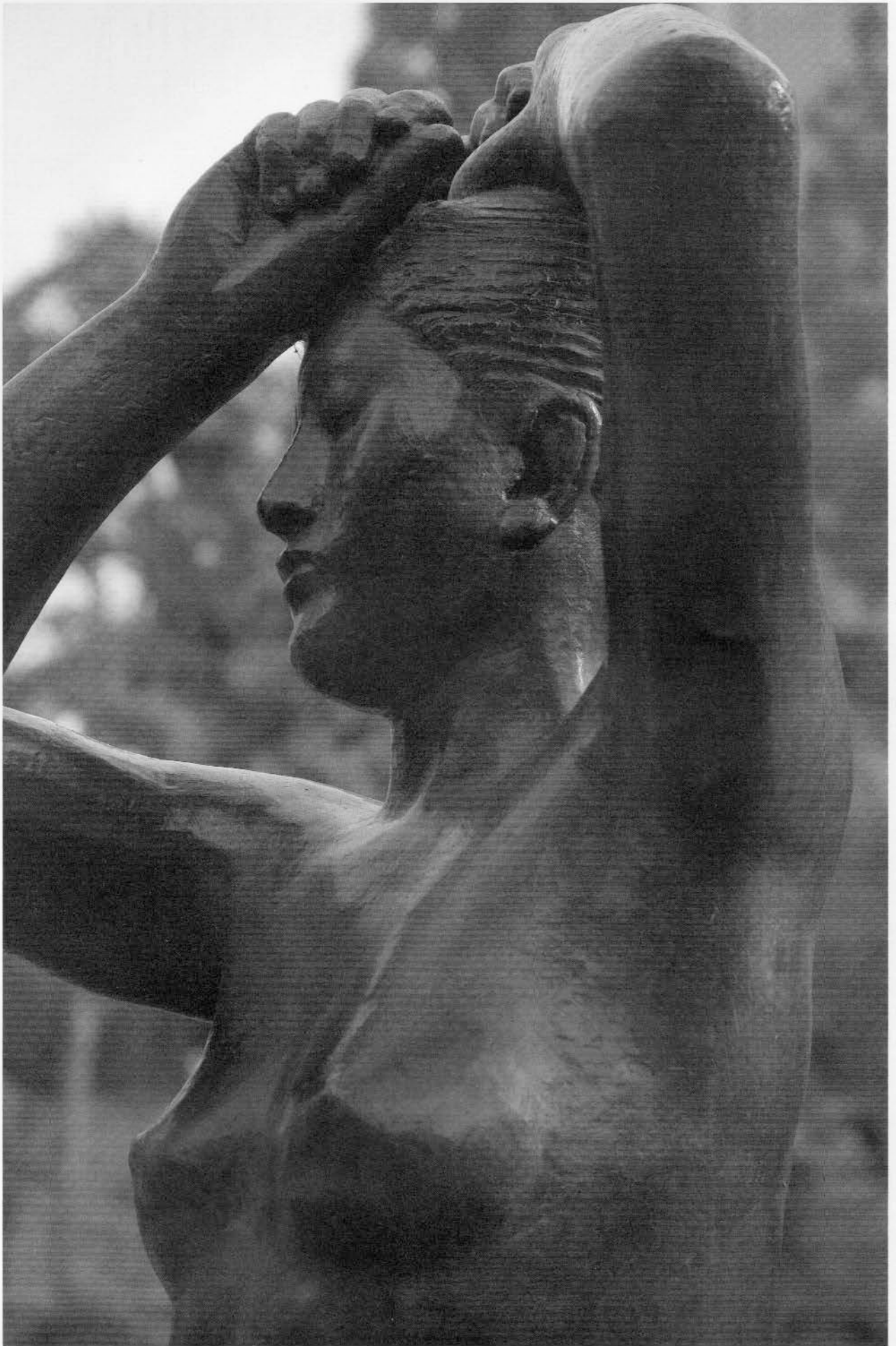
holed area known euphemistically as the “fair weather parking lot” due to its otherwise muddy conditions.

Murphy, however, saw the possibility for something grander and vastly more useful—a public space that would facilitate the daily traffic of thousands of pedestrians but also provide lush greenery and comfortable, room-like terraces in which to study, relax, and reflect. Murphy was an avid traveler and admired the public plazas and gardens of Europe, especially the significant presence of public sculpture. A champion of liberal arts and the well-rounded student, he held that beauty and aesthetics were as essential as academics to the education experience. In keeping with this belief, as chancellor he required that landscaping be an integral part of every

building proposal. Cynthia Burlingham, the Hammer’s deputy director of collections and director of the Grunwald Center for



*On this page:* Artemis of Ephesus by Aldo Casanova (1964–1966), bronze, 84 inches high; Gift of Nathaniel and Margaret Wentworth Owings Foundation, 1967. *Opposite page:* Maya by Gerhard Marcks (1941), bronze, 88 inches high; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Warner and the UCLA Art Council, 1970.





the Graphic Arts, notes that “the character of the [sculpture garden] collection was determined by Murphy’s vision of art as an extension of daily life on campus, and how it would offer [in his own words] ‘a balance between the creativity of nature and the creativity of man.’”<sup>1</sup>

This was a wise choice, since there was no collection to speak of when Murphy proposed the idea for the garden in the early 1960s. While the vision was wholly his own, the overall profile and substance of the collection can be largely attributed to another key figure, Professor of Modern Art and Director, UCLA Art Galleries Frederick S. Wight (1953–1973), whose historic sculpture exhibitions at the University in the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for some of UCLA’s most important art acquisitions. Among these acquisitions are works that were featured in retrospective exhibitions for Jacques Lipchitz, Henri Matisse, Alexander Archipenko, Jean Arp, Gerhard Marcks, George Rickey, and others—all donated to UCLA by major collectors. Just as vital as Murphy’s inspired garden concept (and insider status as head of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s building fund), it was Wight’s keen curatorial sense that set an early direction for the collection’s distinguished growth toward a grand total of seventy-two works by European and American artists. In retrospect, the names now read as a kind of sculpture-garden “who’s who,” including, among those already mentioned, Émile-Antoine Bourdelle, Alexander Calder, Anthony Caro, Barbara Hepworth, Gaston Lachaise, Joan Miró, Henry Moore, Isamu Noguchi, Auguste Rodin, and others.

Due to Murphy’s stipulation that no sculpture purchases would be made from the University budget, private contributions were necessary to realize the ambitious project, which turned definitively on

*Opposite page: Bound Goat, Wednesday by Jack Zajac (1973), bronze, 29 inches high, in memory of Gabriel Mekler (1942–1977), donated by Adam and Joan Mekler, Oscar and Judith Mekler, Tim and Mani Van Kluyve, Alett Mekler, and Nancy Bacal, 1977.*

*On this page: The Bather by Jacques Lipchitz (1923–1925), bronze, 76-3/4 inches high, Gift of David E. Bright, 1967.*





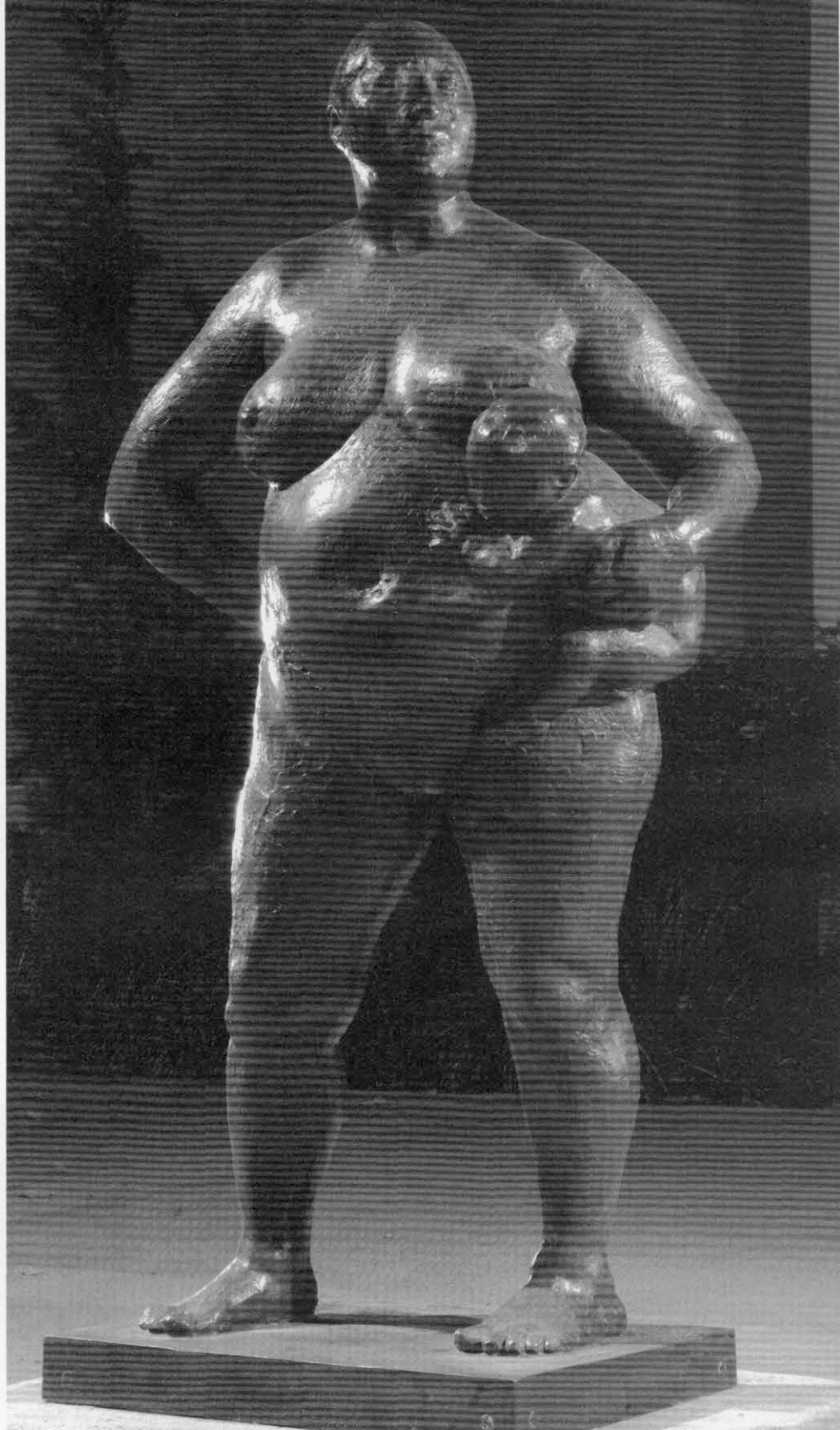
the largess of several Los Angeles collectors. In 1967, when Dolly Bright, widow of UCLA Art Council member David Bright, was considering what to do with her works of sculpture in a final instance of downsizing, Murphy negotiated with her an ingenious swap of paintings from an earlier University gift, and *voilà*—the garden collection instantly mushroomed with eleven seminal works by Arp, Calder, Lipchitz, Moore, and others, including David Smith's stainless-steel abstract *Cubi XX* (1964), a signal work in the history of modern sculpture. The Bright bequest thus put the Murphy Sculpture Garden on the map as a serious collection and set the bar for future acquisitions.

In many respects, the Murphy Sculpture Garden was at the forefront of the mid-century movement to create public open spaces for art in the United States, with MoMA's sculpture garden (reimagined by Philip Johnson in 1953) as perhaps the earliest and most influential example up to this point. Yet, because of the high quality of artworks and cohesion of the garden's overall design, the Murphy garden has become a touchstone for a generation of designers creating outdoor spaces for art at institutions and in the public realm. Dr. Murphy left UCLA in 1968 to become chairman of the board and chief executive officer of the Times Mirror Company, and was succeeded by Charles E. Young, who continued support for the project throughout his twenty-nine year tenure. Murphy also remained personally involved with the garden until his death in 1994.

How much of this background history registers with the average UCLA student is anyone's guess. More salient, and enduring, is the direct appeal of the works and their idyllic setting, shaded by now-impressive sycamore and eucalyptus trees. Because of the collection's wide dispersal throughout the garden's variety of spaces, visitors are afforded an intimate, one-to-one relationship with the artworks, which, for the most part, are lifelike in scale. The sculptures are not memorials or honorific figures; they aren't placed up high or set apart on honorary plinths—they are companions in the landscape. Students rest on the grass next to Gerhard Marcks's tall bronze figure *Maja* (1941), which is sited in a grove of Brazilian jacaranda trees that bloom purple in the spring and fall. Or they pass by Jacques Lipchitz's winged *Song of the Vowels* (1931–1932), the collection's first acquisition, on a pathway. Or they share a quiet moment alone sitting at the hooves of *Pensive*, a Deborah Butterfield bronze horse from 1996, the collection's most recent and final acquisition created specifically for the garden. "We don't plan to add any more," says Burlingham. "We consider it a completed collection because of the sort of balance of the landscape and the sculpture, and the ability to sit and relax in the garden and have this open space. We feel like it has reached that right kind of ratio."<sup>2</sup>



Initially designed with no collection yet in mind, the garden's network of pathways, terraces, and grassy open spaces was created by Ralph Cornell, UCLA's supervising landscape architect from 1937 to 1972. The concrete seating fixtures, with their seamless, ribbon-like undulation throughout the garden, help the sculptures to stand out, even hover, with greater efficacy. Today, building materials for public spaces vie for a lighter touch and smaller footprint. But even if the garden's modernist fixtures carry the heavy stamp of their era (much like the surrounding campus architecture), they nevertheless provide a uniform and unfussy "through line" of good design that ultimately serves the more spectacular pedigree of the artworks, whose individual personalities are still fresh—another testament to the quality of the collection.



*Opposite page and on this page, left:* Dance Columns I and II by Robert Graham (1978), bronze, 102 inches high, Gift of Carol and Roy Doumani, 1980.

*On this page, right:* Mother with Child at her Hip by Francisco Zuñiga (1979), bronze, 74-3/4 inches high, Gift of Lisa and Ernest Auerbach, 1980.

*On page 24-25:* Reclining Nude by Francisco Zuñiga (1970), bronze, 22-1/2 inches high, Gift of Elsie Browning Ballantyne in memory of her mother, Rachel Teresa Browning, 1975.










Interestingly, several UCLA students interviewed for a UCTV video clip point out their appreciation for the garden's butterflies or the prospect of being left alone to enjoy its intimate spaces, as much as they comment on the sculpture. This is an indication of how fully they occupy the garden and how much its overall design affects their behavior, from tossing a Frisbee to sketching the Rodin bronze *The Walking Man* (1905). The garden's unfenced, unguarded openness is one of its most singular features—it is a “public space,” imbued with all that term implies but that often is lacking in sites containing valuable works of art.

Nearing the half-century mark, the continued value of this public ethos, and Dr. Murphy's original vision, is not lost. As Victoria Steele, UCLA's head of the Young Research Library of Special Collections, and founder of the Department's Center for Primary Research and Training, points out in her essay for the Hammer's Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden catalog “...the garden is an education in beauty, natural and artistic. Here students learn the names of plants and familiarize themselves with art by masters of the sculptural medium. Some simply pass through the garden; some take away a deeper impression of it.”<sup>3</sup> 

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#### NOTES:

1. Cynthia Burlingham, “Creating the Murphy Sculpture Garden Collection,” in *The Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden at UCLA* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2007), pages 55–62.
2. Interview with Cynthia Burlingham, UCTV Prime, “Naked Art” (Ep. 2): Murphy Sculpture Garden UCLA, YouTube video, 9:31, posted by “UCTVPrime,” March 8, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRP1GLxgiRs>.
3. Victoria Steele, “An Education in Beauty,” in *The Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden at UCLA* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2007), pages 19–21.

**Opposite page:** Freya by Gerhard Marcks (1950), bronze, 65-1/2 inches high, Gift of the UCLA Art Council in honor of Franklin D. Murphy, 1968.

**On this page:** Noble Burdens by Emile-Antoine Bourdelle (1910), bronze, 49-1/2 inches high, Gift of B. G. Cantor Art Foundation, 1968.

