Dorothy Dehner began her artistic career in New York as an actor and dancer but decided to dedicate herself to the visual arts after discovering modern painting on a visit to Europe in 1925. Upon her return later that year, she enrolled at the Art Students League, where she studied with the Czech-born cubist painter Jan Matulka. She married a fellow art student, the sculptor David Smith, in 1927. Although they ultimately built an upstate home near Lake George, Dehner and Smith remained socially and professionally connected to Manhattan's avant-garde art world. She continued drawing and painting yet seemed to live in her husband's shadow, as his abstract sculptures began receiving acclaim. Not until the couple divorced, in 1952, did Dehner actively add three-dimensional work to her repertoire.

Dehner's sculptures seem at once both elemental and talismanic. Working directly with slabs of wax, she cut, shaped, and assembled various geometric forms, which she then incised with distinctly personal markings before casting them in bronze. Her memories of places, both familiar and foreign, often informed these intuitive, asymmetrically balanced, abstract arrangements. In the 1960s, she drew inspiration from sketches she had made in museums and at archaeological sites in Greece on a 1935 trip there. She based sculptures with titles such as Midas, Knossos Inhabited, Minotaur, and Demeter's Harrow on these decades-old drawings; at least two share the title Arcanorum, which is Latin for “of secrets” and reflective of Dehner’s abiding interest in the mythic and mysterious. Crafted of round and rectangular forms and marked with enigmatic circles and crosshatches, this 1966 version evokes both a cluster of figures and archaeological ruins.

Emily Stamey

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

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