

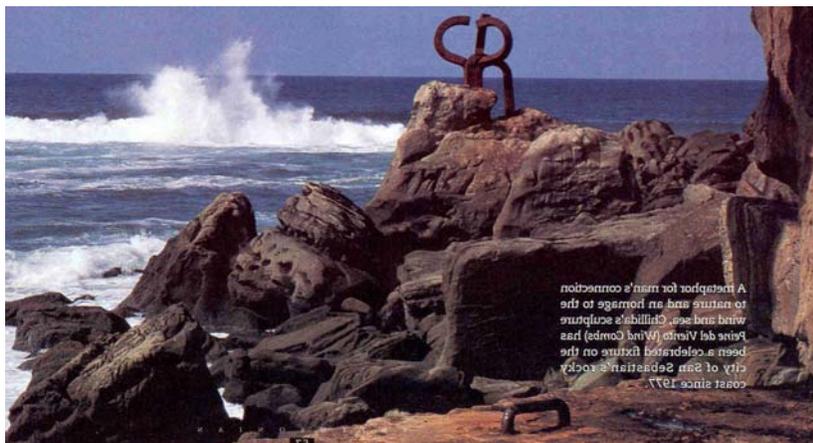
The Poetic Vision of Spanish Sculptor  
**Eduardo Chillida**

# The Poetic Vision of Spanish Sculptor Eduardo Chillida

BY STANLEY MEISLER

A metaphor for man's connection to nature and an homage to the wind and sea, Chillida's sculpture *Peine del Viento (Wind Combs)* has been a celebrated fixture on the city of San Sebastian's rocky coast since 1977.

EDUARDO CHILLIDA, THE RENOWNED 76-YEAR-OLD SPANISH sculptor, wants to climax a long and distinguished career by carving out a massive space 11 stories high and just as wide inside a mountain on one of Spain's Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean. The tall and soft-spoken Chillida, who often sounds more like a poet than a sculptor, is awed by the idea of standing within the enormous emptiness of mountain and looking upward at shafts of light from the sun and the moon.

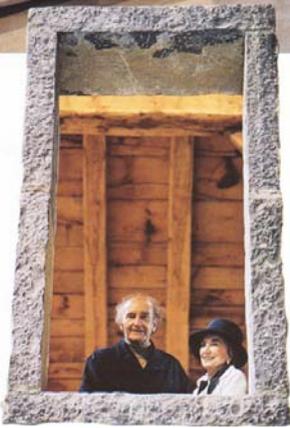


Chillida (pronounced Chee-YEE-dah) may never realize the work. Although the provincial government of the Canary Islands has approved the project, and promoters are already urging tourists to visit the anointed mountain, a small group of environmentalists has denounced the venture, castigating Chillida for meddling with nature. On top of this, engineers have not yet finished a study to determine whether Chillida's plan is structurally sound, and other problems have arisen. Whether successful or not, the grand ambition of the mountain project has not surprised anyone who knows the work of Chillida well. The artist, who has created both monumental and smaller pieces out of iron and steel and wood and alabaster and cement and clay and paper and stone and plaster, has come to look on space itself as material to mold. To sculpt an immense, mind-boggling space inside a mountain makes artistic sense to him.

Although Chillida's sculptures can be seen in a number of major museums in the United States, his name-- unlike that of earlier Spanish artists like Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró--is unfamiliar to most Americans who do not specialize in art. But his artistry has long been celebrated elsewhere.

Chillida was one of the first sculptors chosen when the Japan An Association in 1989 began awarding its annual Imperial Prizes of 15 million yen each (around \$135,000) to the leading achievers in fields not covered by the Nobel Prizes. The award put Chillida onto an august list of fellow prizewinners that now includes American sculptors Richard Serra and George Segal, American painters Willem de Kooning and Jasper Johns, French painter Balthus and British painter David Hockney.

When the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, opened a comprehensive retrospective of Chillida's work last year, Kosme de Barafiano, curator of the exhibition, told a news conference that Chillida "was one of the three pillars of sculpture in the 20th century." He identified the other two as Constantin Brancusi of Romania and Alberto Giacometti of Switzerland, putting Chillida in exalted company.



The gentle Chillida wears such praise without flamboyance or pretensions. He lives in the city where he was born--the lovely Basque seaside town of San Sebastian in northern Spain. He and his wife, Pilar ("Pili"), will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary this year. The couple, who have eight children and 25 grandchildren, live in a four-story house high on a hill that overlooks the center of San Sebastian and its bay. Three children and their families live with them. From the large windows of the living room, they can look down on Chillida's most celebrated sculpture, *Peine del Viento* (*Wind Combs*). The living room and hallways have a good number of Chillida drawings and sculptures, but more prominently displayed are paintings and drawings by Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, Marc Chagall and Georges Braque, almost all dedicated affectionately by the artists to Eduardo and Pili.

There is a story behind each of the dedications. When Chillida was a young artist in Paris, Braque asked to buy one of his sculptures. Chillida was so thrilled by this attention from one of the masters of modern that he decided to give the piece to Braque as a gift. But the dealer Aime Maeght interceded. "Don't be a fool," he said. "This is the first time Braque has offered to pay for anything." So Chillida compromised and

agreed to exchange his sculpture for a painting by Braque. The painting is unusual, for it is not Cubist but representational—a portrait of birds. "He loved birds," explains Chillida.

The sculptor, who has tufts of gray hair curling over the fringe of baldness, has a quiet way of expressing profound thoughts in simple words. "I am always trying to do what I don't know how to do," he says, pointing to one of his recent sculptures. He expressed the same thought at the news conference opening his retrospective at the Guggenheim in Bilbao, adding to the Spanish reporters: "That may sound like a joke. But it's not." He obviously prefers to explore new pathways rather than duplicate his own work.

Eduardo and Pili Chillida are Basques, an ethnic group in the north that regards itself as distinct from the other peoples of Spain. Much of Chillida's work is rooted in Basque culture, and he sometimes titles his sculptures in Euskera, the Basque language. But he refuses to support extreme Basque nationalist causes like independence.

Chillida was born on January 10, 1924, the son of an army officer and an amateur singer. The boy missed the searing experience of most Spaniards of his age, for his family sent him to a friend's home in France during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. After his return, the young Chillida quickly impressed San Sebastian, but not as an artist. He made his mark instead as the goalie for the local professional soccer team. But a blow to his knee during a pileup at the goal cut his sports career short. "They totally broke my knee, and I was finished forever," he recalled recently with a grin. "So I began to look in other directions."

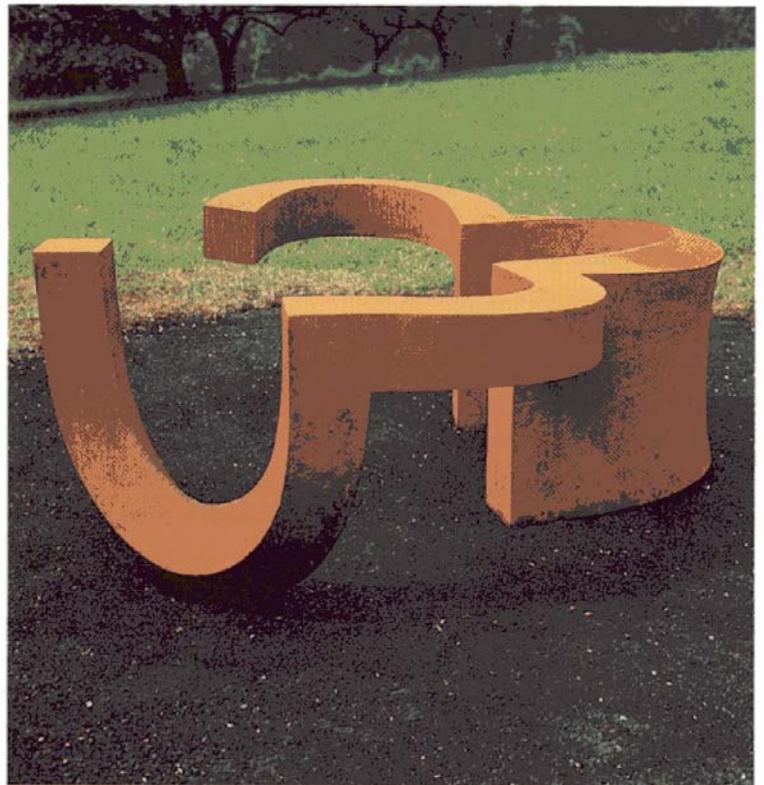
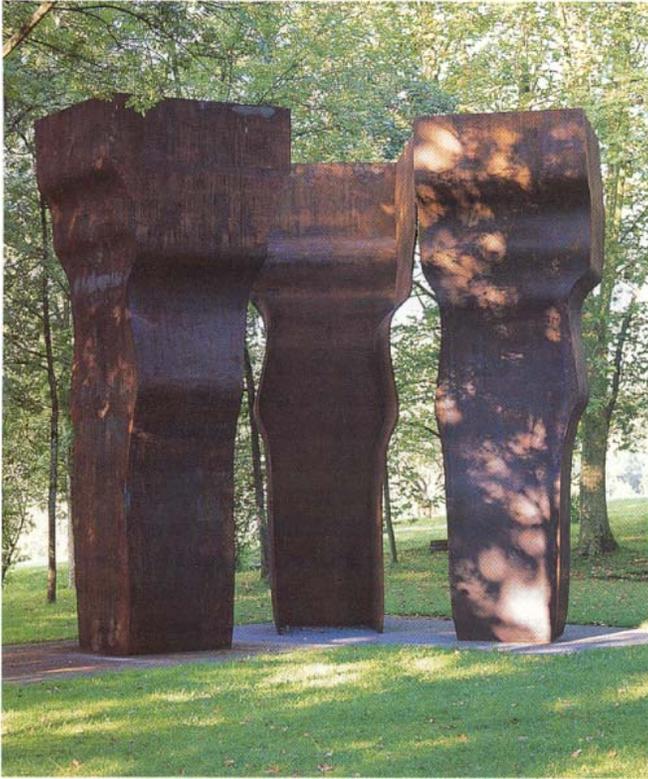
### THE DAWN OF CHILLIDA

EVEN DURING HIS TIME AS A SOCCER PLAYER, CHILLIDA did not neglect his penchant for art. He was always sketching, making numerous drawings of his colleagues playing cards or relaxing in the locker room. But he did not think much of this youthful output. When he and Pili married, he asked her to burn all those drawings. The new bride complied. "I should not have listened to him," she now says.

Chillida studied architecture in Madrid but soon shifted to drawing and sculpture, and in 1947 at age 23, like so many Spanish artists before him, left for Paris. He married his teenage sweetheart, Pili Belzunce, in 1950, and they set up home outside Paris.

In France, Chillida worked in plaster and stone. A critic, seeing several of his pieces in a show, wrote that the world was witnessing "the dawn of Chillida." But Chillida felt troubled. He had modeled his work after the magnificent Greek marble sculptures that he had seen in the Louvre. "Suddenly, it became clear to me that I did not belong to the white light of Greece," he told a Spanish interviewer recently. "I was lost because I belong to a land with dark light. The Atlantic is dark, the Mediterranean is not." The sculptor and his wife returned to Spain in 1951 and settled in San Sebastian.

There Chillida searched for a material that would fit the Basque mood. Iron was an obvious candidate. It has been mined from the Pyrenees for centuries. Spinners of legend, in fact, insist that the first Basque blacksmith emerged in 3000 B.C. Chillida happened upon a blacksmith's forge in a village outside San Sebastian and pondered whether iron was the material he sought. "When we entered the forge," he recalled, "it became clear to me that I was right. Everything was black. There I discovered iron."



**The sculpture garden of Chillida's renovated farmhouse/future museum boasts such works as his 1997 *Searching for Light I* (left), with its three 25-foot-high undulating shafts of steel, and *Tolerance* (right), an early version (1985) of his much larger sculpture for Seville.**

For a decade, Chillida worked almost exclusively in that material, sometimes twisting his pieces out of old farm tools. He attracted a good deal of attention, winning several international prizes for his work and selling one of his early pieces to Chagall. In 1954, Maeght, one of France's best-known dealers, offered to sell Chillida's sculptures. Thus Chillida became the youngest of Maeght's remarkable roster—one that included Bonnard, Miró, Chagall, Giacometti, Calder, Braque and Leger. From then on, his reputation and earnings would be secure.

To increase sales, Maeght urged Chillida to make molds for casting in bronze so that he could create several identical pieces. Chillida reluctantly gave in, turned out several works in bronze, and then stopped. "Pili," he complained to his wife, "it's like making pairs of shoes." Maeght warned him that there would not be enough pieces for gallery shows if he did not duplicate in bronze. "You are young," Maeght said. "All the artists do this." But Chillida remained stubborn. As a result, all but a handful of his sculptures are unique.

## A REBELLION AGAINST GRAVITY

AFTER IRON, CHILLIDA TRIED HIS HAND AT OTHER MATERIALS, primarily steel, wood and marble. As his metal pieces increased in size, he had to shift his work site from a blacksmith's forge to a foundry. He called his massive pieces "a rebellion against gravity." In the late 1950s, he was championed in the United States by James Johnson Sweeney, director of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, who hailed the Spaniard as "the foremost sculptor of his generation." Chillida's monumental *Abesti Gogora V (Rough Chant V)*, a 19-foot-wide granite sculpture that looks like a thunderous rush of falling dominoes, was unveiled in the garden of the Houston museum in 1966.

Experimenting continually, Chillida began creating what he calls "gravitations," multi-shaped papers that hang from strings and fall against each other in a kind of collage. But unlike collages, they are not pasted together. "If you pasted them," Chillida told me as he displayed one of his favorites, "you would lose the space between the papers."

In the 1960's, Chillida started working with alabaster, a translucent material that allows light to enter and diffuse through the space carved within. This took him far from the darkness of the forge and foundry where he hammered out metal sculptures. But the diffused light still kept him to his Basque roots, for it reminded him of the hazy light that broke through the fog on a rainy Atlantic day.

One alabaster piece, *Mendi Huts (Empty Mountain)*, in which shafts of light enter the solidity through rectangular "windows," inspired Chillida to conceive of someday doing much the same with a real mountain. The piece normally sits on a coffee table beneath a Mir6 painting in Chillida's living room. For almost a year, however, it was away, part of the 1999 retrospectives that honored the sculptor at the Queen Sofia National Center of Art in Madrid and the Guggenheim in Bilbao.

## AN AVANT-GARDE SCULPTURE GARDEN

CHILLIDA WAS NOT ALWAYS SO HONORED IN HIS OWN COUNTRY. The fascist government of Francisco Franco, which ruled Spain from the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s, did not look kindly on modern art. After all, one of the icons of modern art, *Guernica*, was painted by the expatriate Spaniard Pablo Picasso as a denunciation of Franco and his generals for ordering German planes to bomb the civilian population of a Basque town during the Spanish Civil War.

This antipathy toward modern art eased somewhat in the waning years of the dictatorship, and the city of Madrid decided to open an avant-garde sculpture garden in 1972 beneath an overpass that spanned the Paseo de la Castellana, one of the city's busiest boulevards. Chillida contributed the largest piece, *Meeting Place III* (right), an eight-ton concrete structure with two giant arms spreading out like wings. This huge sculpture hovered two feet above the ground, suspended by cables attached to four pillars of the bridge. Once installed, *Meeting Place III* provoked furious controversy, and before the garden was opened, the Francoist mayor of Madrid ordered the cables removed as a safety measure, insisting that the sculpture was too heavy for the bridge. Workmen placed the piece on wooden trestles, a state that everyone knew Chillida could not accept. "It is meant to fill a certain space," he told Henry Giniger of the *New York Times*, "and to give the impression of heaviness even though floating."



The engineers who designed the bridge argued that the overpass could support ten times the weight of the sculpture. Art critics pleaded with the authorities. One critic gave the work a new name--"The Grounded Mermaid." But the mayor was adamant. Cranes removed the sculpture during the dead of night. A hundred saddened supporters of Chillida showed up and, as one participant reported, applauded the work as if it were "a mortally wounded gladiator." But the controversy ended happily. Spain transformed itself into a democracy after the death of Franco in 1975. Less than three years later, the newly elected mayor of Madrid overruled the foolish strictures against suspending the piece and decreed that it should now hang from the bridge. The artist Joan Mir6, who had boycotted the garden because of the controversy, then donated a sculpture of his own.

## A STORY OF EXCITED MOVEMENT

FRESH FROM THIS VICTORY, CHILLIDA COMPLETED ONE OF THE most spectacular works in all 20<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture. The city of San Sebastian nestles against a long, semicircular bay of the Atlantic, and Chillida embedded three steel structures, each weighing 11 tons, in the cliffs and rocks at the western edge of the bay. He called the trio *Peine del Viento (Wind Combs)*--a dramatic grouping that seems to tell a story of excited movement. A vertical comb, protruding from a boulder in the water, reaches upward with claw-like fingers while similar appendages of the two horizontal combs onshore twist and yearn toward each other and toward their brother in the water.

"I began studying for this when I was very little," Chillida told me when I visited, brushing the wet steel with his fingers. He remembers coming to this part of the shore when he was 2 years old and feeling enchanted by the sea. "I have a very special connection with the sea," he has said. "She knows everything. I love to walk near the sea like children like to walk with their father." He describes the site of *Wind Combs* as "a very, very special place for me. ...I never chose the place. The place chose me."

With democracy secured in the late 1970s and '80s, demand grew throughout Spain for Chillida sculptures in outdoor public places. Chillida produced imposing works in steel and concrete for Barcelona, Guernica, Vitoria, Seville and other Spanish cities. The monument in Guernica has special significance for him because the town was the medieval capital of the Basque country. Commissions came from other European cities as well, especially from Germany, and from the United States. These monumental pieces made Chillida's work more familiar and accessible to the public than ever before.



**Chillida's 1989 two-piece steel sculpture *De Musica* stands in striking counterpoint outside the Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas. His monument in Guernica (right) was created to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1937 bombardment of the town.**

Chillida rejects the notion that he is an abstract sculptor. Instead, he calls himself a "realist sculptor"—but a realist who does not focus on appearances. By this he means he is not trying to depict people and events but to show ideas and emotions. At their best, his works brim with movement and tension. Huge concrete arms extend in a welcoming embrace from *Homage to Tolerance*, his mammoth sculpture in Seville, for example. His largest work for the United States, *De Musica*, the 81-ton steel sculpture that stands in front of the I. M. Pei-designed Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas, features two pillars with branches that reach out but do not touch.

While commissions for large public pieces poured in, Chillida bought a 16th-century stone *caserio*—a traditional four-story Basque farmhouse—in the nearby village of Hernani and proceeded to renovate it. The artist left wooden beams and

a narrow section of the top floor in place but gutted the rest of the caserío so that some of his giant sculptures could be placed there. Even larger works dominate the grounds outside the farmhouse.

SOME CRITICS BELIEVE THAT CHILLIDA'S CREATION OF A VAST space within the farmhouse was a rehearsal for creating a vast space within a mountain. Chillida came up with the idea in the mid-1980s and then proceeded to search for a mountain. He looked in Italy, Finland and Switzerland before settling on Mount Tindaya on sparsely populated Fuerteventura in the Canary Islands, off the coast of West Africa. Tindaya seemed ideal. A mining company was already extracting trachyte, a decorative rock, from one side of the mountain, and Chillida could position the entrance to the interior on the site of the quarry. As Chillida envisioned his mountain sculpture, a visitor would stand at the entrance and look back at more than a mile of lava-laden earth extending to the sea. The visitor would then walk down a corridor almost the length of a football field before reaching the massive cube of interior space carved within the mountain. Light would come from two shafts that would penetrate the summit. The visitor, Chillida hopes, would feel the smallness of mankind and the immensity and force of space.

But Chillida did not anticipate the problems that would be spawned by his project. Delays have been caused by environmentalists afraid of damage to the mountain, anthropologists worried about the loss of what they believe may be the footprints of prehistoric man, engineers who have still not completed a study on whether the digging can be done safely, and investigators looking into accusations of corruption between politicians and the mining company that has been quarrying the trachyte. Although the Canary Island government gave the project final approval in late 1998, Chillida is concerned that politicians might back down if the problems intensify. The frustration has made him testy and defiant. He told reporters recently, "The Tindaya project will be finished someday even if I am not here to see it." The troubles over the mountain coincided with about of near depression. But Chillida, in an unusually frank interview not long ago, did not blame the controversy for the attacks that made him feel like "everything was falling apart. " The sculptor conquered this funk by listening to Bach and other music, reading philosophy and poetry, and forcing himself by sheer will to act as if he did not feel the near depression. Still a productive artist these days, Chillida is powered by the sentiment expressed in the line of a poem that he has cited often over the years. Quoting the French poet Rene Char, Chillida has told many interviewers trying to understand his work, "One must walk forward into the night."



***Eulogy to Water (left) was commissioned in 1987 for a city park in Barcelona. The precast concrete structure is suspended on steel cables from surrounding cliffs.***

***Smithsonian, July, 2000.***