



*Ursula von Rydingsvard's Czara z Babelkami, in Madison Square Park through December.*

ART

## Green Party

A spiffed-up Madison Square Park gets the kind of summer visitors that New Yorkers actually like.

BY MARK STEVENS

**C**ONTEMPORARY “public sculpture” is too often a bureaucratic afterthought, an add-on to upgrade a bland plaza or park. It rarely has a daring or vital connection to its surroundings. It should be the maraschino cherry on the banana split, but, instead, it sits there, a thingamajig in nowhere-ville, inviting admiration and yielding boredom. Four sculptures by Ursula von Rydingsvard, on view for the rest of the year in Madison Square Park, make a delightful exception to this tradition of mediocrity. Not only do they appear vibrantly at home in one of the most successful parks in New York City, but they also nourish this particular park’s character.

Von Rydingsvard was born in Germany to Polish parents in 1942 and, after the war, spent her childhood in a refugee camp. Many of her large cedar sculptures refer to her youth, but not in a cold, angry, resentful, or bleak way. Instead, they appear as knottily complex as people are. Treating wood as the living material it is—the slow graying of a wooden sculpture appeals to her—she nicks and cuts and forms small bumps on the surface until the massive blocks develop an individual face. This “face,” however, is

never cornily anthropomorphic: Von Rydingsvard learned from Minimalism’s cool severities even as she retained the large feeling of Abstract Expressionism. Many pieces play between interior and exterior, the concealed and the revealed. And many also have a forest magic about them, that dreamy, grand, and strangely austere aura of the woods found in Northern European culture.

Madison Square Park, not long ago a junky dust bowl, is already a brilliant piece of urban resurrection. Ringed by several wonderful works of architecture—above all, the Flatiron Building—it contains stately old trees, lush grass, and fine wavy pathways. At its southern end, of course, is Danny Meyer’s Shake Shack, an elegant remake of the classic American burger joint where New Yorkers line up for highbrow hamburgers with curious intensity. Inside the park, Von Rydingsvard has placed three cedar pieces and one extraordinary work of glasslike polyurethane resin. Two of the cedars are large vertical bowls that swell upward from a narrow base. They rhyme with the soaring of both the trees and the skyscrapers, helping bond the park to its place. The third cedar, set near the busy

MAD. SQ. ART: URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD  
MADISON SQUARE PARK,  
THROUGH DECEMBER 31.

Shake Shack, is horizontal in form. (A park is a place where you can lie down in the vertical city.) Despite their urban nature, certain great parks also contain a dream of the wild forest. Von Rydingsvard's cedar pieces carry that lovely echo, too.

In the heart of the park, at the north end of the Oval Lawn, Von Rydingsvard has placed *Damski Czepek*, a gray sculpture made with great technical flair from a polyurethane resin that resembles a hard, translucent stone. Its title means "lady's bonnet," and its form evokes the sort of hat women once wore for a walk outside. More particularly, *Damski*

*Czepek* looks like a cave or grotto. Such places have important associations in Western culture: the shelter from the storm, the Lascaux paintings, the religious hermits, the robbers, the children escaping into the magical world of elves and trolls. Caves are a kind of open secret, a hideaway, just as parks are. *Damski Czepek* is a refuge within a refuge. Flowing out from this cave are two welcoming arms, which look as lively and unexpected as a pair of small forest streams.

*Damski Czepek* changes as the sky does. In a certain light, it can almost glow like a lantern. It mirrors the gray of both sky and skyscraper, and it has something in com-

mon with boulders. But its light also dematerializes weight and form, so that it becomes like fog, a cloud, or a wisp of smoke—a dreamy counterpoint to the rigid city. At the entrance of the cave, you look across the trees to the Flatiron Building, which from that perspective resembles a rakish ocean liner heading uptown. Not surprisingly, the people of the park have taken to this sculpture. Actors recite lines in its small sanctuary. Lovers retire into its shadows. Children lay hands on its mysteriously lit stone. Nerds wonder how it was done. Around *Damski Czepek* people seem unusually happy. They've forgotten it's art. ■