



Image from: [Richard Serra, Gravity, 1991. Steel, 12 × 12 × 10... in Artists of the American Mosaic: Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists](#)

Summary Article: **Richard Serra (1939–), sculptor and draftsman.**  
from *Artists of the American Mosaic: Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists*

An artist who challenges conventions and definitions of sculpture, San Francisco-born Richard Serra retains the original properties of his untraditional materials, which often comprise massive, site-specific structures. Indeed, truth to materials, both color and texture, as well as large scale and site specificity are the most enduring values in Serra's art. Serra explained the importance of site: "For the most part the site determines how I think about what I am going to build, whether it be an urban or landscape site, a room or other architectural enclosure. Some works are realized from their inception to their completion totally at the site" (Serra, *Richard Serra: Writings, Interviews*, 168).

While working at steel mills to support his education—an important introduction to what would become the artist's favorite material—Serra studied English literature at the University of California at Berkeley and at Santa Barbara (1957–61). At Yale University (1961–64), where he worked with Josef Albers on his well-known book *The Interaction of Color* (1963), Serra earned a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. Following two years in Europe funded by grants, Serra settled in New York in 1966 and began creating work that emphasized temporality and process. *Splashing* (1968), for example, required Serra to throw molten lead into the angle where the floor and wall meet in a room. The hardened, splattered mold recalls paintings by Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, but unlike Pollock's canvases Serra's work is ephemeral. During this time Serra, like Eva Hesse, also experimented with various industrial materials, such as rubber and fiberglass, in nonnarrative works designed for interior spaces. Exploring the distinctive qualities of the materials and the consequence of gravity, *Belts* (1966–67, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York) comprises vulcanized rubber hanging serially from a wall accentuated by neon tubing. Through the late 1960s, Serra also investigated the effects of gravity on heavy, temporally installed, abstract sculpture and on the viewer's confrontation with weighty, unsecured pieces of art arranged vertically. Two hundred tons of identical metal slabs, piled twenty-feet high, loomed perilously over the viewer surveying *Stacked Steel Slabs (Skullcracker Series)* (1969, Fontana, California, destroyed).

A number of sculptures from the early 1980s are huge, minimalist, geometric in form, and at times controversial. His infamous public sculpture *Tilted Arc* (1981) was made on commission from the United States General Services Administration for New York City's Federal Plaza. Many viewed the 12-foot high, 120-foot long curved, tilted slab of Cor-ten steel as threatening in conception, divisive of pedestrian space, and constrictive of the plaza's view. Even after a federal court case during which Serra argued that moving the sculpture would be a violation of his contract and would destroy the site specificity of the piece, the sculpture was removed in 1989.

During the past two decades he has worked on several sculptures related to Holocaust remembrance. Installed next to the Berlin Philharmonic, the abstract, two slab, Cor-ten steel *Berlin Junction* (1987) memorializes those who lost their lives at the hands of the Nazis. *Gravity* (1993), a ten-inch thick, nearly ten-foot square standing, tiered slab of Cor-ten steel, was made on commission for the Hall of Witnesses at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (see figure). The title has multiple implications: the gravity of the evils perpetuated by the Nazis, the gravitational forms that keep the large piece erect, and the derivation of the word "grave" from gravity, an evocation of the mass burials of Holocaust victims. In addition to other works associated with the Holocaust, Serra made two sculptures referring to survivor Primo Levi, one titled after Levi and the other called *The Drowned and the Saved* (1992, Erzbischöfliches Diözesanmuseum, Cologne) after a chapter in *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi's memoir of his Holocaust experience. The former sculpture was exhibited at the 1995 Whitney Biennial, and the latter originally appeared in the abandoned Synagogue Stommeln in Pulheim, Germany, a locale in which Sol LeWitt also designed a Holocaust remembrance. Both of Serra's sculptures are composed of two conjoined steel L-beams that together look like an upside down U or a bridge. Scholar Harriet Senie characterizes the sculpture as "an open barrier held in tense equilibrium. The historical experience of Jewish identity might be similarly described" (210). Critic Hal Foster reads the sculpture as "an icon of spanning and passing, and both kinds of movements are intimated here. There are those who span the bridge, who pass over it, the saved, and those who do not span the bridge, who pass under it, the drowned. These two passages, these two fates, are opposed, but they come together as the two beams come together, in support" (190).



Richard Serra, *Gravity*, 1991. Steel, 12 × 12 × 10 feet. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. Photography by Edward Owen. © 2006 Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In the early 1970s Serra began making drawings of his sculptures after they had been conceived. He also devised a mode of wall drawing, akin to LeWitt and Jonathan Borofsky, which explored issues of space and employed his favored geometric, minimalist, nearly monochrome approach. First preparing large rolls of Belgian linen with gesso and a coat of black paintstick—which creates a heavy black field of color—Serra then brings the canvas roll into the gallery, cuts the canvas into a shape dictated by the wall, and staples the image to the wall. The objective of the works is to alter the viewer's experience of the room, similar to Serra's sculptural goals. More recently, three of Serra's *Torqued Ellipses*—enormous steel plates twisted into ovals that possess a sense of grace and delicacy despite their heavy material and size—were exhibited at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York (1997–98).

Serra installed an outdoor sculpture at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1987, a year after his first American retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Other honors include an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from the California College of the Arts (1994).

### Selected Public Collections

Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Nationalgalerie, Berlin

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

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Richard Serra (1939–), sculptor and draftsman. (2006). In S. Baskind, *Artists of the American mosaic: encyclopedia of Jewish American artists*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/serra\\_richard\\_1939](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/serra_richard_1939)

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## Chicago

"Richard Serra (1939–), sculptor and draftsman." In *Artists of the American Mosaic: Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists*, by Samantha Baskind. ABC-CLIO, 2006. [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/serra\\_richard\\_1939](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/serra_richard_1939)

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## MLA

"Richard Serra (1939–), sculptor and draftsman." *Artists of the American Mosaic: Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists*, Samantha Baskind, ABC-CLIO, 1st edition, 2006. *Credo Reference*, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/serra\\_richard\\_1939](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/serra_richard_1939). Accessed 19 Jan. 2019.