As a sculptor, she worked actually in a very unusual way. When Dorothy started making sculpture in the 1950’s, she preferred to work in bronze, but like many women artists, she really wasn’t very comfortable with welding. She used slabs of wax very much in the way a constructivist might use pieces of metal that were then going to be combined to be welded. In other words, she worked in a constructivist way using geometric forms, these slabs, and then she personalized them in certain ways by incising into them and building them up in geometric arrangements and then they were cast in bronze. She addressed an idea of creating an art that could be very meaningful and filled with content and expression within an abstract form.

Fortissimo is a very late piece. It was typical of Dorothy Dehner in her late years to use as a source of inspiration and also as a compositional basis, either a drawing or to use a small sculpture. The sculpture then was not really a maquette because it was an independent piece. Fortissimo was based on a composition that was originally in bronze. It was taken by the fabricator and enlarged initially because Dorothy wanted to see how it would appear in a larger form. It was made in a three dimensional styrofoam version, and this was brought to her for her approval. Now when I talk about the styrofoam versions, it was not the piece at the deCordova,
which is very large. It was in fact the piece that was much smaller than that, that was originally used so that she could decide on the composition and whether or not she was satisfied with the way it was going to look. Then it was fabricated into steel. There were two types of steel used for her fabricated sculpture, either a rolled steel that was going to be painted or Cor-Ten. And then there were a number of pieces, including the one at deCordova, that were made in aluminum.

Joan Marter, scholar
Modernist Sculptors
I think we are making a reassessment of the artists of the 40’s and 50’s in particular. When I say we are making a reassessment I mean that the artists of the New York School, the group itself is enlarged to include both male and female artists, who have expanded the canon of a very small group including Pollock and de Kooning, and such. Another aspect of her that is very important, aside from the fact that she is a woman artist of great importance in that period is that we are also looking, I hope, more seriously at sculptors of that period. The sculptors have been neglected. In fact the sculptors often times are not considered part of abstract expressionism. It’s very difficult to get a sense of their use of abstraction, as compared to paintings by Pollock, or de Kooning, or Franz Kline, or any of the other artists involved with Abstract Expressionism. But in fact their ideas about abstraction are very similar, and many of these artists were in fact close friends.

Paula Wizotski, scholar
The Title Fortissimo
Dehner was very widely read and had a remarkably broad vocabulary, and she would absolutely have been aware not only of the musical term that is associated with the Italian word, “fortissimo,” but also its derivation from the Italian and ultimately the Latin root for “strength.” So on one hand, here is a work that speaks to strength and fashioned at the end of the long and productive life. It speaks to the artist’s sense of strength, the power of her work, but also the fortitude that made it possible for her to remain committed to her art over the long decades of her life. But the musical reference, the idea that this is something that should be played strongly, loudly, fortissimo, also would have had strong associations for her because she had grown up with music. The idea of a parallel creation to sculpture, something that would be the abstract form of music, and the dynamics of how music is written down and communicated to the artist who is going to play it would have all had meaning for her.

Paula Wizotski, scholar
Fortissimo as a Totem
She would have read, or at least known, the ideas of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud and she read a great deal of psychology in that period. And out of that, she, like many of her colleagues, became interested in the idea of the totem. The thing that helps to identify us, but also repulses us because we know that we must be close to it, but we must not be one with it as a kind of distillation of what those ideas are about and how they circulated for the visual artists in the United States in
that era. And so, even in *Fortissimo* from 1993, the vertical orientation of the work, the opening within the half-square that references a head...all those things are anthropomorphic at the same time they also are totem-like, so that we are attracted to the object because it is human-like in its form, but we are pushed away from it. Partly from the protrusions, from the object that literally, physically pushes away. And also of course, in the instance of this specific work because of its great height. A monumentality that overshadows us.

**Mystery Family Tour**

You are looking at a sculpture by Dorothy Dehner titled *Fortissimo*. Listen and look carefully to solve the mystery of what this title means. Dorothy wanted to create a sculpture that looked strong. She created this sculpture when she was 92 years old and wanted it to show how strong she had been throughout her lifetime. Does the sculpture seem strong to you? Why or why not? I sure think it looks strong and so did Dorothy. She even named this sculpture *Fortissimo*, which means “very strong” in Italian. Do you think that is a good for this sculpture? Have you noticed how tall this sculpture is? It is 20 feet tall! That’s as tall as a house! Imagine if the sculpture were smaller than you. How would you feel about it then? Dorothy made this sculpture with aluminum metal that she painted black. What would happen if this sculpture were painted a soft pink or yellow, or if it were made out of fabric? Would it still seem strong?