

Obituaries

JOSEPH BLUMENTHAL

When Joseph Blumenthal died on July 11, 1990, in West Cornwall, Connecticut, the Society lost a member of less than six years' standing. Although he was not directly active in its affairs, his life touched many fields and persons the Society esteems, and his achievements, like his friendships, were as solid as the printing he produced.

Born in New York City in 1897, Blumenthal was the son of a German immigrant. His father started out as a peddler in rural Pennsylvania and worked his way up to a retail shoe store and later a clothing business in Manhattan. In storybook fashion, he was able to send all his children to college. Joe attended Cornell University but dropped out in his sophomore year to enlist in the U.S. Navy (though World War I ended before he saw action as an aviator). Following a stint in his father's business, he decided that the world of books was for him. First working as a salesman for a publisher, then as an apprentice at the highly regarded printing establishment of William Edwin Rudge, Joe went on to establish his own shop, The Spiral Press, in 1926.

'It had been my father's wish,' he wrote much later, 'that I would carry on in business where he had left off, that I should rise to become a captain of industry. Alas I never became more than a corporal.' But he picked the right mission and led his squad to distinguished achievement during forty-five years as a designer and letterpress printer. He early set high standards of unobtrusive legibility and careful presswork and in time became internationally known for these qualities. He was associated through his work with many contemporary artists, among them Reginald Marsh, Ben Shahn, and Antonio Frasconi. He designed his own typeface,

Emerson, which was made available for machine setting by the English Monotype Corporation. He designed the format for the volumes of the presidential papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1938) and regularly printed books and catalogues for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Grolier Club, Steuben Glass, and many other organizations and publishers. He was perhaps best known for his long typographical and personal friendship with Robert Frost. Many of Frost's books and a long line of Christmas poems were printed at The Spiral Press. Joe and his wife Ann even 'boarded' the Frost dog in later years when Frost went to Florida during the winter.

Typographically, Joe early came to prefer generously spaced types and often employed a swelled rule or dash on the title page of his books. This became such a well-known feature of his work that, reportedly, someone once asked him if they could borrow his 'copyrighted' design. So closely did The Spiral Press and Joseph Blumenthal become entwined that he would sometimes sign notes and dedications with the name 'Joe Spiral.'

After closing the Press in 1971, Joe became a steady and thoughtful student of the history of printing. With due modesty, he appreciated his own role in this century's developments. He was as lucid a writer as he was a typographer, and he tells his own story best of all. *The Spiral Press through Four Decades* was both an exhibition and book about his work shown at the Morgan Library in 1966. It was followed in 1973 by another exhibit and volume, *Art of the Printed Book, 1455-1955*, also at the Morgan, a major gathering of books accompanied by the insights of a practicing printer. Dartmouth College was the scene of yet another exhibition, *The Printed Book in America* (1977), which drew on books from 1640 to 1976. In 1982 his *Typographic Years, a Printer's Journal through Half a Century* appeared. These last three works were designed by him and printed by Society member Roderick Stinehour. Blumenthal's final work, *Bruce Rogers, A Life in Letters* (1989), treated the work of the famous book designer, which he greatly admired. Joe's historical interests were not limited to one period and were never

mere assemblings of facts and footnotes but were based on his honest feeling for true human achievement in any age.

In addition to his writing, his legacy will remain the work of the Press itself and his own strength of character. Joe combined in one person both the artistic and business skills requisite to keep a shop going. His was one of only two major letterpress printing firms from the 1920s to survive into the 1970s.

Age did not diminish his mental powers. In his retirement years, he and Ann welcomed young printers and designers into their home for pleasant visits about printing or gardening or politics, food or family or fame. They thus kept in touch with the current world of books and printing. But in the process Joe was also handing on his knowledge and traditions to the next generation, always generous in the giving of ideas as well as of books and other gifts.

Joe's most direct contributions to AAS were at least two. He was a mentor to Roderick Stinehour, the Society's principal printer, and he gave Isaiah Thomas a relatively long and certainly strong plug in *The Printed Book in America*, which had a large circulation.

Upon accepting membership in AAS, Blumenthal wrote then-president John Jeppson: 'When your Isaiah Thomas, late in life, was honored by members of his craft, he closed with the words, "My attachment to the art of which we are professors is not diminished. Could I live my life over again and choose my employment, it would be that of printer." To which I may add, Amen.'

Darrell Hyder

OTTO VINCENT GUSTAFSON

Otto Vincent Gustafson died on February 20, 1989, at the age of eighty-two. He was elected to AAS in 1982 and served on the Committee on Finance and the Worcester County Committee of the Society's Isaiah Thomas fund drive. He never missed a meeting

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