

Obituaries

LEONARD BASKIN

We associated with the Society should not let the passing on June 3, 2000, of one of the most influential figures in the book world go unrecognized. The sculptor, engraver, designer, essayist, printer, and collector Leonard Baskin, familiar to the Society through his long friendship with President Emeritus Marcus McCorison, became a member of the Society in 1989. His work has found wide recognition and is included in most major American collections, as well as many in Europe and elsewhere. Known in the art world for his enormous output of masterful engravings and woodcuts; sculptures in wood, stone, and bronze; and his extraordinary Gehenna Press, Baskin's work condensed the suffering and tenuous nature of humanity into images that emphasize man's tenacity, stoicism, and innate nobility. He said: 'The human figure is the image of all men and of one man—it contains all and can express all.' His prints and drawings feature haunting figures, often derived from biblical or classical inspiration. Anthropomorphic birds suggest predatory human beings; man in all his frailties exposed; the bloat of greed and avarice; or the grizzled look of hunger, veins, and sinews, all finely sliced into copper plates, or facilely carved in bold strokes on wood blocks, some as big as doors. His intellectual sensibilities are evident in every line of his pen or burin. He probed, penetrated, and made visual the darkness at the depth of man's nature; his pose was often one of admonishment, his theme often death, at the same time calling us to rejoice in the 'glory of our gutted mansion.'

Born the son of a rabbi in 1922, Baskin grew up in Brooklyn, went to yeshiva, studied with the sculptor Morris Glickman, and,

by the age of thirteen, knew he would be an artist. He addressed the philosophical implications of man's injustice to man, and the survival of the race as part of a generation born between two world wars: witness to the terror, depredation, alienation, and displacement of millions; the destruction of whole populations, and the atomic horror of Hiroshima. The Holocaust and death profoundly informed his work, as in his sculptures of dead men and his large format woodcuts *Man of Peace* and *Hydrogen Man*. But his work could be laudatory also, as evidenced in his many portraits of artists of the past and a book of essays dedicated to the subject called *Iconologia*.

A self-proclaimed maverick, it is not surprising that he was at odds with the prevailing forces in the art world. He saw in its disdain of all things tangible and figurative in artistic expression and its inability to address meaningful, universal, and timeless issues, an art that was self-indulgent, vacuous, and cowardly. While critics still remain divided about his lasting place in the art world, collectors and bibliophiles are not.

From his time at Yale University as an undergraduate, when he first came under the spell of William Blake and was introduced to printing at the Jonathan Edwards College Press, he founded his Gehenna Press and produced a wide range of books and printed materials that form a lasting memorial to his energy, taste, and vision. With works such as *Castle Street Dogs*, an uncensored view of his mangy, canine neighbors, he gained the attention of collectors while an instructor at the Worcester Art Museum School. And it was here in Worcester that he began a teaching career that would span over forty years. After moving to Northampton to take a position at Smith College in 1953, through the birth of his first child, his marriage to Lisa Unger and their beginning a new family, and the death of his first wife, Esther Tane, his art continued to flourish. Even a move to England in the 1970s and an operation for a tumor on his pituitary gland could not still his production. His press continued wherever he might be.

The press often published little-known texts reflecting his di-

verse interests, preoccupations, and collections. In their production, he showed his consummate skill and sophistication as a designer, typographer, and artist. Texts ranged from Euripides to Goethe, texts as dissimilar as John Woolman's *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* and art-historical tracts on Dutch masters. Modern poets such as James Baldwin, Anne Halley, Stanley Kunitz, Archibald MacLeish, and Anthony Hecht were published with original works, and he often collaborated with his friend, Britain's Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, to great effect in works such as *Capriccio*. He even attempted the daunting task of printing the entire works of Shakespeare in elephant folio format, a project the press could not sustain, and that he ultimately dismissed as an act of hubris.

At his press in Northampton, Baskin and pressman Harold McGrath gave direction and succor to some budding talents later to become important figures in the hand press renaissance. His students included Carol Blinn, Bruce Chandler, David Godine, Lance Hidy, Michael Kuch, and Barry Moser. As a professor at Smith and Hampshire colleges, he inspired a generation of students to enter fields in the arts, and, through his accessibility as an immense presence of the book world, was instrumental in making the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts into a haven where the book arts would flourish.

His collecting was legendary. Starting with his first trips to Europe, he never shied away from incurring debt in pursuit of his passion. When asked about a relative's collection, he observed: 'He could never have a great collection—he is never willing to spend more than he earns.' He often discovered obscure or undervalued artists, always collecting before a trend. His interest always deeper than the mere desire to amass, his collections inspired and defined his work. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portrait books led to several Gehenna Press imprints of both real and imagined artist portraits, with fanciful texts of his own confection sometimes confounding scholars and art historians. A collection of small, bronze, animal sculptures cast from the creatures

themselves led to a book titled *Nature's Mould* about past masters in this arcane field. His vast and varied knowledge and the depth and intensity of his collecting infused the products of the press with a literary and art historical, as well as artistic, sensibility few modern private presses can boast.

In later years while pursuing important sculptural commissions, such as the Holocaust Memorial in Ann Arbor and the Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorials in Washington, D.C., it was always the books that gave him sustenance. His output ever more prodigious, his imagination ever more fanciful, editions spilled forth from his press, more limited in copies, at a rate of four a year: books of sybils and terms, grotesques and arabesques, and even the three-volume *Oresteia*, occupied artisans in their completion and filled collectors' bookshelves, finding a diverse, new generation of bibliophiles to enjoy them.

On a personal level, in his presence one's mettle was constantly being tested. His opinions, offered in a rasping, crackling voice, could be withering. He loved language; even his jokes, told in several languages at once, could be a challenge. But his approbation came just as readily as his dismissal, and he was a generous and entertaining host. He and his wife Lisa offered their hospitality to artists, writers, and craftspeople, as well as opening their home, sponsoring many fundraising events in support of the various progressive causes about which they were passionate. He enriched our lives and, with unfailing honesty, helped us understand who we are. His was a vision and a voice that will be greatly missed.

Daniel Gehrich

GERTRUDE ROBINSON MALLARY

Gertrude Slater Robinson was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, on August 19, 1902, into a family of means and position in that city. She was the daughter of George Edward and Jennie (Slater)

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