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Leonard Baskin: Imaginary Artists

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Leonard Baskin: Imaginary Artists

Description

Leonard Baskin (1922-2000) was an American sculptor, illustrator, and printmaker. He is perhaps best known as a figurative sculptor and a creator of monumental woodcuts. The Gehenna Press, Baskin's private press, operated for over 50 years (1942-2000) and produced more than 100 volumes of fine art books. His most prominent public commissions include sculpture for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial and the Woodrow Wilson Memorial, both in Washington D.C., and the Holocaust Memorial in Ann Arbor, MI. Baskin received numerous honors, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Gold Medal of the National Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Jewish Cultural Achievement Award. He had many retrospective exhibitions, including those at the Smithsonian, the Albertina, and the Library of Congress. His work is in major private and public institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the British Museum, and the Vatican Museums.

Imaginary Artists, a collection of 25 watercolor sketches, was completed in 1976 as a gift for Baskin's friend, the distinguished Philadelphia lawyer Edwin Rome, and his wife, Rita. In this series Baskin skillfully acknowledges the Western art historical canon through irreverent references to traditional compositions and famous artists. His group of imaginary—or one can imagine uncredited—artists were often figured as the assistants, students, or rivals to the most noted painters of the centuries and include “Smedley Webb, little-known student of T. Eakins” and “Antonin du Colines, assistant to Poussin.” Through these representations, Baskin mirrors his earlier 1963 series Portraits of Artists, but takes up the subject, history, and medium of painting with humor and a serious commitment to figuration.

Keywords

Leonard Baskin, sculpture, illustration, printmaking, The Gehenna Press

Disciplines

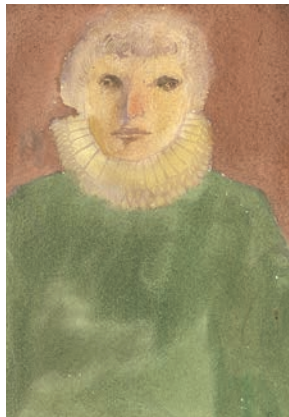
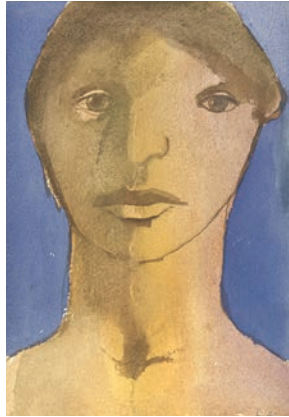
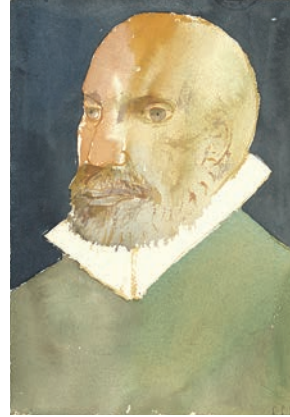
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Publisher

Schmucker Art Gallery, Gettysburg College

Comments

Leonard Baskin: Imaginary Artists is on exhibition at the Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College, September 8 - October 21, 2017.



LEONARD BASKIN: IMAGINARY ARTISTS

LEONARD BASKIN: IMAGINARY ARTISTS

INTRODUCTION

American artist Leonard Baskin (1922-2000) not only worked in a variety of media, including sculpture, painting, printmaking, bookmaking, and illustration, but he also incorporated a wide range of historical and artistic references in his diverse oeuvre. He drew inspiration from the Middle Ages, the Baroque period, as well as from the Old Testament and Native American cultures, and his sculptures, engravings, and prints are found in collections worldwide including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC. Baskin illustrated several children's books such as *Animals That Ought To Be*, which paired poems and nonexistent creatures. His commitment to figurative representation and an expressionist style throughout his long career reflects a deep and spiritual understanding of how traumatic events affect the human condition.

Growing up in Brooklyn, Baskin, the son of a Rabbi, was immersed in the Jewish Orthodox tradition and attended a yeshiva school.¹ From a young age he was deeply interested in the arts and was determined to become a sculptor.² Baskin apprenticed under New York artist Maurice Glickman during the Great Depression, and he received an honorable mention for the Prix de Rome at the age 18. In addition to seeking art training, Baskin became interested in issues of social injustice and the rise of fascism. At the onset of World War II, he enlisted in the Navy and served as a gunner on the Merchant Marine. As an Orthodox Jew, serving during the War must have been a profoundly personal experience, and this devastating period significantly affected his artistic career. For instance, among his sculptural commissions was a monumental figurative sculpture for the Holocaust Memorial, built on the site of the first Jewish cemetery in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and dedicated in 1994. A series of prints from the mid-1990s also depicts somber and haunting imagery of the Holocaust. The figures in many of his works appear grotesque, abstracted, or in states of suffering. Baskin was interested in how the human body endured in the wake of trauma.³

Following the War, Baskin earned a degree under the GI Bill and attended New York University, Yale School of Fine Arts, and The New School. While he studied at Yale he founded the Gehenna Press, a private press inspired by English artist and poet William Blake.⁴ Baskin was interested in Blake's multiple accomplishments as an artist, poet, and printer, and was determined to become a printer similar to Blake.⁵ Blake's training emphasized the importance of works from Medieval and Renaissance masters and the connections to literature and religion. Baskin emulated Blake's intense attention to spirituality, poetry, history, and art. At Yale, Baskin studied customary European styles and traditions of the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* and applied these lessons of the Renaissance masters to his own works.⁶ Baskin asserts, "I had built a drawing style that was an unbelievable mixture compacted out of Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelitism & Botticelli's Neo-Platonism. I would trace those weak, half-baked, ill-drawn effusions during life class, deploying the lightest tonalities of penciled graphite to achieve my miserable ends."⁷ The influences of Blake and European artists drove his expressionist style, as Baskin sought to push the boundaries of traditional techniques. His training emphasized customary academic styles, but seemed impractical when applied to the issues of modern society. Moreover, his life-drawing classes at Yale offered unrealistic expectations of art and the human form that centered on dated principles. After leaving Yale, Baskin continued his education in Paris and Florence in 1950 and 1951. Ultimately Baskin's artwork was profoundly influenced by late Medieval and early Renaissance European masters seen during his European travels, but he adapted these precedents to an evolving society and modern artistic techniques.⁸

Baskin eventually returned to the United States to teach at Worcester Museum and Smith College in Massachusetts.⁹ Throughout his career, Baskin focused on relating his artworks from the past and present. He believed that an artist's role is to understand history in order to anticipate a new future. He acknowledged that not every artist can be considered a "Renaissance Man," but his work can be seen as at once contemporary and deeply engaged with previous art historical periods.¹⁰ The watercolors seen here in *Imaginary Artists* exemplify his relationship with notable artists and literary figures while also representing his expressionist style.

The twenty-five watercolor portraits in this exhibition *Imaginary Artists* were originally gifted to Baskin's friends, Edward and Rita Rome. The series reflects his interest in art history and literature; for each portrait Baskin fabricated fictitious individuals that refer to real historical European and American artists and movements. The particular portraits test the viewer's knowledge of art history, as the individuals at first appear to

be true, perhaps a continuation of Baskin's 1969 series *Laus Pictorum, Portraits of 19th Century Artists*, and simply lost in history. In contrast to his art that expresses human endurance, the works in this exhibition convey humor and wit. The use of bold colors and exaggerated features, such as elongated legs and heads, suggest Baskin's expressionist focus on the figures' personalities rather than naturalistic attributes. For example, *Bradley Farnsworth, American Expatriate in Paris*, is an imagined artist that could have been among the many artists and writers that sojourned to Paris, like John Singer Sargent and Ernest Hemingway.¹¹ Paris in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attracted many American artists who, like Baskin, studied European masterpieces and developed a more modern and cosmopolitan style

After a long and celebrated career in the Massachusetts and New York areas, Baskin passed away on June 3, 2000.¹² Baskin described, "The forging of works of art, is one of man's remaining semblances to divinity," as art has the ability to connect to a higher power.¹³ Baskin believed that artists are obligated to connect the past and present. His distinct artistic style celebrated not just a single artist, either real or imaginary, but sought to contribute to human culture and to a larger sense of spirituality, mythology, and history, across generations.

– Erica Schaumberg '18

1 Robert Spence, "Leonard Baskin: The Artist as Counter-Decadent," *Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1962): 88.

2 Ibid.

3 Sidney Kaplan and Leonard Baskin, "The Necessary Image: From the Iconologia of Leonard Baskin," *The Massachusetts Review* 5, no. 1 (1963): 25.

4 Daniel Gehrich, "Leonard Baskin," *Proceedings Of The American Antiquarian Society*, 112, no. 1 (2002): 20.

5 Leonard Baskin, "Impulsions to Print," *The Yale University Library Gazette* 69, no. 3/4 (1995): 164.

6 Ibid, 163.

7 Ibid, 163.

8 Spence, 89.

9 Ibid, 88-89.

10 Ibid, 90.

11 Barbara H. Weinberg, "Americans in Paris, 1860-1900," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, last modified October 2006, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ampa/hd_ampa.htm

12 Gehrich, 19.

13 Kaplan and Baskin, 3.



JAN SNYDERS OF LEIDEN, GENRE PAINTER

Leaf 16, Imaginary Artists

The watercolor of *Jan Snyders of Leiden, Genre Painter* exemplifies Baskin's bold use of abstracted shapes to create fictional portraits inspired by notable art-historical figures. The watercolor is dominated by a rectangular grey hat, which is sheltering a man whose direct gaze confronts the viewer. The comically large hat occupies almost the entirety of the composition, and one notices how Baskin varied the shades of gray and shapes as left small spots uncolored. Because the hat occupies the majority of the space, the viewer perceives the sitter's status and personality through this strange accessory.

The figure's nose and the right cheekbone area are highlighted in a golden orange color, which appears in lighter, more yellow shades across the figure's face. Baskin contrasted the soft, fluid watercolors with the denser and seemingly more controlled application of black ink to delineate the figure's eyes, mustache, and cheekbones. The lines suggest the three-dimensionality of the figure's face, darkened by his curious chapeau. The short lines extend to create definition of the figure's mustache, nose, cheekbones, and wide-set eyes. The eccentric portrait does not offer a naturalistic depiction of a "real" artist, but instead gives the viewer a sense of his artistic personality.

– Erica Schaumberg

DON PEDRO Y ZARAGOSO, SPANISH GRANDEE AND AMATEUR PAINTER

Leaf 14, Imaginary Artists

Leonard Baskin's *Don Pedro y Zaragoso, Spanish Grandee and Amateur Painter* poses in a slight contrapposto. This watercolor is the only composition out of the entire series of 25 *Imaginary Artists* to depict its subject as a full figure, standing portrait. The title, *Spanish Grandee*, suggests that he is a person of high nobility. Baskin emphasizes this man's honorable status by his sixteenth-century attire. Zaragoso wears a brown tunic with red vertical stripes and gold circle accents in the center, green-striped breeches, and a dark brown, large brimmed hat. The hat shadows his bearded face, but he peers decidedly at the viewer with dark dotted eyes, a seemingly serious, straight mouth. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Spanish fashion consisted of similarly large breeches, hats, and tunics. Baskin combined this extraordinary mode and use of perspective to dramatize and abstract the figure's body. The viewer sees the subject from a low viewpoint, and the figure's head appears strangely small in comparison to his large torso. Zaragoso looks indifferently at the viewer, as though to assert his social superiority. As an amateur painter in Spain, this imagined artist possibly learned beside great court painters or esteemed artists in Mannerist and Baroque styles. Perhaps Zaragoso took up painting as an avocation to improve his reputation in the Spanish court. Because of his stated nobility, one can imagine that Zaragoso may have collected works of renowned Spanish artists of the Golden Age like Alonso Cano, Diego Velasquez, and Francisco Zurbaran.

– Kathya Lopez









DIEGO YGLESIAS, MOOR, PUPIL OF VELÁSQUEZ

Leaf 6, Imaginary Artists

In this portrait of *Diego Yglesias, Moor, and Pupil of Velásquez*, the sitter's round face occupies almost the entirety of the composition. *Yglesias's* dark hair, comprised of shades of black and brown, seeps into his face, but close looking reveals a splash of dark red in the center part of his hair and in the middle of his forehead. Baskin carefully shades his face through a gradation from a darker brown in the upper-left side of his right (our left) eye toward the much more lightly colored chin. *Yglesias's* round brown face is highlighted by shades of yellows on the right side of the portrait, as if sun coming through a window was providing warmth and illumination. Baskin makes *Yglesias's* shine with small white dots. Baskin styles *Yglesias* in a brown shirt with an abstract blue collar; other portraits in the series wear clothing in a similar palette. Baskin paints dark brown shadows inside the wrinkles and curves of the figure's eyes, nose, mouth, and chin to convey a sense of naturalistic, three-dimensionality.

Named as a pupil of Velásquez, *Yglesias* is imagined in the light of this significant and extraordinarily influential Baroque painter. Velásquez, an important court painter for King Philip IV of Spain during the seventeenth century, is best known for his painting *Las Meninas* (1656). Baskin makes another significant note of titling this imagined artist as a Moor, which was used during the Middle Ages as a way to describe a Muslim person of Arab and Berber descent and from northwestern Africa. Muslims reigned in the Iberian Peninsula in 711 AD until 1492 and were expelled in early seventeenth century. This descriptor is important because it affects how the viewer imagines the artist's ethnic and geographic identity in the title, particularly as it relates to the career of the greatest court painter of Spain. By alluding to Spain's complicated and problematic relationship to Moorish culture, Baskin creates a portrait that is more political than viewers might have initially imagined.

– Kathya Lopez

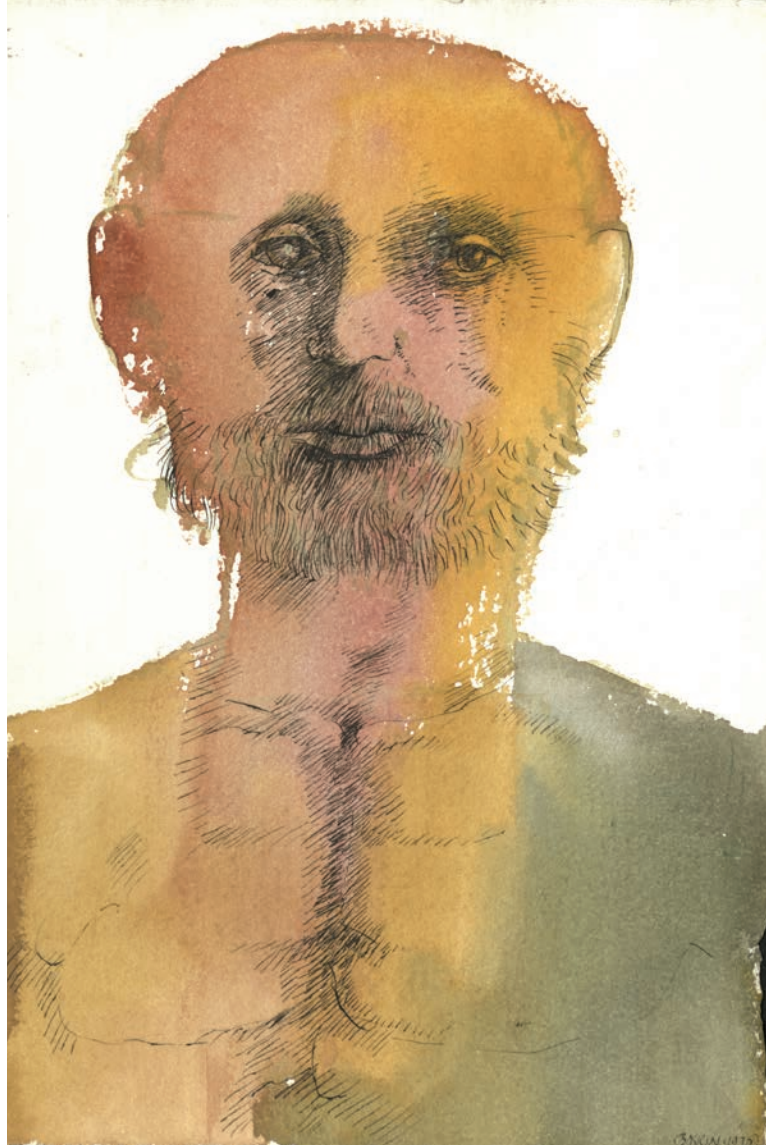
CHYAM PRITCHICK, ISRAEL'S NATIVE MASTER

Leaf 17, Imaginary Artists

Baskin depicts *Chyam Pritchik, Israel's Native Master* with carefully applied lines of black ink across the washes of pinkish red, ochre, and light green of the figure's face and bare chest. Short dark lines create the shadows around Pritchik's eyes and nose and merge with the strokes that describe his a short beard and lips. Green applied over the black ink suggests another means of shading the figure's face. His ears, outlined with green and red paint appear more stylized than the naturalistic detail in the center of Pritchik's face.

Baskin repeats this application of black ink along the neck to depict the man's Adam's apple, collarbone, pectoral muscles, and chest hair. Baskin abstracts Pritchik's slim bare chest through expanses of yellow on the left and green on the right. His eyes gaze directly at the viewer with a blankness and sense of detachment. Knowing the significance of Judaism in Baskin's life, this reference to Israel encourages the viewer to consider how the portrait relates to Baskin's own Jewish American identity.

– Kathya Lopez





INGRID TØFT, NORWAY'S GREAT PRINTMAKER

Leaf 25, Imaginary Artists

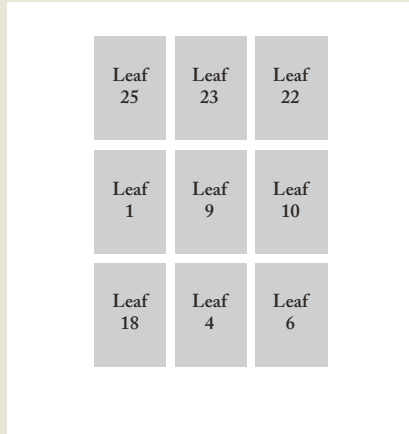
In *Ingrid Tøft, Norway's Great Printmaker*, Baskin uses loose brush strokes to create the fictional figure's burnt orange colored garment and wild, windblown locks of hair. Short, dark brown lines frame Tøft's face and contrast with her pale Nordic complexion. Similarly, her jawline and collarbone are defined by these faintly painted lines. Baskin elongates the figure's torso, and her head appears peculiarly small in comparison to her broad fiery cloak. This clothing, marked with a v-shaped neckline, hangs boldly from the figure's slender shoulders, and the large expanse of color abstracts and dominates the portrait. About three quarters of the composition is taken up by this color field, which is echoed by Tøft's auburn colored hair.

Because Baskin names Tøft as "Norway's Great Printmaker," one thinks immediately of Norway's real and best-known printmaker, Edvard Munch. Regarded for his psychological representations of humans, Munch's paintings and prints were influenced by traumatic events in his childhood and reflected the inward themes of love, anxiety, and death embraced by Symbolists. Munch conveyed intense human emotions in his work and rejected conventional, naturalistic depictions of physical features.¹ Baskin's expressionism resonates with Munch's own artistic style. The abstract forms in Tøft's portrait do not adhere to naturalism, but rather suggest the figure's passionate disposition. Her slightly asymmetrical eyes, particularly the white daub in her right eye, evinces a sense of sadness. The subtle tear in her right eye suggests a more complicated mental state. This portrait exemplifies Baskin's interest in abstraction over naturalistic depiction, and particularly his knowing and ardent references to expressionist European printmaking.

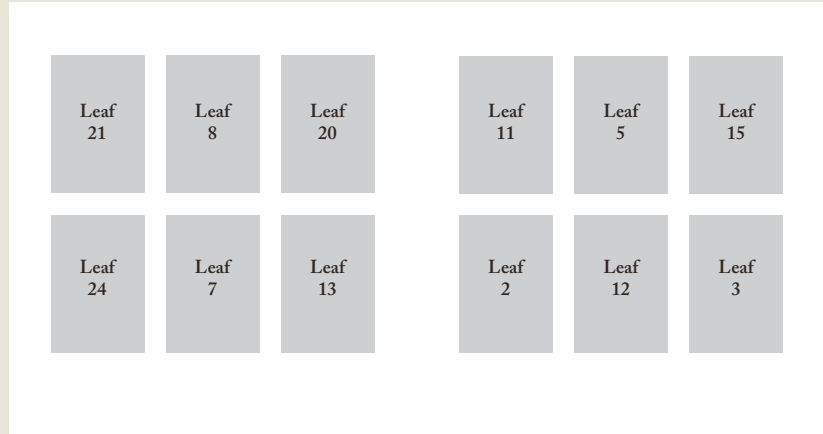
– Erica Schaumberg

¹ Marina Vaizey, "Edvard Munch: Life -Love - Death," *Cv/Visual Arts Research* 148, (September 2012): 5-6.

IMAGES



COVER



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LEONARD BASKIN (American, 1922-2000)

Imaginary Artists

1976

series of twenty-five watercolors

28 x 19.5 cm

Gift of Geoffrey Jackson '91

Gettysburg College Fine Arts
Collection, Special Collections/
Musselman Library

©The Estate of Leonard Baskin;
Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne,
New York

- Leaf 1 For Ed & Rita from Leonard with his abiding love. Little Deer Isle 1976.
- Leaf 2 Claes Goltzins, Hendrick's brother
- Leaf 3 Bradley Farnsworth, American Expatriate in Paris
- Leaf 4 Sir Brabazon-Wilkes Dewhurst, Norwich school, later phase
- Leaf 5 Dominic Plaisance, Arles, aquarelliste
- Leaf 6 Diego Yglesias, Moor, pupil of Velazquez
- Leaf 7 Olav Hashalom, mid-western american realist
- Leaf 8 Lucius of Sienna, Follower of Arnolfo da Gambia
- Leaf 9 Smedley Webb, Little known student of T. Eakins
- Leaf 10 Evalena Edgeworth, Married sister of Mary Moser
- Leaf 11 Stanislaus of Novgorod, master of Rubler, the icon painter
- Leaf 12 Death mask of Feruccio Sorini, Canova only competitor
- Leaf 13 Mirkov Statitsky, Leader of Russian Vorticists
- Leaf 14 Don Pedro y Zaragoso, Spanish Grandee & amateur painter
- Leaf 15 Massimo Balduccino, Bolognese school
- Leaf 16 Jan Snyders of Leiden, Genre painter
- Leaf 17 Chyam Pritchik, Israel's native master
- Leaf 18 Oskar Wurst, German futurist
- Leaf 19 Edna Cather Orne, Maine painter
- Leaf 20 Alaert Moleynaar, the noted carragist, Utrecht variety, contemplating a vast canvas ruined through overwork
- Leaf 21 Charles Bloods, American master
- Leaf 22 Philimon Millard, Elizabethan miniaturist
- Leaf 23 Perino del Pozzo, cinquecento mannerist
- Leaf 24 Antonin Du Colines, assistant to Poussin
- Leaf 25 Ingrid Tøft, Norway's great printmaker

FURTHER READING

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Edna Cather Orne, Maine painter

LEONARD BASKIN: IMAGINARY ARTISTS

CURATED BY KATHYA LOPEZ '18 AND
ERICA SCHAUMBERG '18

SEPTEMBER 8 - OCTOBER 21, 2017

GALLERY TALK:
SEPTEMBER 8, 5PM,
RECEPTION TO FOLLOW UNTIL 7PM

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