LEONARD BASKIN: IMAGINARY ARTISTS
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. From a young age he was deeply interested in the arts and was determined to become a sculptor. 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.
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. Baskin was interested in Blake’s multiple accomplishments as an artist, poet, and printer, and was determined to become a printer similar to Blake. 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. 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.” 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.

Baskin eventually returned to the United States to teach at Worcester Museum and Smith College in Massachusetts. 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. 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.  

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. 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. 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

2 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 163.
7 Ibid, 163.
8 Spence, 89.
9 Ibid, 88-89.
10 Ibid, 90.
12 Gehnrich, 19.
13 Kaplan and Baskin, 3.
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
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
In this portrait of Diego Yglesiás, Moor, and Pupil of Velásquez, the sitter’s round face occupies almost the entirety of the composition. Yglesiás’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. Yglesiás’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 Yglesiás’s shine with small white dots. Baskin styles Yglesiás 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, Yglesiás 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
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 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
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

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 Statisky, 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


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