1965

Leonard Baskin's Speech of Acceptance on Receiving the Medal of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, New York, April 28, 1965

Bowdoin College. Museum of Art

Leonard Baskin

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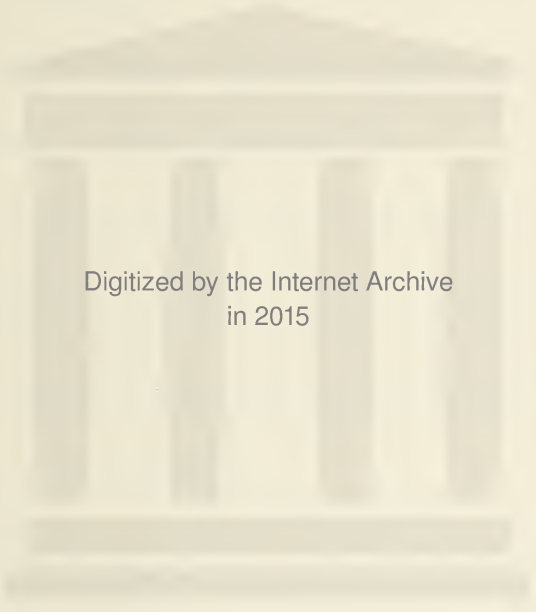

TO
LEONARD
BASKIN

CITATION: For *the diversity of his creative power in sculpture and the graphic arts;*
For *the fervor of his belief, in an age of aesthetic innovation, that the greatest art is not experimental but a portrayal of external reality, and for being one of the chief artists of his generation who adheres to this ancient principle;*
For *his concepts of joy and beauty, so differing from the general that at first sight his art seems tragic, whereas it is always an act of praise.*

MAY I EXPRESS MY DEEP SENSE of startled humility at being inscribed in that roll of honour which is made golden by the names of those in whose hands the art of printing never faltered, but was made more splendid, was made a more vital and enduring member of the body-typographic. The names I mean are Carl Purington Rollins, Daniel Berkeley Updike, Bruce Rogers, Ray Nash, and Joseph Blumenthal. These were and the latter two happily still are my mentors, the unassailable paragons; toward their various perfections I aspire, and when Mrs. Morrow telephoned to tell me that it was this institute's intention to join my name to theirs, my immediate reaction was, "Too young, too young, scratch off my name." She replied in her breezy way, "But Leonard, you're no teenager."

I am slowly accustoming myself to other people's wrong estimate of my worth. The preceding to the contrary, I am quite free of false humility, being massively buttressed with a colossal ego, which is every

artist's constant, continual and enduring bastion; it holds him upright under calumny or praise. Thus I can express my great feeling of pride in accepting this medal, prematurely bestowed. It is my usual nasty custom to harangue and insult those who have invited me to address them. But surely it is hardly commendable to slap the hand that gives one a medal (although it is a very attractive notion), and since I have always felt that receiving an award grants one license to talk about oneself, I shall try to articulate one or two principles that relate to my work.

I have an exhilarating and oppressive vision of man as immutable, intact and practically unalterable. I could have walked with Socrates, hauled stones for Chartres, set type for Bodoni, and had my skull cracked by a cossack's club in any of innumerable pogroms. I am joined to that colossal continuum of man thrusting through the centuries. And we men in this hall here tonight are simulacra of all men past and gone. Our bodies perform the wonder-work (unbid and undirected) that grants us the life we grasp at, exactly as it has done for four thousand years. (I am interested in man when he mastered writing.) King Oedipus, Antigone, Hamlet, Lear and Ahab enlarge

and inform our emotional lives, and we are eager heirs to the past's treasure of wisdom and art precisely because we are so suited to it. This historical and pervasive identity overrides and diminishes the particularities, the dialects, the apparatus of any specific age.

I trouble you with this notion because man is disappeared in contemporary art, and the specifics of our age are adduced and alluded to as being primarily responsible. As though speed matters, or the conquest of space, or even the *bomb*, and that is the depressing Swiftian side of man. The bomb's critical importance is that it threatens the central enduring primacy of man. Has it struck you that whereas we can participate in and in varying degrees understand *all* the art of the past, whether primitive, mystic, sophisticated, eastern or western, all of that past, if confronted with our art, would be confounded, puzzled and dumbfounded? The excision of man in the art of our time is, I think, an infantile response to the horror of the last war, especially Hiroshima and the general aura and ubiquitous stink of anxiety. It will not do to thus respond with visceral subjectivity. In the frivolous and pestilential abandonment of our artists to the irrational despair of abstract expressionism, the faggish

banality of pop art, the retinal irrelevancies of optical art, all skills and cunning are being lost, lost to a terrifying degree. Man, in Melville's words, is at the axis of reality. Man stands fixed in his miraculous architecture of tissue and bone, unique and general, the archetypal sign and devise of all men, and an outcropping stanchion, the one single exposed man. The figure and meaning of man is a vast terrain, crusted and reticulated with his passage from time to time and place to place. Here is he pitched and in this lambent configuration is his future and his hope.

Thoreau said, "Much is published, little printed." He meant by this beautiful maxim to celebrate the wealth of wordless atypographic knowledge that lies open to our gaze at every side. I read it to mean an indictment of the mass of grubby and nasty smears that issue in a deluge and which is with egregious presumption called printing: printing which in no way participates in that tradition of making a book seemly within and just without; in which the book's work of transmitting thought, is deemed worthy of care, pain and love.

If you think this concern is quaint or aboriginal, I fear you do not see man diminished by shoddy,

wretched and unspeakable work. In that presumed idyllic and languid time of the cradle period of printing, eight million copies of thousands of titles were stamped into superb life on presses little removed from the olive press. This plea is old hat. The great William Morris, the wealthy socialist, made magnificent backward-looking books which only the rich could afford. Machine-rejecting attempts to resurrect the modes of another age must fail, for probity in craft must be like speech, true to the age. I would point to the achievement of Sir Francis Meynell's "Nonesuch Press." With supreme intelligence Meynell mastered the new printing technology and compelled it to yield books of beauty and worth which have not physically rotted (as most of your books, alas, will) and still retain after thirty or more years their typographic force and remain a pleasure to hold and to *read.*

Nor can the drive toward profit alone comprehend our sorry typographic state: The Spiral Press in New York City and the Plantin Press in Los Angeles, span the nation and print for money. And yet their books and jobbing work readily stand with the work of the great masters. What is required is care, concern, a little less speed, a little more culture, rather less profit and

rather more pleasure in the work. Have felicity and grace departed in the rat race? Are they irrevocably gone? I exhort you with these words of William Blake from his "Jerusalem,"

Reader, lover of books, lover of Heaven,
And of that God from whom all things are given,
Who in mysterious Sinai's awful cave
To Man the wondrous art of writing gave:
Again he speaks in thunder and in fire,
Thunder of thought & flames of fierce desire:
Even from the depths of Hell his voice I hear
Within the unfathom'd caverns of my Ear.
Therefore I print; nor vain my types shall be.
Heaven, Earth & Hell henceforth shall live in
harmony.

This speech has been made into a booklet for the

Bowdoin College Museum of Art,

for the "Typophiles" (monograph no. 78) and

for the friends of Leonard Baskin and the Spiral Press,

where it was printed in June of 1965