

Leonard Baskin Dies at 77 Sculptor of Stark Memorials

By ROBERTA SMITH

Leonard Baskin, a figurative sculptor and graphic artist whose work ranged from a Holocaust memorial to a prizewinning children's book but dealt mostly with the human condition in angst-ridden terms, died on Saturday evening in Northampton, Mass. He was 77 and lived in Northampton.

He had been treated for kidney problems for several months, said Richard Michelson, his primary representative since 1985.

In an art world given to changing styles and continually updated aesthetic agendas centering on abstraction, Mr. Baskin remained steadfast in his belief in the superiority of figurative art and the importance of mortality as a theme. His convictions brought him honors and important commissions, including those for the bas relief of a funeral cortège that he created for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial in Washington and an anguished, heavily seated cast-bronze figure, seven feet tall, for the Ann Arbor Holocaust Memorial in Michigan.

Widely read and articulate, he could be acidly funny, referring to Pop Art, for example, as "the inedible raised to the level of the unspeakable." Or he could pontificate in biblical sonorities, as in a frequently quoted statement published in Time magazine: "Our human frame, our gutted mansion, our enveloping sack of beef and ash is yet a glory. Glorious in defining our universal sodality and glorious in defining our utter uniqueness. The human figure is the image of all men and of one man. It contains all and can express all."

His art did its best to keep up with this sense of urgency and drama. In sculptures of wood, limestone or bronze and the large scale woodblock prints that may be his most interesting achievement, his figures often had scabrous surfaces, appeared bloated or malformed and sometimes merged with animals. (His favorite was the owl, whose predatory habits fascinated him.) If his figures did not appear to be actively suffering or simply dead, they often appeared to be in numbed, introspective states.

Mr. Baskin was born in New Brunswick, N.J., the son of a rabbi who moved his family to New York seven years later. By age 14 he knew he wanted to be a sculptor; at 15 he began a two-year apprenticeship to the sculptor Maurice Glickman. At 18 he won an honorable mention for the Prix de Rome.

He studied art at New York University's School of Architecture and Applied Arts, and, on scholarship, at Yale University from 1941 to 1943. He discovered the illustrated books of William Blake in a library at Yale, an encounter that inspired him both to teach himself printing and, in 1942, to found the Gehenna Press, which became noted for its fine typography and superbly illustrated limited-edition books. Its first publication was a small book of Mr. Baskin's own poems titled "On a Pyre of Withered Roses."

After serving in the United States Navy in the Pacific during the final years of World War II and working for a period in the Merchant Marine, he returned to New York and earned his B.A. at the New School for Social Research in 1949. He then spent a year studying at the Accadémie de la Grade Chaumière in Paris and another at the Accadèmia di Belle Arti in Florence.

Returning to Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1953, he found himself attracted to a variety of figurative sculpture, including the effigy tomb sculpture of the Middle Ages, the early Renaissance carving of Giovanni Pisano and the 19th and 20th-century work of Rodin, Manzu and especially the German Expressionist sculptor Ernst Barlach.

Mr. Baskin had his first solo show in New York at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery in 1953, exhibiting regularly there and with the Boris Mirski Gallery in Boston throughout the 1950's and

The books Mr. Baskin illustrated for other publishers included several more collections of Hughes's poetry, as well as works by Dante, Homer, Conrad, Swift, Tennyson, and by his first wife, Esther Tane Baskin, who died in 1967. His illustrated children's book "Hosie's Alphabet" won the Caldecott Medal in 1974.

Mr. Baskin is survived by his wife, Lisa Unger Baskin; a son from his first marriage, Tobias Baskin, of Columbia, Mo.; two children from his second marriage, Hosea Baskin and Lucretia Baskin, of Northampton; a brother, Rabbi Bernard Baskin of Hamilton, Ontario; a sister, Pearl Rabinowitz, of Massapequa, N.Y., and three grandchildren.

Despite the broad range of his work, Mr. Baskin disdained color, saying, "Black and White is all I need." He also did not depict women. "The female form is useful for some ideas," he said in 1964, "but the colossal male is better suited to the .ghoulish ones I try to portray.""