

Renaissance Man Artist Leonard Baskin was last of his breed

By John McMurtrie. Chronicle staff Writer
SFGate Sunday, July 23, 2000

Years ago, Leonard Baskin compiled some of his natural-history paintings in whimsical, palm-size books, one of which lovingly depicts extinct creatures. One can't help but think that Baskin, who remained an outsider in the art world, felt a special kinship with these colorfully rendered and noble-looking beasts and birds, which have vanished from Earth.

Baskin was a multidisciplinary artist whose somber, often witty style is distinctive and instantly recognizable. Throughout his long career he prided himself on not falling victim to artistic trends, trashing both Abstract Expressionism and Pop art ("the inedible raised to the level of the unspeakable"). As a result, some critics considered him a grouchy relic.

Baskin died last month, at age 77, and though the world has lost a one-of-a-kind artist, his art, independent of any fickle movement, is sure to live on.

"People are going to be discovering him for decades to come," said Robert Flynn Johnson, curator of a Baskin exhibition at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum. "His art is in many circles out of fashion. . . but his work is not going to go away. Baskin is part of a humanistic continuity."

The Baskin show, which runs through August 27, was organized while he was dying, and it stands as one of his last testaments.

"Testament" may seem like a weighty word for an exhibition, but the term fits Baskin. The son of a rabbi, he often explored morality and mortality in his art. His art was imbued with a deep compassion for human suffering.

The exhibition provides only a snapshot of his life's work; nevertheless, it highlights important themes that are present in much of his art. On display are a dozen monumental woodcuts created between 1952 and 1963 that have never been exhibited together. Each depicts life-size figures in various states of mental anguish and physical decay.

It's no surprise that earlier in his career, before he worked on the woodcuts, Baskin sculpted. Bold, black lines give the figures on display a Rodin-like heft, conveying a sense of raw physicality. The figures have a timelessness to them -- each is nude and set against a blank backdrop -- and a mood of eternal torment carries them beyond a simple commentary on Cold War apocalyptic doom.

This art may not be for everyone, but Kenneth Shure, who was Baskin's primary agent, is quick to defend it. "Life isn't all pretty flower pictures on the wall," he said. "Decorative things are pretty, but they pale. (Baskin's art) constantly requires you to be engaged by it. It's very powerful."

The de Young's Johnson agreed.

"These are works that people avoid today," he said. "His works don't have a surface glitz to them. They are deeply thought-provoking."

As Baskin explains in text that accompanies the art, the woodcuts are full of ambiguities: "Thus is 'The Hydrogen Man' (with flesh torn off) a victim or a perpetrator, is the 'Hanged Man' (with sagging head) innocent or guilty?"

Richard Michelson, a gallery owner in Northampton, Mass., near Leeds, where Baskin lived, was the artist's primary dealer and a close friend. He praised Baskin as "one of the few artists who is able to look the human condition right in the eye, and he doesn't flinch." One gets this sense from a self-portrait that Baskin created last year, which is in the exhibition.

He presents an unblinking, stem face, half-concealed in shadow. On either side of him, in etched type that stands out in red, are Baskin's initials and his age. Despite the artist's apparently dark nature, Michelson said that "Leonard in many ways remained an optimist. The people he (created) are often suffering, but they're survivors."

This is clear in much of Baskin's work, not only in prints but also in painting and sculpture. One of his best-known works is the 3-year-old Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C., for which he created FDR's funeral cortege in bas relief. In 1994, he sculpted a tall, bronze figure for the Holocaust Memorial in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Baskin's paintings range from those gracing a Passover Haggadah to illustrations accompanying poems by his friend Ted Hughes. But he also created witty works, including a natural history of imaginary creatures that are both frightening and funny, and an art-historical satire titled "Jewish Artists of the Early and Late Renaissance." And Baskin loved children's books. Shortly before his death, he and Michelson had finished their last collaboration, "10 Times Better," a counting book.

Baskin also was a writer and teacher. "He could be brutal to young students," Michelson said. "He did not suffer fools easily."

Baskin did this "not for the sake of destroying them, but for the sake of higher art," Michelson said. It seems only fitting that one of his former students, artist Barry Moser, used Baskin as a model for Moses in his recent illustrated Bible.

Baskin was unique in that he ran his own press, which, according to Shure, was the longest-lasting artist-run press in modern times. It doesn't seem a stretch, therefore, when Michelson calls Baskin "our last renaissance artist," someone who could have achieved greatness even if he had worked in just one art form. One could forgive Baskin if he agreed.

Some have called him the greatest sculptor of his time. "Not because I am so great, though I am," Baskin once said, "but because all the others are so dreadful."

FINE ARTS MUSEUMS of SAN FRANCISCO
Leonard Baskin: Monumental Prints
May 27- August 27, 2000

This exhibition showcases 11 groundbreaking, large-scale woodcuts created between 1952 and 1963 by the original, independent, and often controversial American artist Leonard Baskin. A renowned sculptor, printmaker, and book designer, Baskin has always followed his own unique artistic vision, and rejects the ideas, trends, and practices of the mainstream contemporary art world.

These monumental prints, depicting the human figure in full size, were created by Baskin from a single block of wood, not pieced together from multiple blocks as had previously been done when creating prints of this size and scale. Baskin's work eventually inspired other artists, especially those associated with the Pop Art movement, to experiment with large scale printmaking. By the late 60s and early 70s artists like Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Helen Frankenthaler were creating gigantic prints, and since then large-scale prints have become commonplace in American graphic workshops.