In the School of Baskin

BY LANCE HIDY

I first became aware of Leonard Baskin in 1963, during my senior year of high school in Oregon. The Portland Art Museum exhibited his drawings for Richmond Lattimore's translation of *The Iliad*, newly published by the University of Chicago. The india ink drawings were the largest I'd ever seen, 40 x 26 inches, and powerful in their depiction of war. I was already savvy enough to know that figurative art, which I loved, was not in style, so I added Baskin to a little pantheon of contemporary figurative artists, including Ben Shahn, Rico Lebrun, Saul Steinberg, Salvador Dali, and Ronald Searle, whose work intrigued me.

Later, when I got to know Baskin, I asked him how his work happened to come to Oregon. He told me that Francis Newton, director of the Portland Art Museum, had been a curator at the Worcester Art Museum in 1953 while Baskin was teaching graphic art in the Museum School. When Newton accepted a curatorship in Portland (promoted to director in 1960), he gave Baskin two exhibitions – a 1955 show of prints and drawings, and the 1963 display of drawings for *The Iliad* that had so taken me. In

1975 Newton acknowledged his debt to Baskin, "My love of books and printing I credit to Leonard Baskin whom I met in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the early 1950s. He lived on Castle Street (which he made famous) and had already established the Gehenna Press. I became acquainted with his work, his library, and collections. I began to acquire prints and books by Baskin. In that atmosphere I was encouraged to collect prints seriously, and am still doing that." (from "Works from the Collection of Francis J. Newton," Portland Art Museum, November 12 through January 4, 1975.)

Francis Newton's exhibit of Baskin *Iliad* illustrations made a permanent mark on me – a 17-year-old from Lincoln High, not only because it featured depictions of human figures, but also because they were in a museum of *Fine Art*.

Shahn and Baskin moved gracefully between those two worlds of fine art and illustration, challenging the common prejudice about illustration's lowly status. Baskin saw illustration and text as equivalents that illuminated and expanded each other. Often Baskin created images in response to text, but poets such as Anthony Hecht and Ted Hughes also wrote text to accompany Baskin's art.

In Steve Heller's book, *Innovators of American Illustration* (1986), Brad Holland, Alan Cober, Paul Davis, Seymour Chwast, Robert Weaver, James McMullan, and Julian Allen

credit either Baskin or Shahn with inspiring their career choice by giving dignity and passion to the profession of illustration. Both artists were awarded medals of honor from the American Institute of Graphic Art; Shahn in 1958 and Baskin in 1965.

Baskin wrote in *The Gehenna Press, the Work of Fifty Years*, "I held Shahn in awe, regarded him as a mentor, and managed to escape his stylistic influence." He said that Shahn was "the finder of the means to successfully communicate and express social and political content of an immediate and complex nature."

Each produced large bodies of prints and published illustrations, often with a political message. Once Baskin initiated a joint project, reporting that Shahn "acceded to my request that he make drawings for a Gehenna edition of a selection of [Wilfred] Owen's war execrating poems and he made a beautiful set of drawings which are the chief merit of the book's making. The drawings were photolithographically printed with zealous fidelity by the Meriden Gravure Company under the continuous aegis of Harold Hugo and therefrom began a long and fruitful friendship." The Shahn portrait drawing of Owen on the title page was engraved in wood with loving care by Baskin and printed from the block – an act of homage that moves me again as I write about it.

Because of the political importance of all presses (not

just Gehenna), Baskin told me that he was troubled by the idea of limited, numbered editions. He encouraged efforts to bring his work to a larger audience, such as Grossman Publisher's 1968 facsimile edition of Gehenna's 1959 *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake, which had existed only in 250 signed and numbered copies. Baskin also wanted his large, 62-inch woodcuts, to be printed until the blocks wore out. With titles like "Hydrogen Man," and "Man of Peace," these were political works to be disseminated widely. Baskin told me with frustration that his print dealer thwarted his plan for unnumbered editions, citing the responsibility of galleries to protect client investments and assure that the market would not be flooded with prints. He lost that battle, but the lesson was not lost on me, and I have tried to keep my own print editions unnumbered and affordable.

Henry David Thoreau, stamp by Leonard Baskin, 1967.

In light of his egalitarian beliefs, it is fitting that Baskin accepted a commission in 1965-66 to design a postage stamp honoring Henry David Thoreau, known to most people as the author of *Walden*. The stamp (Scott no. 1327), issued in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1967, was printed in a quantity of 111,850,000. Baskin was pleased by the beautiful engraving made by J. S.

Creamer, Jr., from the drawing, which is owned by the Postal Service. The preliminary studies are still owned by his family, who, like him, were avid stamp collectors. Baskin based the portrait on his favorite U.S. stamp, "Black Jack," the famous two-cent Civil War issue portraying Andrew Jackson (Scott no. 73).

Baskin's power as an artist allowed him to elevate the tiny portrait to a controversial political statement. His Thoreau wears a moustache-less beard, which was a nineteenth-century badge of pacifism and is still observed today by groups such as the Amish. Thoreau's disheveled hair, which like the beard was based on a photograph, also suggests a similarity to the hippie Vietnam war protesters. The Thoreau Society of Concord, whose members had been proudly awaiting the stamp, hated the design, even though their hero was undoubtedly a hippie of his time. I remember Baskin telling me with some enjoyment about the discomfort he had caused.

Coincidentally, during the late sixties there was growing interest in Thoreau, not because of *Walden*, but for another essay, *Civil Disobedience*, which Gandhi credited, along with the *Bhagavad Gita*, Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount,* and Leo Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?* for inspiring his theory of Non-Violent Resistance. Baskin's little print soon became popular with the doves, who, like Martin Luther King, looked to Gandhi and Thoreau as guides for the

non-violent protests. It was equally disliked by the hawks. I have found that the stamp still stirs up strong feelings among philatelists, many of whom are veterans, and may have been among those who voted it the "Worst Stamp" of 1967 in the *Linn's Stamp News* annual reader survey.

For me, that stamp had another significance. I saw it as an emblem of the role of the artist who would engage in the important public debates of the day and create works that took a stand, and that would be distributed broadly. I saved two copies of the stamp and carried them in my wallet for years as a talisman, and I still have them today – they lie on the desk next to my iBook as I write.

Henry David Thoreau, wood engraving by Lance Hidy, 1969.

David Godine and I produced two Thoreau essays as limited edition books in 1969: *Civil Disobedience*, designed by David, and *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, which I designed and illustrated with wood-engraved portraits of Brown and Thoreau. My Thoreau had evidently changed barbers. It is unlikely that we would have spent so much time on Thoreau if Baskin had not made the stamp.

Being only twenty-one when

Baskin's stamp appeared, I despaired of ever being in a position to win a commission from the Postal Service but, nevertheless, kept that as a goal. I had to wait for over thirty years. When my stamp, Mentoring a Child (Scott no. 3556), was issued in Annapolis, Maryland, on January 10, 2002, in 125 million copies, a television reporter asked me who my mentors were. It was at that moment that I remembered the Thoreau stamp. The text on the Mentoring stamp states "values, goals, skills," which concisely describes what Baskin gave to those of us who followed him.

Mentoring a Child, stamp by Lance Hidy, 2002. The typeface is Penumbra, designed by the artist.

Baskin's first book appeared while he was a student at the Yale School of Art, in 1942. It was his own poetry, *On a Pyre of Withered Roses*, hand-composed and printed at the Jonathan Edwards (J.E.) College Press, located in a garden-shed near the Yale Art Gallery. The press included a foot-treadle Chandler and Price platen press, 10 x 15 inches, and two cases of Stephenson Blake foundry Caslon, 10 to 72 point, donated by a law student, August Heckscher, six years earlier.

Baskin credits his original compulsion to print to his discovery of the works of William Blake while at Yale.

"Confronting Blake plain and unexpected was like being struck by a locomotive. Here was model, praxis, and example, an artist and poet coupled, who made his own books; marvelous, strange books, their impact was overwhelming, and I determined to learn to print." (from "Impulsions to Print," by Leonard Baskin, printed in the *Yale University Library Gazette*, lxix: 163-69. This talk was delivered at the Yale University Art Gallery on September 22, 1994, in conjunction with the exhibition, "The Gehenna Press: 1942-1994," at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.)

When I arrived at Yale as a freshman in 1964, and was assigned to Jonathan Edwards College, I had no idea that I was literally following the footsteps of my new hero. I found out soon enough because Baskin made two public appearances at Yale during my freshman year. First was a February reception for the Gehenna Press exhibit at the University Library. Then on May 4, Baskin spoke to a Wayzgoose of the Honorable Company of College Printers and was introduced by Alvin Eisenman. As I listened to Baskin explain the philosophy of the Gehenna Press, I too felt like I was being hit by a locomotive.

My interest in using the same machine, and same Caslon, that Baskin used twenty-three years before had been noted by Beekman Cannon, Master of J. E., who appointed me as an apprentice in the Jonathan Edwards College Press in the fall of 1965. Fortunately the shop had

been moved into the warm basement of my dormitory, and a motor was connected to the great flywheel of the Chandler and Price by means of a wide belt. I was introduced to David Libby, then a graduate student in graphic design, who was already affiliated with the J. E. Press and taught me to mind my p's and q's. It is no exaggeration to say that I spent the next five years trying to emulate Baskin's Gehenna Press books. For inspiration, I had easy access to my two favorite Gehenna publications in the Yale collections: *Horned Beetles and Other Insects* and *The Wood-engravings of Leonard Baskin 1948, 1959, Impressions from the Blocks*.

Two Yale librarians, Ken Nesheim and Dale Roylance, were making regular visits to Baskin in Northampton to collect press proofs and papers of the Gehenna Press. These archives still reside at Beinecke on loan, where, let us hope, they will remain. My admiration for Baskin led to an invitation to accompany Ken and Dale on these visits during 1966-68. While Baskin was busy with the librarians, I was taken under the wing of Harold McGrath, who was not only a great pressman, but a natural teacher. When I showed Harold my printing, he saw the ink globs on the edges of the type. He surmised that the gelatin rollers had swollen, and were squeezing the ink off of the face. When I reported that the little C&P clamshell press had no mechanism for adjusting roller pressure, he sug-

gested wrapping tape around the metal roller-wheels, lifting them off the track until the desired lightness of touch was achieved. It worked.

Harold was also the supreme master of the make-ready. He had a supply of different weights of thin tissue and tracing paper, and a very logical method for building what looked like tiny topographical maps for each wood engraving. These would go under the tympan to modulate the printing pressure exactly for the light and dark areas of the block.

Perhaps it was because he was a sculptor that Baskin liked to impress the type deep into the paper. He explained this Gehenna trait: "the principle is that one must use the type to print with and not ink. We use as little ink as possible, so that the letters are sharp and clear. . . . Once someone criticized my printing, saying that if a person goes blind they will still be able to read it, which is the virtue." (*Wesleyan Library Notes*, Number Ten, Spring 1975)

Harold later taught David Godine, Martha Rockwell, and me how to operate the Kelly flatbed cylinder press at the Gehenna Press. Never was there a teacher with a better sense of humor or with a keener intuition for when it was time to be silent and let the students have a go. He kept the machine and the office spotless. It was the only place where I have seen Persian carpets and printing machinery side-by-side. Harold also loved children. He coached Babe

Ruth and Little League for many years and kept the local elementary school art teachers supplied with paper cut-offs.

In 1974, in an informal talk before the friends of the Wesleyan Library, with Harold Hugo among those present, Baskin had this to say: "Harold McGrath and I have worked together for about fifteen years. He is now the consummate pressman. People think he's a printer; I'm the printer. It's a universal mistake, but its okay.…But he is vastly intelligent, and he beyond anything else is vastly mechanically intelligent in the way that I'm hopelessly illiterate and non-mechanical." (*Wesleyan Library Notes*. Number Ten, Spring 1975)

Eighteen years later Baskin formally stated his admiration for Harold in the fifty-year Gehenna bibliography at page 40: "McGrath and I in tandem made an interactive and productive team. His was the perfected means to carry out my printing needs and typographic fantasies. He had the infinite patience of the immaculate compositor and in his press-work he built ever more and more complex and intricate make-readies to assure perfect and even impression tone. He possessed the quotient of excessive staying power that superb presswork requires. . . . It did not take very long for Harold McGrath to become a full-time employee of a more formally organized Gehenna Press. I used to boastfully prattle that the Gehenna Press was the only private press with a full-time employee.

Apprentices were always welcome and Harold McGrath's great patience was further tried as he slowly and skillfully taught the young people the mysteries of composition and printing techniques. That the Gehenna Press served as a fountainhead for a generation of bookworkers significantly adds to the totality of its achievements." (*The Gehenna Press, The Work of Fifty Years, 1942 , 1992*. The Bridwell Library and the The Gehenna Press. Distributed by the University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1992.)

It may be less well known that Harold also worked in the sculpture studio during the late sixties and early seventies, doing some of the rough cutting on wood sculptures, following drawings that Baskin made on the blocks. Another task that took Harold out of the Gehenna Press to the Fort Hill studio was printing the giant woodblocks. This was a tricky job – to lay the paper square without smearing the ink and rub the back of the paper with a wooden tool to transfer the ink as a solid black with no gray areas.

I feel the need to insert here a mention of Arno Werner of Pittsfield, who bound numerous Gehenna Press editions. Arno, like Harold, believed in the apprentice system, which was how he was trained in Germany. These three men, Baskin, McGrath, and Werner, were a free academy of the book arts, and the word soon spread. These Gehenna masters caused Northampton to become a book

arts Mecca. Not only was no money ever requested in exchange for the education, Arno was known to dispense money, tools, supplies, and room and board to support the fledgling apprentices. In one case he even helped a student purchase a car. Sandy Kirschenbaum, during the time she was publishing *Fine Print*, told me that she believed the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, including Northampton, Amherst, South Hadley, and Easthampton, to be the most active and vibrant book arts community in the country. That vitality continues to this day.

Baskin too was a devoted teacher, as his students at Smith College, and later Hampshire College, have reported. Michael Mazur studied with Baskin at Hampshire and remembers him as the first professional artist he had met, and who became his role-model. Baskin also had private students. I was just one of many whom he allowed into his home for portfolio reviews and encouragement. After I graduated from college, he invited me to move to Northampton and study with him during 1968-69. With the help of a small grant from the Altschul Foundation, I was able to afford a small apartment in Haydenville, not far from Northampton, for nine months.

It was in Baskin's home that I first met David Godine, who after graduating from Dartmouth and Ray Nash's workshop was accepted by Baskin and McGrath as an apprentice. When my money ran out, I followed David to

Brookline to start the Godine Press in 1969. At Baskin's I also met another Ray Nash's protégé, Steven Harvard, and his wife Paula. Nash suggested that Steve show Baskin the type punches he had cut, perhaps hoping that Baskin might find a way to sponsor the cutting of a proprietary type, as other private presses had done. Nothing came of the meeting other than a wonderful friendship between Steven and me, which ended prematurely with his death in 1988. Baskin did discuss the design of a Gehenna typeface later with John Benson. Although that never came to fruition, Benson did lettering for several Gehenna Press title pages.

I will always be grateful for the advice Baskin gave me when he saw the four little copper etchings of trees and flowers that I produced the summer after I met him. He suggested using them as illustrations for Andrew Marvell's poem, *The Garden*. He said that he'd been considering illustrating the poem, but saw that I had already done it, although unconsciously, since I had not read the poem. I followed his advice, using one of Baskin's favorite typefaces, Jan Van Krimpen's Cancelleresca Bastarda, imported from the historic typefoundry of Joh. Enschedé & Zonen in Haarlem, Netherlands. David Godine sponsored the project, and it was published in 1970 in an edition of 115 copies, perhaps the pinnacle of our Baskin period. Thirty years later it was chosen by the Grolier Club for its exhibit and book, *A Century for the Century*. Thank you, Leonard.

My own work no longer gives any visible clues that I was a student of Baskin. Our paths diverged, and over the last thirty years we saw each other perhaps twice at large gatherings. But when I look at his work of every period, I still feel that old thrill from my student days. I look across the top of my computer to the shelf where I keep my books about Leonard Baskin, next to the Ben Shahn books, and think about how much these two artists did to elevate the graphic arts. And I see there the work of Harold McGrath and Arno Werner, who taught us so much about generosity and craft. I wonder where many of us would be today without these men to guide us.