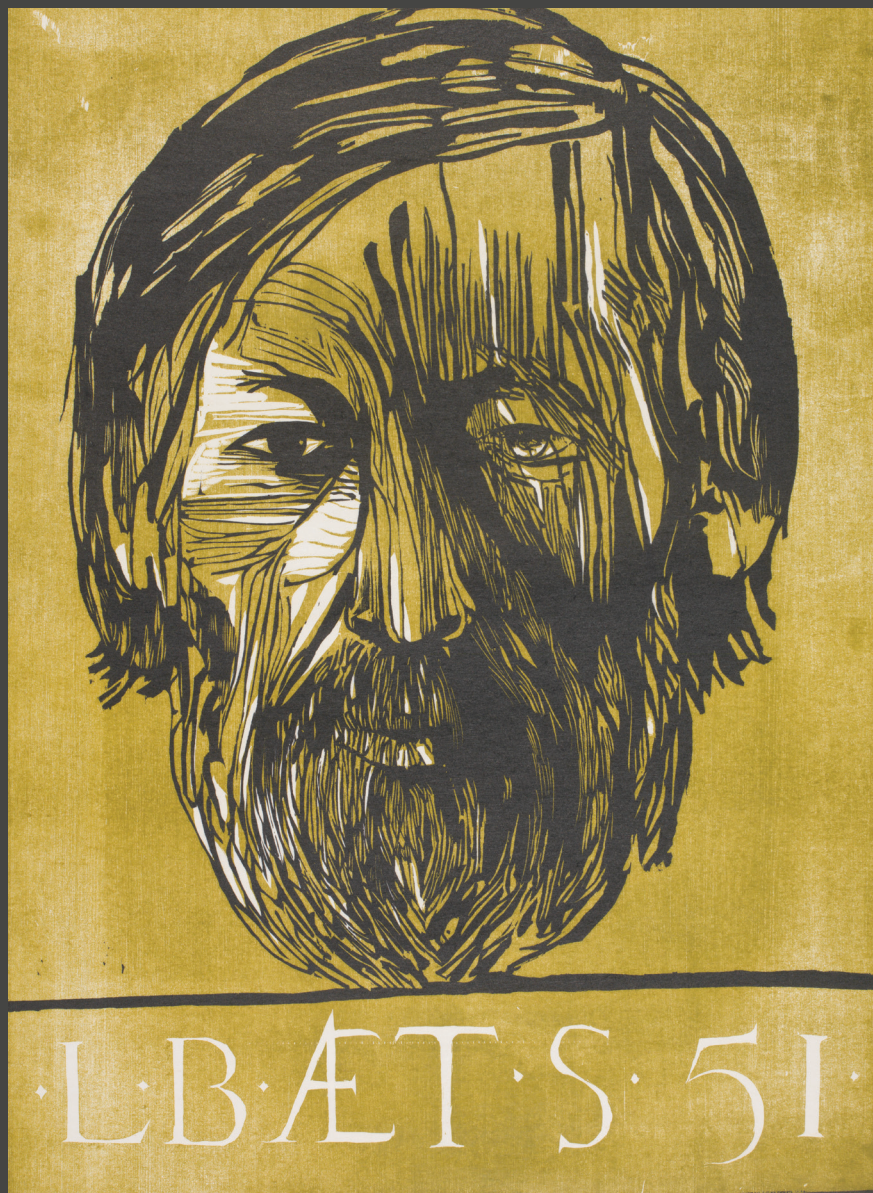


THE HUMAN FRAME:
PRINTS BY
LEONARD BASKIN



The Curatorial Project
Spring 2022
Department of Art & Art History and Muscarelle Museum of Art

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *The Human Frame: Prints by Leonard Baskin* on view April 15, 2022 through September 25, 2022 at the Muscarelle Museum of Art and curated by Alice Baughman, Gabrielle Buffaloe, Isobel Collins, Ivana Genov, Carter Helmandollar, Yijun Huang, Emma Jackson, Ellie Kurlander, Maeve Marsh, Miles Piontek, Anna Scott, Tara Vasanth, Donovan Watters, and Anna Wilkinson—students curators in *The Curatorial Project* (ARTH 331, Spring 2022), a course taught by Charles Palermo, Professor of Art History.

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Front image caption: **1. LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Leonard Baskin at 51*, 1973 | Woodcut in black and green on Japanese rice paper | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.137

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Refer to text labeled with * for more information on Baskin's compositional choices.

THE HUMAN FRAME: PRINTS BY LEONARD BASKIN

Alice Baughman '24

Gabrielle Buffaloe '23

Isobel Collins '24

Ivana Genov '23

Carter Helmandollar '22

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Emma Jackson '24

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2.



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2. LEONARD BASKIN (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Man of Peace*, 1952 | Wood engraving | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.017

3.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The members of *The Curatorial Project* class that organized this exhibition would like to thank the many individuals and entities at William & Mary who made this project possible.

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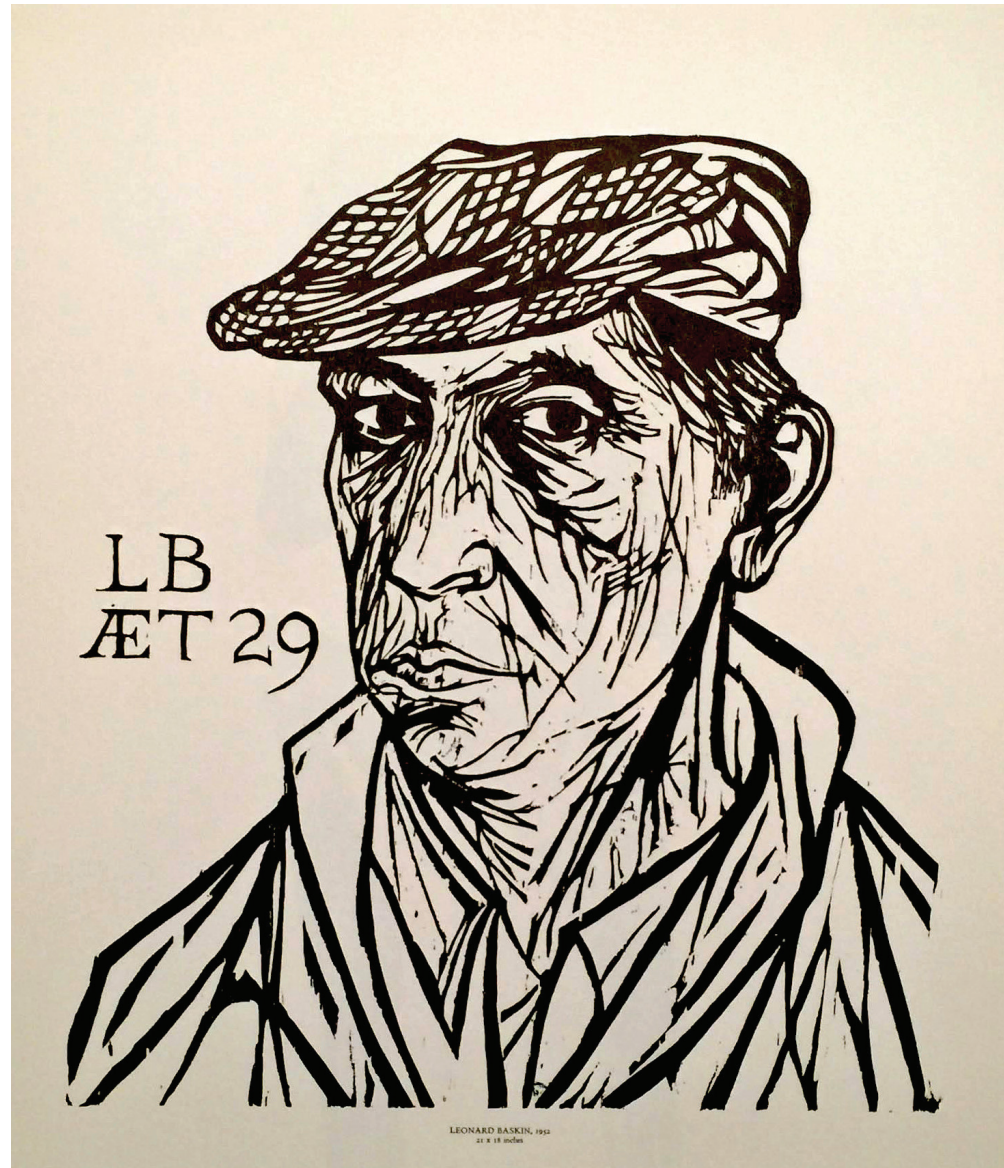
Adriano Marinazzo photographed the process, and Jennifer Williams and Stephen Salpukas wrote and illustrated with photography a news story on the project. All three are consummate professionals.

The Department of Art & Art History was fully supportive. Chair Mike Jabbur was always available for encouragement and advice. Cathy Jacobs and Pamela Hawkes supplied administrative backup.

Jay Gaidmore and Jennie Davy in the Special Collections Research Center at Swem Library gave their time to our class to review holdings of Baskin's work and publications from his Gehenna Press, helping us understand those holdings and ultimately making generous loans to the exhibition.

Professor Charles Palermo,
on behalf of the class of *The Curatorial Project* (Spring 2022)

4.



THE HUMAN FRAME: PRINTS BY LEONARD BASKIN

Leonard Baskin (American, 1922–2000) first gained notoriety through printmaking, a practice he maintained throughout his career — though many know him as a sculptor of prominent public commissions such as the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial or the Woodrow Wilson Memorial, both in Washington, D.C. In addition, he founded the Gehenna Press and collaborated with artists, writers, and other presses to produce artists' books and bound publications. This exhibition focuses on Baskin's prints, in which creatures, human and otherwise, embody themes of morality and mortality as seen in his haunting portraits and satirical personifications of death.

As the son of a rabbi, later self-identifying as a “believing atheist,” Baskin's Jewish upbringing influenced his approach to tradition and scholarship, to the tensions between the mundane and the extraordinary, and between the mythical and the actual. Ever the intellectual, Baskin drew upon myth and poetry in his individual and collaborative pieces. Despite his respect for tradition, Baskin frequently challenged artistic norms with compositional spaces that uniquely frame his subject matter, often breaking the picture plane. His depictions of figures confront the viewer with what it means to embody the inner experience within the human frame.

Generous gifts by Barbara Waal and Chris Vinyard, along with recent Museum purchases, have enhanced the Muscarelle's existing collection of Baskin's two-dimensional work. Swem Library's Special Collections Research Center also contributed selected examples of Baskin's published works.

Hebrew to English translation: *Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked without blame*

Psalm 26:1

5.



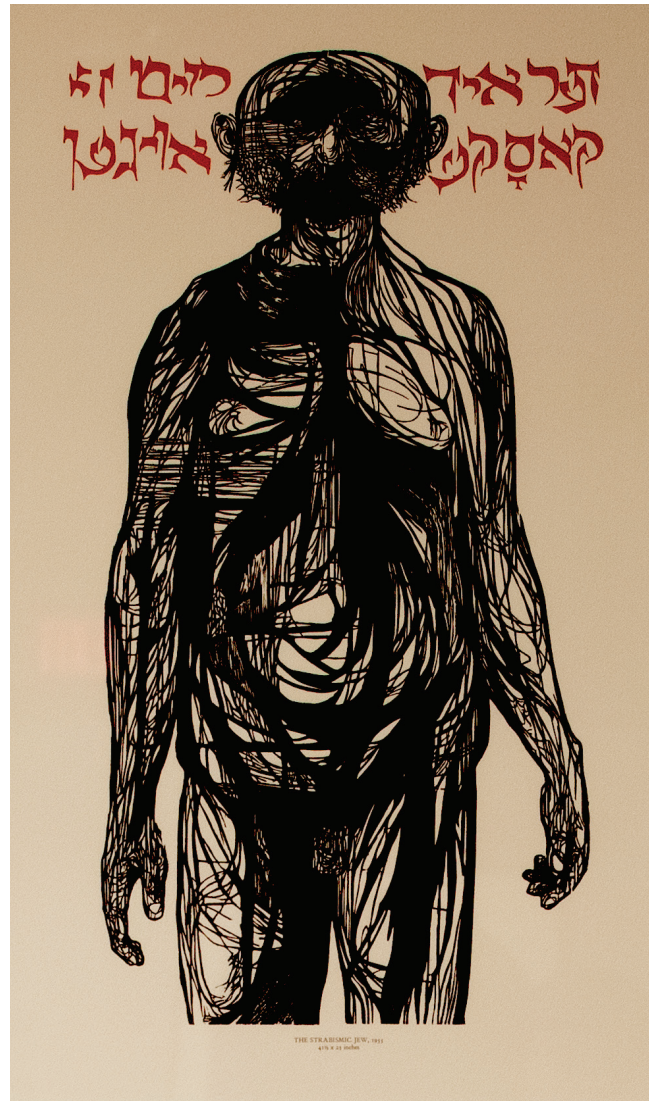
JEWISH HERITAGE

Judaism is a central theme in Baskin's life and art. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, attended a yeshiva (Jewish school), and worked at the local synagogue as a young adult. At the age of seventeen, Baskin had his first exhibit of sculpture at the Glickman Studio Gallery in New York. Baskin studied first at New York University, then at Yale University, where he founded the Gehenna Press in 1942. Baskin then served in the United States Navy from 1943 to 1946. After his time in the military, he attended the New School for Social Research in New York City. During 1950 and 1951, Baskin studied abroad in both Florence and Paris. After returning to the States, he taught sculpture and printmaking at Smith College, while maintaining the Gehenna Press.

Using his knowledge of the Jewish tradition, Baskin illustrated traditional texts such as *A Passover Haggadah* (1974) and *The Five Scrolls* (1984). Later in his career, Baskin published a series of works depicting the horrors of the Holocaust, many of which are housed in Holocaust memorials and Jewish centers across America. Although Baskin grew up immersed in the Jewish world, he titled himself a "believing atheist." Jewish themes of persecution, suffering, and faithfulness appear throughout his work as evidence of his ties to Judaism.

5. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Man in Green*, no date | Watercolor on paper | © Artist's estate | Acquired with funds from the Board of Visitors Muscarelle Museum of Art Endowment | 2021.061

6.



6. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Strabismic Jew*, 1955 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

Strabismic Jew encapsulates Baskin's connection to Judaism. Strabismus is a condition inhibiting both eyes from focusing on one thing at the same time, causing squinting. The red lettering in the background is Yiddish for "The Jew with the crossed eyes." Influential art critic Edward Lucie-Smith commented, "Baskin's print celebrates the Jew as a Judas figure as the eternal outcast." Portraying the Strabismic Jew as an outsider, a haunting figure of loneliness, captures how Baskin may have felt.

7. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Pomegranate*, 1952 | Woodblock print, trial proof | © Artist's estate | Maria Herman Lania Print Collection; Gift of Frederick and Lucy S. Herman | 1985.102

The symbol of the pomegranate is important to Jewish culture as it is one of the seven spices originating in Israel, according to the Hebrew Bible. Pomegranate seeds symbolize two things: the 613 mitzvot (commands) in the Torah and fertility, which is why the pomegranate is often present at Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year). The pomegranate was also the symbol of the Gehenna Press, which Baskin founded.

7.



6

8.



8. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Abraham*, 1970 | Lithograph | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.023

The inscription translated is also the title of the work: Abraham. It is believed that Abraham and his descendants were chosen by God to create a great nation – these descendants are the Jewish people. In this work, the subject is depicted as elderly and wise, yet feeble and concerned, possibly addressing Baskin's own religious skepticism. It is as if Baskin is projecting his inner self onto Abraham's expression and connecting himself back to this symbol of Jewish heritage as he explores his relationship with religion.

9. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Man with Clasped Hands*, 1949 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.010

Baskin's use of clasped hands in this print can be traced back to the Zohar. This Jewish text suggests the intertwining of fingers symbolizes the judgment of oneself (Zohar 24a).

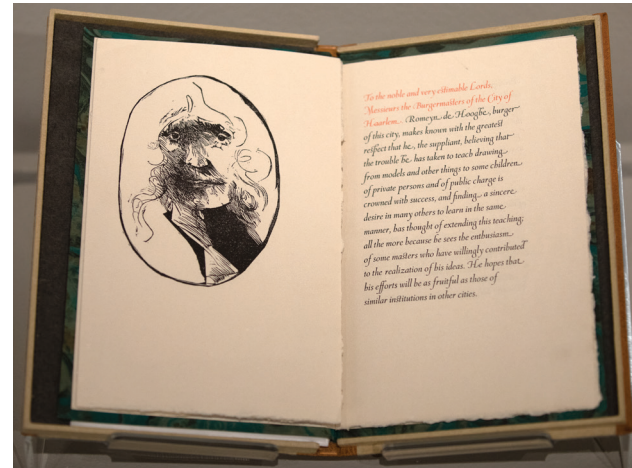


7

ARTIST PORTRAITS

I am human, and I think nothing human alien to me. 10.

This quote, penned by Terrence, became central to Leonard Baskin's ideology. Baskin composed portraits of predecessors he considered important, exploring the role of art as homage. He chose to venerate artists whose work comments on the collective identity we call humanity. Baskin seemed to believe that our common griefs and joys create a strong bond between oneself, one's peers, and figures of the past. Art, in the eyes of Leonard Baskin, is a celebration of us.



10. **ROMEYN DE HOOGHE** (Dutch, 1645 – 1708) | **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | **HAROLD MCGRATH** (American, 1871 – 1932) | *To the Burgermasters of Haarlem*, 1971 | © Gehenna Press | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

11.



11. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Kollwitz*, no date | Etching | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.032

Käthe Kollwitz was a prominent German artist who worked in painting and sculpture, but is best known for her prints and etchings. Much of her art focuses on proletarian themes and the suffering endured by the masses following World War I. Kollwitz lost her son in the fighting, and therefore shares deeply personal ties with the bereaved subjects she chooses to represent. Her ideologies on the universality of grief align with Baskin's own.

12. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Kollwitz*, no date | Etching, 4th state | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.033

In his essay titled *Four Drawings, and An Essay on Kollwitz* Baskin writes that, "from the anguish of Kollwitz flowed [art], and in this agony we share." Kollwitz' art is a "sob as trenchant today as it will be fifty years hence," creating a deeply sympathetic bond between people of all eras. The grip of anguish is deeply resonant in Baskin's works due to its immense power. This work demonstrates his belief in our ability to express and understand emotion makes us human.

12.



13.



13. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Barlach "B"*, no date | Lithograph | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.034

Ernst Barlach, the German sculptor and printmaker to whom this print pays homage, was a close friend of Leonard Baskin. Baskin was first acquainted with Barlach's work when reading Ernst Benkard's photographic compilation of death masks titled *Das Ewige Antlitz*. He appreciated Barlach's ability to capture raw, grotesque moments with tranquility and replicated this contradictory pairing in his own work. Baskin sought to honor innately human experiences, believing that even tragic moments are made beautiful by compassion and empathy. In this portrait, although the subject's countenance is somber and distant, Baskin's use of softly applied texture and wisped lines create a sense of peace.

14. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Barlach "C"*, no date | Lithograph | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.035

Ernst Barlach's body of work consists largely of pieces protesting World War I and the suffering that occurred in its wake. These themes resonated with Baskin, who once wrote, "Indeed, only the elemental emotions of the human race are great and eternal. The things that arrest my attention are what a human being has suffered and is able to endure." Baskin demonstrates that grief and despair are understood universally, in such a way that they knit together the fabric of humankind. He celebrated suffering as a hallmark of the human experience: a work of art.

14.



15.



15. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Auguste Rodin on his death bed*, 1963 | Lithograph | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.020

François Auguste René Rodin was a French sculptor best known for his contributions to modern art. He had a meteoric rise to fame despite being initially rejected by the official academies and died having reached an unparalleled level of success. Baskin's interpretation of him seeks to acknowledge his humanity paralleled by his greatness, while honoring an individual that he looked to for inspiration.

16.

16. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Hercules Seghers*, 1962 | Etching | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.005

In the 17th century, a great proliferation of the arts occurred in the Netherlands during the Dutch Golden Age. Hercules Seghers was a Dutch artist of the period and is lauded as one of the first master printmakers and etchers. Baskin created this print as a tribute to Seghers' masterful contributions to landscape art, including a mountainscape in the band that overlaps with the subject's eyes and brow.



10

ANIMALS & MYTHOLOGY

17.



17. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Love Me, Love My Dog*, 1958 | *Castle Street Dog #150, #152, #155, #157, 1952* | Wood engravings | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.019, 2021.012, 2021.013, 2021.014, 2021.015

These engravings make up a series that was printed by Baskin's own Gehenna Press. Baskin lived at one time on Castle Street. Depicted here are the dogs that used to roam there. They initially stand out as being rather unique within his *oeuvre*; their amusing and charming character is refreshing when compared to the deeper moral conundrums concerning life and death that are so prominent within most of his work. We might assume

from these depictions that he is fond of the dogs: he depicts them with an intricate sense of care and detail. However, he regarded these dogs as "scabrous and lousy" and had a strong distaste for them. Additionally, a strong sense of the erotic exists within all the prints, and this combined with his disgust for the dogs brings to the fore a commentary on the fetishization of eroticism that is perhaps more typical of Baskin's work and themes.

11

The resurrection of the dead; we don't believe in it. In any case, the owls and the crows will represent us.

-Leonard Baskin

18.



19.



* 19. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Icarus in black and white*, 1967 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.021

The title and imagery within this woodcut details the tragic story of Icarus and his fall from the sky. The figure in the print dons outstretched wings that nearly graze the sides of the circular border – as do the wings in *Crow Ikon*. Icarus appears suspended in the air, neither flying nor falling. Baskin offers a snapshot into a singular moment in time when Icarus' blind ambition morphs into instantaneous regret. Icarus flawlessly incorporates Baskin's fascination with mythology, death, and anthropomorphic beings to express a greater moral message.

18. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Crow Ikon*, 1982 | Lithograph printed in three colors on Velin d'Arches paper | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.029

A splayed crow is enshrined under a black, arched altar. His wings are outstretched, barely touching the corners of the frame, mirroring a crucifix. The crow appears to be in limbo, stuck in a conceptual no man's land halfway between our world and the bird's. The inky, desolate void that suffuses the canvas triggers images of despair, confusion,

and nonexistence; the horror and trauma of World War II are strongly represented in Baskin's work, drawing attention to the fragility and ferocity of Man. Baskin's birds are charged icons of these very themes, and here the artist canonizes this lonely crow as a saintly – or sinful – symbol of these complex sentiments.

20. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Gluttony*, 1992 | Etching | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.030

Representations of the seven deadly sins frequently appear in Baskin's prints and sculptures. This lithograph draws from Baskin's religious upbringing by depicting the personified version of gluttony. The face of the figure is obscured. Instead, the focus is placed on the round stomach and green feathers that drape the body like a cloak. Baskin's Gehenna Press published the following poem written by Anthony Hecht, perhaps revealing his agreement with Hecht's sentiment.

*Let the poor look to themselves, for it is said
Their savior wouldn't turn stones into bread.
And let the sow continually say grace.
For moss shall build in the lung and leave no trace,
The glutton worm shall tunnel in the head
And eat the Word out of the parchment face.*

The Seven Deadly Sins by Anthony Hecht
Published in 1958 by the Gehenna Press



21.



21. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Angel of Death*, 1959 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

The subject of *Angel of Death* references both Baskin's connection to religion as well as his fascination with death. The imagery of a bird as a messenger from another world illustrates Baskin's connection to birds on a more philosophical and spiritual level. The distorted style of this work uses Baskin's characteristic organic lines to distort his figures, making them feel less literal and more available to interpretation.

* 22. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Tormented Man*, 1953 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

In this print, solid blocks of color in the background interact with distorted figures made up of many small expressive lines. By placing the figures on top of the linear shapes in the background, Baskin breaks the picture plane that he created. In keeping with Baskin's other works, *Tormented Man* references the anguish of the human condition as well as the presence of mythical and deformed bird figures. The style of these birds appears frequently in Baskin's *Cave Birds* series and in his sculptures of birds, featuring a small head, a large body, and one claw-like foot. One thing that stands out, however, is his use of color. Baskin uses color sparingly;

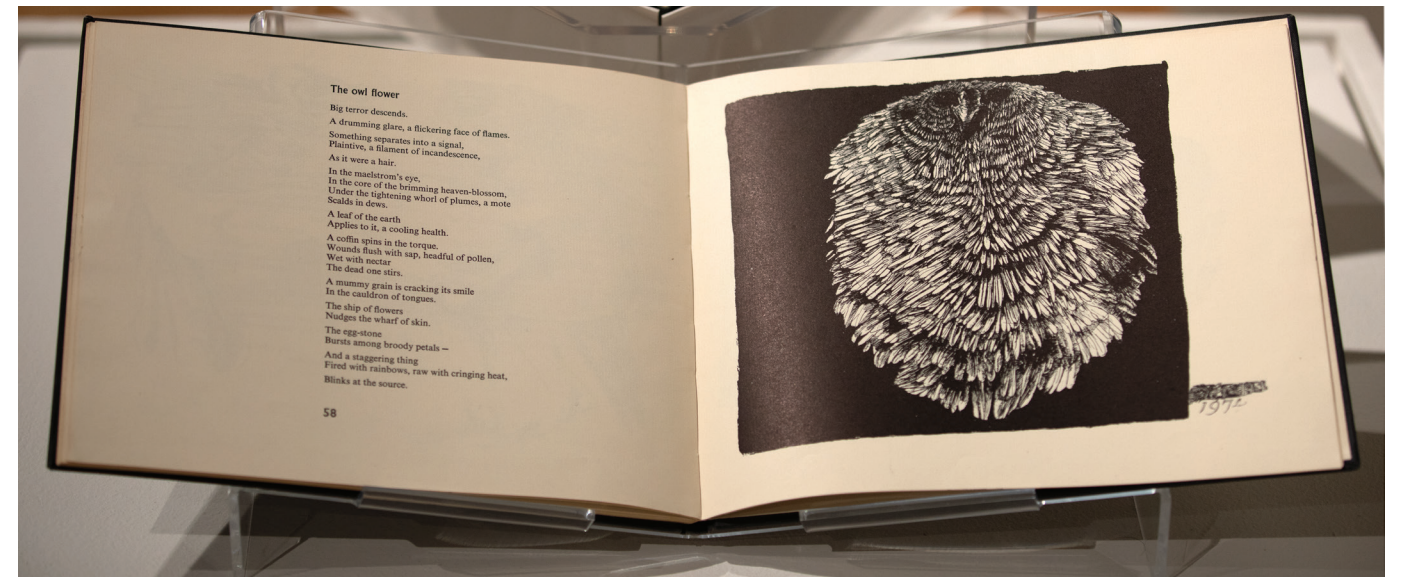
here, the addition of the red creates yet another plane that is then broken up by the overlapping human figure and offers some contrast among the three birds.

22.



14

23.



23. **TED HUGHES** (English, 1930 – 1998) | **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Cave Birds: an Alchemical Cave Drama*, 1971 | © Viking Press | William & Mary Libraries

Cave Birds is a book of poetry written by Ted Hughes and illustrated by Leonard Baskin telling the story of a traditional hero, with a judgment, death, and resurrection. Some of the poems were written with inspiration from the prints, while other prints were inspired by the poems. This method of collaboration creates a deep connection between the works. The book features striking images of birds in black and white. A few depict anthropomorphic figures, blending human and bird anatomy. Baskin carries over his distortive style, ranging from stick-like figures to larger, blocky ones.

24. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | 24. *Birdman*, 1962 | Wood Engraving | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art Purchase | 1973.031

The contour of a bird-man hybrid overwhelms the frame and confronts the viewer with weird and warped fervor. The heavy black ink blots out any sense of normalcy and familiarity, and we are immediately pulled into a deep, dark corner of the artist's fantasy. Baskin saw birds as harbingers from another plane, clutching peculiar feelings and philosophies in their claws and depositing them into our consciousness. He had an affinity for the crow, believing the creature to be an ambiguous and empathetic incarnation of Man's desperate ability to deceive, scavenge, and steal – simply to survive. The behavioral tendencies shared between the two species are emphasized in this nightmarish crossover.



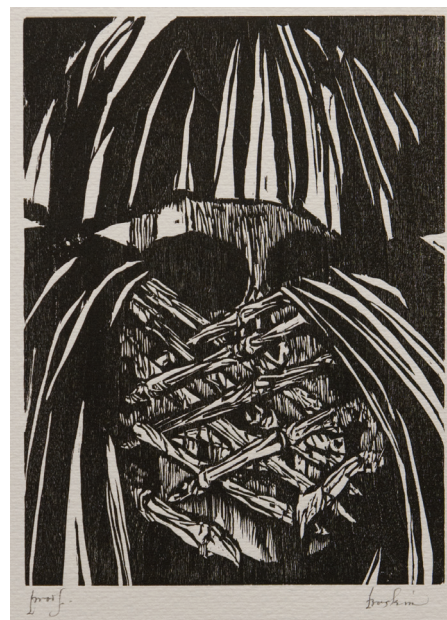
15

DEATH

One lottery that cannot be lost

-Ted Hughes, "A green mother," *Cave Birds*

25.



25. LEONARD BASKIN (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Death and the Punchinello, Death the Justice, Death the Scholar, Peek-A-Boo*, 1995 | Woodcuts | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.014, 2012.009, 2012.008, 2012.006

26.

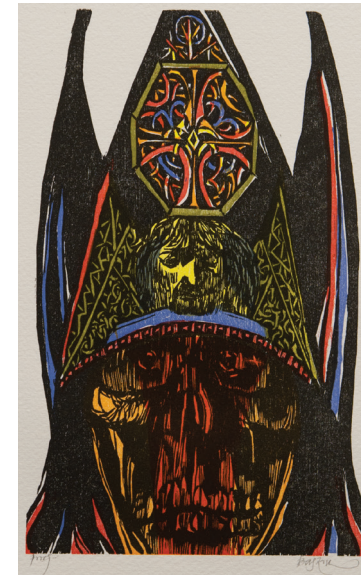


26. *Death the Inquisitor*, 1995 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.007

This piece conveys a particularly sinister meaning. Death in the guise of an Inquisitor brings fear and apprehension – a motif that Baskin infused throughout his work as he grappled with ideas of life and death. This ominous portrayal of Death has no visible human features but rather implies a figure underneath – as the Inquisitor embodies not an individual, but a role, so too does Death come to fulfill its role in the cycle of life. Its monstrous, claw-like hands reach out to grab whoever appears in its path, pulling its victims into eternity.



28.



27. *Death and the Whore*, 1995 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.011

The only soul able to overcome Death is that which does not disguise its true nature in life: the Whore. She has no earthly trappings – not even clothes – of which to be stripped, and is allowed to retain her flesh as a reward for her honesty.

28. *Death and the Archbishop*, 1995 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.012

Here, Baskin illustrates that greed poisons even the anointed. His use of the same garishly vibrant hues as those in *Death and the Society Lady* and *Death the Punchinello* links the forsaken Archbishop with comic overindulgence.

29. *Death and the Society Lady*, 1995 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.013

With lurid, bright hues of purple, red, and yellow, Baskin uncharacteristically brings color to this print of a ruffled skeleton with a feathered hat – he seems to view these kinds of wealth “markers” as distasteful and unsubtle. Simultaneously, he points out the uncomfortable truth that everyone, from wealthy society ladies to archbishops becomes the same in death as much as they try to distinguish themselves in life – each skeleton is more like another than it is different.

29.



30.



As exemplified by this piece, Baskin used his art to be socially and intellectually provocative, bringing up uncomfortable emotions for viewers and questioning the status quo.

30. *Death and the Carnival Barker*, 1995 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.010

The jaunty set of the carnival barker's hat creates a contradictory tone with the rest of the print – the ghoulish skull with cavernous sunken eyes is grim, dark, and looms eerily, dominating most of the composition, the hat brushing the edges of the frame. This jarring distinction between lighthearted entertainment and the realities of death is further emphasized by the swaths of black and white in the print's background.

31.



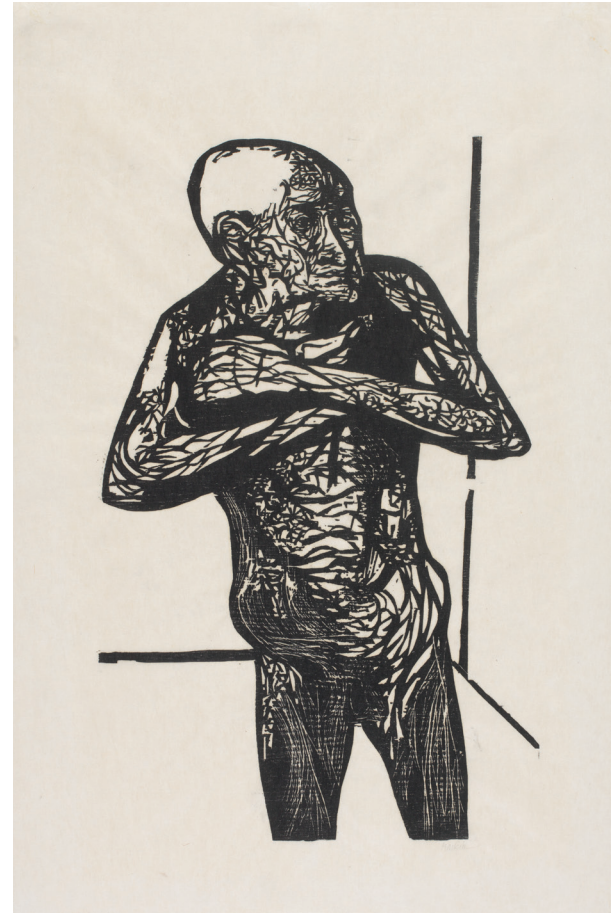
31. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Hanged Man*, 1955 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

32.



32. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Hydrogen Man*, 1954 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

33.



33. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Frightened Old Man*, 1952 | Wood Engraving | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art Purchase | 1973.027

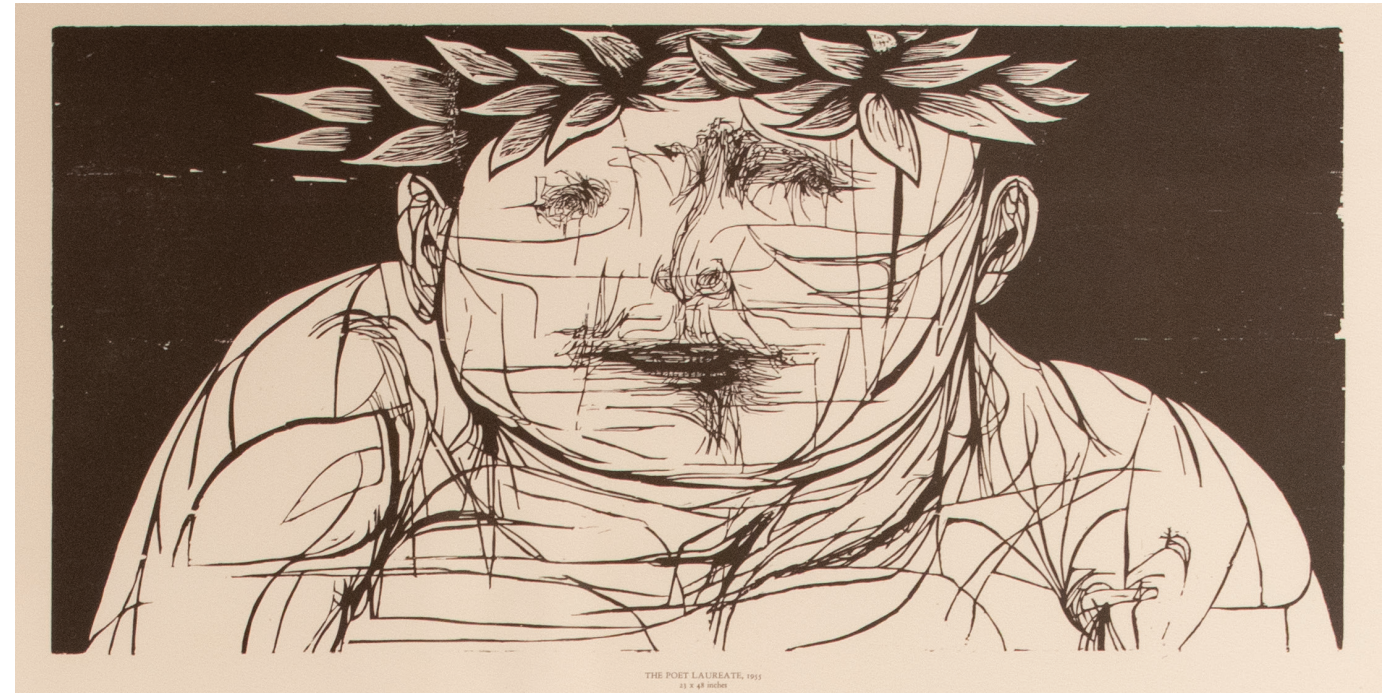
Baskin portrays a man confronted by Death with unique sympathy. The subject has been backed into a corner by Death – perhaps Baskin is attempting to show that resistance is futile.

34. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Body and Head*, 1969 | Etching on Velin d'Arches paper | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.022



18

35.



35. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *The Poet Laureate*, 1955 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

Baskin depicts a poet grinning stupidly upon receiving his laurels. The subject is blind to the insignificance and irony of this award – as we see in *Death of the Laureate*, “you can't take it with you.”

36.



36. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Death of a Laureate*, 1957 | Wood engraving | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.018

In one of his most critical pieces, Baskin mocks a greedy poet. Baskin was consistently vocal about his disdain for modern artistic practices, and the concept of laureates was no exception; when criticizing the work of his dealer Richard Michelson, Baskin reportedly said: “What are you waiting for? A Pulitzer? Prizes are vanity.”

19

NATIVE AMERICAN

In 1969, the National Park Service commissioned Baskin to illustrate a handbook for Custer Battlefield (now known as Little Bighorn Battlefield Monument), the location of the 1876 battle between a band of Lakota Sioux and a group of allied Cheyenne warriors led by Sitting Bull against the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer.

When Baskin began the project, there was a rising interest in Native history and political activism spurred on by the American Indian Movement. His captivating images of *Yellow Magpie*, and *Crow Scout/White Man Runs Him* speak to the complex impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous relations. *Yellow Magpie* and *White Man Runs Him* were Crow scouts who were with Custer until shortly before the start of the battle. They counseled Custer not to engage Sitting Bull's camp since the 7th Cavalry was outnumbered by the Lakota warriors.

Troubled by the harsh conditions on the American Indian reservations, Baskin demonstrates in his portraits his typical themes of mortality while also humanizing Native Americans. In their eyes, there is a deep sense of isolation, loss, and abandonment, but also an overwhelming sense of courage and dignity. For one of the first times in history, a sense of identity is attached to these faces, rather simply becoming absorbed by the tensions and conflicts of the period.

38. LEONARD BASKIN (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Crow Scout/White Man Runs Him*, 1974 | Lithograph printed in seven colors on Velin d'Arches paper | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.027

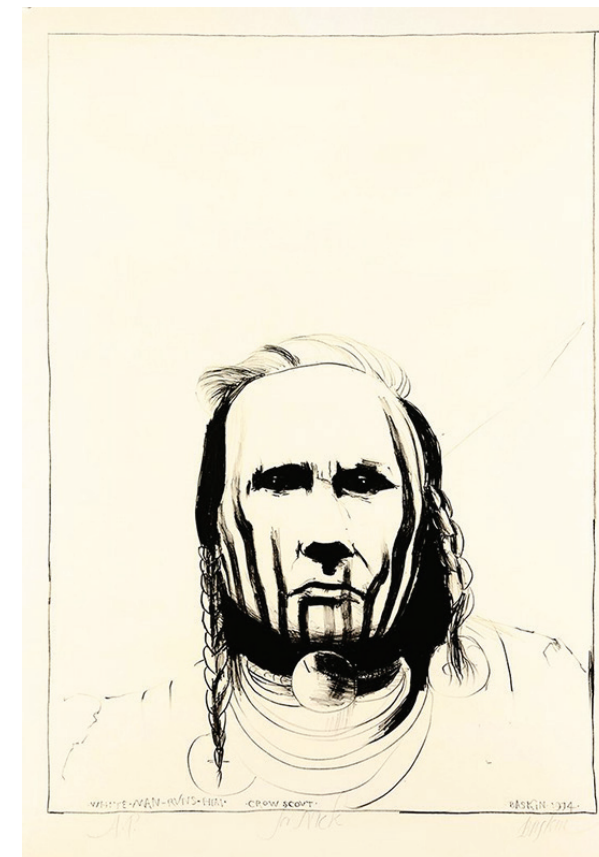
39. LEONARD BASKIN (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Yellow Magpie*, 1973 | Lithograph printed in seven colors on Velin d'Arches paper | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.026

37.



37. LEONARD BASKIN (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Indian Faces*, 1974 | Lithograph printed in seven colors on Velin d'Arches paper | © Artist's estate | Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.028

38.



39.



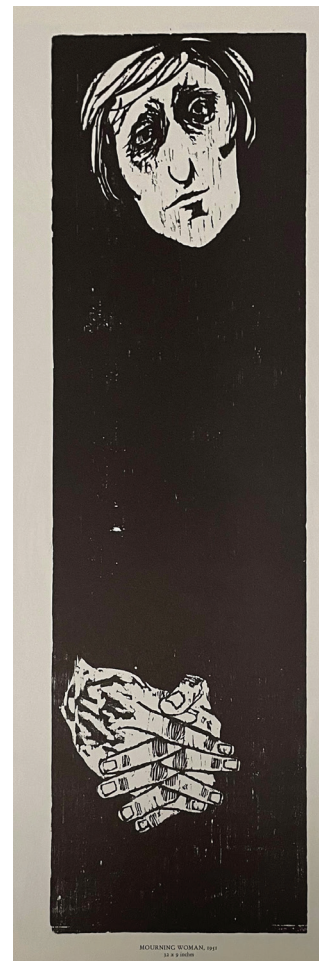
COMPOSITION

The prints of Leonard Baskin are nothing short of mystifying. Limiting himself to a mostly black and white palette, Baskin throws his bold challenges to convention into stark relief. During Baskin's lifetime, Gestalt psychology, a school of thought concerning the mind's tendency to find patterns and bridge perceptual gaps, gained popularity. Baskin manipulates the Gestalt principles of grouping such as proximity, closure, and figure-ground relationships to produce pictorial effects or establish narrative meaning throughout his works on paper.

Baskin uses the brain's tendency to fill in gaps by distorting traditional compositional elements. He forces viewers' attention towards negative space, treating it as a subject in itself. The use of space within the pictorial place, including the breaking of the outer boundaries, coupled with his signature sinewy line, results in abrupt ends and implied continuations beyond the canvas. Baskin scrawls mountains across his subjects' eyes, peels away their layers to reveal the underlying musculature, and abandons traditional aesthetic pleasure for grim, often satirical explorations of the psyche, death, and humanity. His works are grotesquely physical and psychological, weaving these two elements of the human condition together through innovative compositions. These prints are not intended to comfort – rather, they are meant to disturb or interrogate, inspiring introspection.

Refer to text labeled with * for more information on Baskin's compositional choices.

40.



41.



40. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Mourning Woman*, 1951 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

In this print, Baskin refrains from revealing all to his viewers – instead, the presence of the woman's body draped in jet-black mourning garb must be inferred from the oblong rectangle that exists in its place. Baskin positions the woman's hands as to suggest the existence of her arms, again concealed by the darkness. However, the woman's clothes are not the only thing Baskin has obscured – the black also seeps past the figure and into the background, suggesting the presence of a greater gloom surrounding the woman.

41. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Unnamed Print*, no date (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

The interplay between figure and ground invites the viewer into this image, like many of Baskin's other works also constructed from diverse perspectives. Occupying two-thirds of the whole scope, the blank space is separated from the sideways head through a thick line. The twisted and delicate lines placed perpendicular to the hanging head express a sense of constraint and tension. This tension is amplified by the facial expression, which is blurred to represent a chaotic inner state. Baskin intentionally suspends the head over a column of blank space, allowing the audience to speculate on the underlying cause of such grief.

42. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Torment*, 1958 (printed 1962), from *Fifteen Woodcuts* | © Artist's estate | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

42.

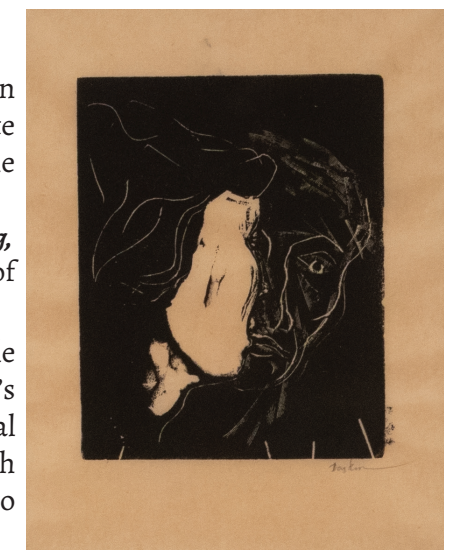


43. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Lovers, A New Year's Greeting*, 1978 | Wood engraving | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.009

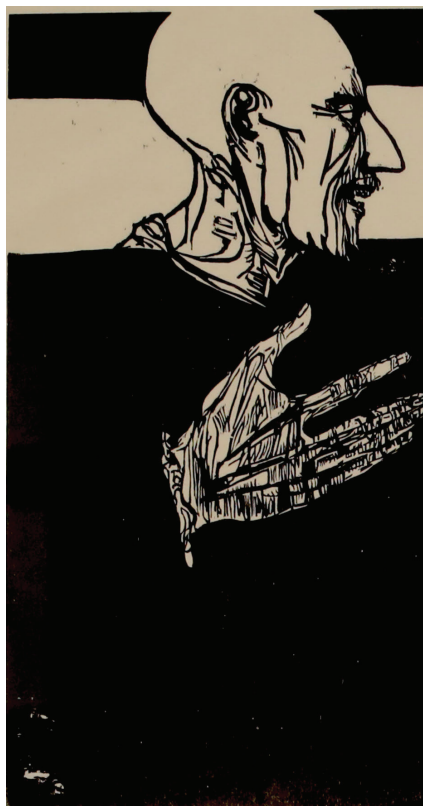
In this print, Baskin once again puts positive and negative space in a tense relationship. The off-centered bird looms above, hidden in the darkness in sheer contrast with the illuminated head. Since the man's expression is nearly obliterated, the bird gazes out at the audience to communicate his anguish. The corresponding clusters of vertical, scribbled linework of the bird and the ambiguous composition of the head express a chaotic mental state as the man slowly disappears into the the pitch blackness of a tormented psyche.

43. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Lovers, A New Year's Greeting*, 1978 | Wood engraving | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.009

In this print, Baskin explores the configuration of two faces, using angle and color to contrast the two individuals. This is a fine example of Baskin's proclivity to use perspective to captivate the viewer and draw special attention to elements of the face. The juxtaposition of color contrasting with the fusing of the figures embodies their connection, inviting the viewer to celebrate their intimacy in a portrait paying homage to their pairing.



44.



44. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Iago (portrait and profile)*, 1973 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.025

This woodcut print is in the Gehenna Press edition of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Iago, the play's antagonist, uses his intellect and his words as tools of destruction. The heavily lined facial features provide contrast against a band of light, while the domed head acts as a break in the band of black. His hand receives much less light than his face, proving him the instigator of dark tragedies to follow. The positioning of the figure creates directional horizons which push the eye from left to right along the picture plane.

45. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Iago (portrait)*, 1973 | Woodcut | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.024

This woodcut is from the Gehenna Press edition of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Nothing but Iago's head is rendered in detail, putting nearly all focus on his expression. A master of controlling narratives, his face is veiled by shadow, reflecting his selfish intentions. The figure's head exceeds the height of Baskin's framing, placing Iago squarely in the foreground as he makes contact with all sides of the rectangle. Iago interrogates the viewer as he leans forward, invading the viewer's space by visually pushing beyond the bounds of his own.

45.



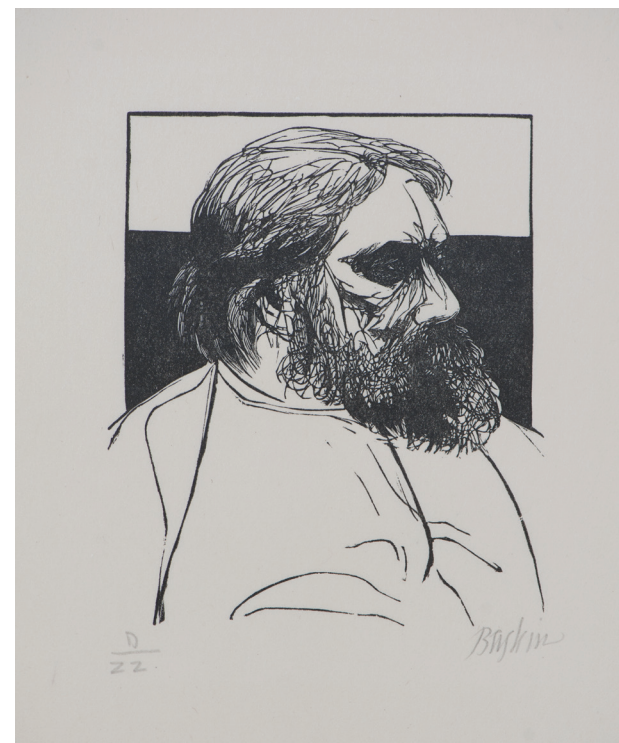
46.



46. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Arabesques and Grotesques*, no date | Etching | © Artist's estate | Muscarelle Museum of Art, Gift of Barbara Waal | 2021.031

An unusual octagonal image, this print depicts three bearded male faces conjoined together into one. The negative space in this work is uniquely considered, harkening back to Rubin's Vase, an optical illusion dating back to 1915. The octagon confines the subject to a small picture plane, forcing engagement with every edge and evoking an uneasy, claustrophobic feeling in the viewer. The composition leaves the subject both physically and mentally trapped within the space, but maintains balance with heavier visual weight sitting at the top and bottom, leaving a path across the three noses.

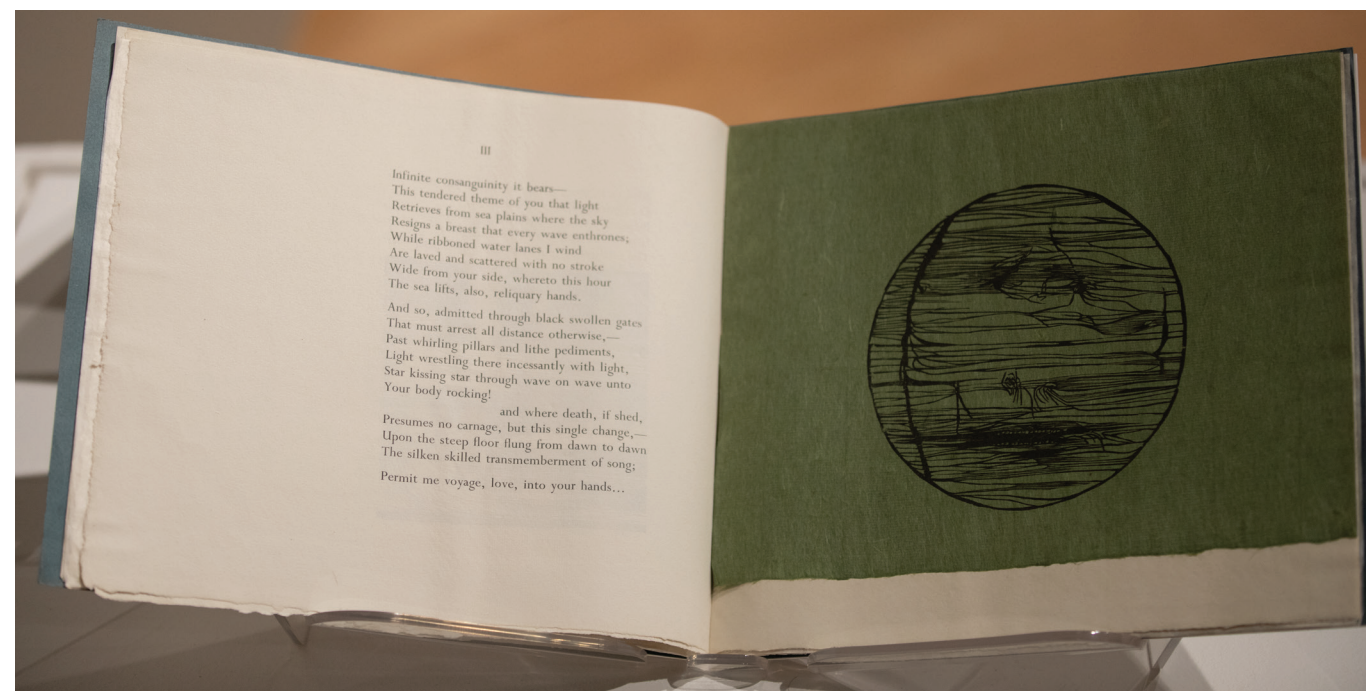
47.



47. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Gustave Courbet*, 1969 | Engraving on laid Japanese paper | © Artist's estate | Gift of Christian Vinyard | 2012.018

This engraving of 19th-century French Realist painter Gustave Courbet is one of many works Baskin created depicting other artists, some of them also displayed in this show. In this portrait, we see a graphic quality similar to many Baskin prints that includes a broken outer boundary, the shoulders of the subject sitting outside of the delineated border, and a stark horizontal block of black coinciding with the subject's eye level. The contrasting bands of black and white create a balanced weight to the overall image that would be echoed in the Iago portrait series Baskin would create several years later. The linear detail is concentrated on the face of Courbet, pulling the viewer's attention to a heavy gaze and shadowed hair. This contributes to the balance of the composition, coinciding with the boundaries of the background and easing to flow down into a minimally defined upper torso.

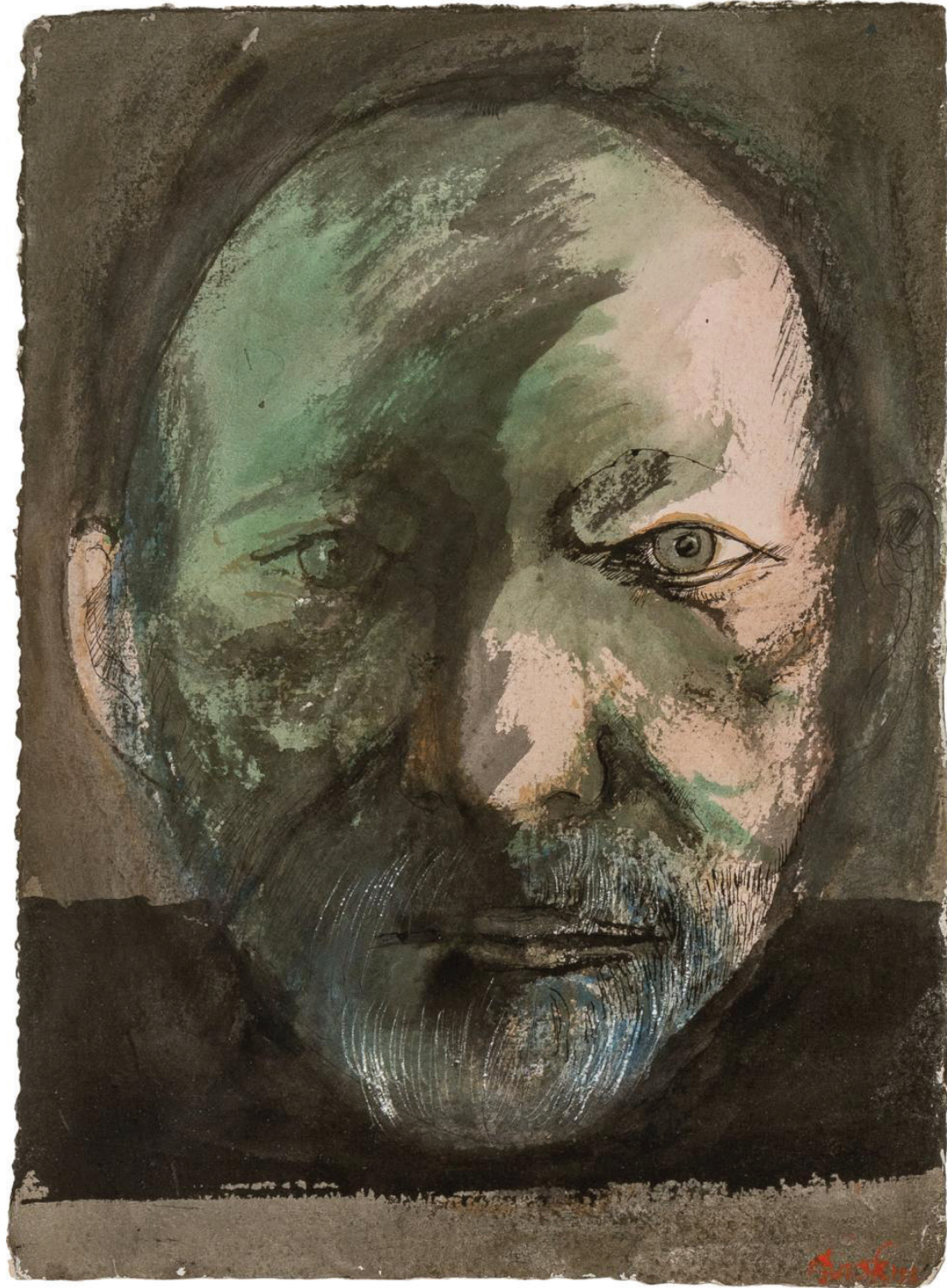
48.



48. **HART CRANE** (American, 1899 – 1932) | **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Voyagers: Six Poems from White Buildings*, 1957 | © Museum of Modern Art | Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries

Voyages: Six Poems from White Buildings features texts by modernist poet Hart Crane complemented by Baskin's prints (six boxwood engravings and one cherry woodcut). The short book demonstrates Baskin's creative and often unconventional play with space and color. Baskin's signature linework surrounds and supports Crane's poetry in a way that brings the artwork to the forefront. One poem features a large, red shell superimposed over Crane's words, as if the poem is intended to support the image rather than the reverse. Other prints, though they do not overlay the poetry, still dominate the landscape of the page, acting as a visual foundation upon which the words rest.

49.



49. **LEONARD BASKIN** (American, 1922 – 2000) | *Self-portrait*, no date | Watercolor on cream wove paper | © Artist's estate | Acquired with funds from the Board of Visitors Muscarelle Museum of Art Endowment | 2021.060



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