

Alan and Lois Fern collection of Leonard Baskin and Gehenna Press material

Ms. Coll. 1412

Finding aid prepared by Holly Mengel and Faith Denny.

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University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2019 August 23

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Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts
Creator	Baskin, Leonard, 1922-2000
Creator	Fern, Alan Maxwell, 1930-
Title	Alan and Lois Fern collection of Leonard Baskin and Gehenna Press material
Call number	Ms. Coll. 1412
Date [inclusive]	1957-1971
Extent	0.2 linear foot (1 box and oversized folder)
Language	English
Abstract	Leonard Baskin (1922-2000) was a figurative sculptor, graphic artist, poet, printer, and founder of the Gehenna Press. This collection documents the printed works of Leonard Baskin and his Gehenna press through announcements; cards; exhibition advertisements; invitations; printing examples, bookplates, and keepsakes; printed complete works; and prospectuses and catalogs.

Cite as:

Alan and Lois Fern collection of Leonard Baskin and Gehenna Press material, 1957-1971, Ms. Coll. 1412, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania

Biography/History

Leonard Baskin, a figurative sculptor, graphic artist, poet, printer, and founder of the Gehenna Press, was born on August 15, 1922 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, but moved to Brooklyn, New York in 1929. At age 13 or 14, he knew that he wanted to be a sculptor. He was educated at New York University School of Architecture and Allied Arts from 1939 to 1941 and at Yale University School of Fine Arts from 1941 to 1943. In 1942, while at Yale, Baskin started the Gehenna Press.

From 1943 to 1946, Baskin served in the United States Navy; in the Pacific during World War II and afterwards as a Merchant Marine. Following his return to civilian life, he earned his degree at the New York School of Social Research (1949) and then traveled to Florence and Paris, studying art; in particular, Renaissance art. Upon his return to the United States, in 1951, he and his wife, Esther Tane, settled in Worcester, Massachusetts, and he began his teaching career at the Worcester Art Museum school. From 1953 to 1974, he taught at Smith College.

During this time, he ran the Gehenna Press, "which became noted for its fine typography and superbly illustrated limited-edition books," (Smith) and published his own wood engravings. He also continued to sculpt and paint. Over the years, his work won many awards and he is known for his sculpture for the Ann Arbor Holocaust Memorial and the Roosevelt Memorial bas-relief in Washington, DC. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, throughout his lifetime, "Mr. Baskin remained steadfast in his belief in the superiority of figurative art and the importance of morality as a theme," (Smith). Furthermore, the Jewish Museum states, "Leonard Baskin's figurative art stems from his deep understanding of artistic and literary traditions of both Western civilization and Judaism. The ancient themes that he derives from biblical, mythological, and historical sources forcefully convey contemporary human dilemmas," (Jewish Museum). He exhibited his work both in the United States and internationally.

From 1974 to 1981, Baskin and his second wife, Lisa Unger, lived in England, where his work was greatly inspired by the poet Ted Hughes. After returning to Massachusetts, he continued in his artistic endeavors and taught at Hampshire College from 1984 to 1994. In the 1980s, there was a shift in his art to focus more on his Jewish heritage and the aftermath of the Holocaust, which according to the Jewish Museum affected him enormously as early as the 1940s; however, "he did not confront the topic directly until the 1980s, when he created a series of watercolors accompanied by Yiddish epigrams that embodied his emotions," (Jewish Museum).

Baskin died in 2000, at the age of 77. Brandeis University's site states that "after over 100 books and 50 years, the Gehenna Press can be called the most successful private press of all time, for no other private press has achieved anything near its output and longevity."

Works consulted and cited:

Brandeis University. Leonard Baskin and the Gehenna Press. (accessed 2019 August 23)

Jewish Museum. Leonard Baskin, The Altar. (accessed 2019 August 23)

Smith, Roberta. "Leonard Baskin Dies at 77: Sculptor of Stark Memorials," *New York Times*, 2000 June 6.

Scope and Contents

This collection documents the printed works of Leonard Baskin and his Gehenna press through announcements; cards; exhibition advertisements; invitations; printing examples, bookplates, and keepsakes; printed complete works; and prospectuses and catalogs. The collection is arranged alphabetically by the type of material created by Baskin and the Press.

For Baskin, family, friends, and work seem to have been intertwined and he used the Gehenna press to document not only business, but also important moments in his own life, such as his wedding, holidays, and achievements. It is not always clear what was produced professionally and what was produced personally. Nearly all the documents in this collection are beautifully decorated with Baskin's woodcuts and elegant typography. While many of Baskin's prints are extremely dark in nature, his announcements, cards, and bookplates are based more in nature and usually contain more color than the black and white he traditionally used in his prints.

There are a few items whose connection to Gehenna are unknown, including a document printed by Sun Press as well as United States Postal Service stamps featuring Henry David Thoreau. It is presumed that the woodcut of Thoreau was created by Baskin. There is also one item, clearly produced by Eremité Press, which was a press under which Baskin briefly published.

The largest portion of this collection is the prospectuses and catalog which include advertisements for books, drawings, and prints produced by Baskin and/or the Gehenna Press. These documents are similarly decorated with typography and woodcuts and include advertisements for "Between Wars and Other Poems," by Anne Halley, "The Poppy and Other Deadly Plants," by Esther Baskin, "Homage to Redon, by George Lockwood," and "Poems by Wilfred Owen," to name only a few. Of particular interest may be the advertisements for Baskin's own work, including "Caprices and Grotesques," "Demons, Imps, and Fiends," and "Diptera: A Book of Flies and Other Insects."

Researchers should consider consulting this collection in its entirety, as much of the material seems interconnected. This material was collected and kept by Baskin's friend, Alan Fern, former chief of Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress and the director of the National Portrait Gallery.

Administrative Information

University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2019 August 23

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Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

Use Restrictions

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Source of Acquisition

Gift of Alan and Lois Fern, 2016.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

At Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library:

Leonard Baskin letters to Edwin Rome, 1962-1985

Leonard Baskin papers, circa 1800-1979

At University of Oxford, Bodleian Library:

Catalogue of the Gehenna Press

Controlled Access Headings

CORPORATE NAME(S)

- Gehenna Press.

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Advertisements
- Book catalogs
- Greeting cards
- Printed ephemera

PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Baskin, Leonard, 1922-2000

SUBJECT(S)

- Advertising
- Art
- Book industries and trade
- Exhibitions
- Letterpress printing

Collection Inventory

	Box	Folder
Announcements for births, marriages, changes of address, and pottery exhibition, and the Gehenna Press, 1959-1967, undated.	1	1
Cards, personal and business, 1962-1971, undated.	1	2
Exhibition: "Drawings, Sculpture, Woodcuts, Leonard Baskin," at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1962 March 15-April 2.	1	3
Exhibition: "Leonard Baskin: The Graphic Work," at Far Gallery, New York, 1970 February 10-March 1.	1	3 1
Exhibition: "An Exhibition of the Creation, Printing and Illustration of the Most Recent Work of the Gehenna Press," at the Yale University Library, undated.	1	3
Invitations, largely related to Leonard Baskin's exhibitions and/or events	1	4

honoring Baskin, 1959-1962, undated.

Printing examples, bookplates, and keepsakes (including Henry David Thoreau stamps), 1962, 1969, undated.	1	5 1
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Printed complete works: <i>Riddle Poems</i> , by Emily Dickinson, 1957.	1	6
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Printed complete works: Leonard Baskin's speech of acceptance on receiving the medal of American Institute of Graphic Arts, New York, 1965 April 28.	1	6
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Printed complete works: <i>Cancelleresca Bastarda: Displayed in a Series of Maxims and Mottos, with Alphabets and Ornaments</i> , signed by Baskin (no. 92 of 100), 1965.	1	6
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Printed complete works: "Leo Tolstoy: Advice to a Draftee", 1969.	1	6
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	Box	Folder
Prospectuses and catalog, largely advertising prints, drawings, and books,	1	1

1964-1967, undated.

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