



*Remembering
Elliot Melville Offner (1931-2010)*

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VOSE GALLERIES



Elliot Melville Offner in his studio, Northampton, MA

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In Tribute

Elliot and Rosemary Offner quickly became like members of the Vose family, stemming right from our first meeting in 2003. We enjoyed many lengthy visits together at the gallery, at Elliot's studio and home in western Massachusetts, and at his summer house on Nantucket. We soon learned that Elliot was not only a legendary sculptor, he was a Renaissance man whose love of life was sparked by his curiosity and lively intellect.

We eagerly anticipated visits to Elliot's home and studio in Northampton. With multiple skylights filling the studio with dappled light, the enormous high-ceilinged room encased a helter-skelter world that unveiled the mind and hand of an incredible talent. Utensils were strewn everywhere; clay, wax, plaster and wood sat in various states of completion; bronze castings were plunked on tables and the floor; and multiple sketches were tacked to the walls as a guide for making his three-dimensional objects.

A curator once said that Elliot "radiates optimism, even love," and his zeal for life, even during his lengthy illness, hardly diminished. He was gregarious, a natural leader, but not self-centered, always inquiring about the other person. His intellect was large, and he was passionate about so many things that lively conversations could go on for hours. He treated our daughters, Beth and Carey, with respect and encouragement even though they were fairly new to the art world at the time of his first gallery exhibition. He was always ready with a warm smile and gracious sense of humor.

My fondest remembrance of Elliot occurred at his opening at our gallery in 2007. It was a balmy fall evening and Elliot stood outside in the courtyard greeting throngs of his admirers, many of whom had traveled great distances to honor him. Bystanders gawked, and it was obvious that the best party on Newbury Street was at Vose Galleries! It was a joyous event, and many of his colleagues at Smith College, where he had taught for over forty years, had never seen such an array of his work, which was displayed on all four floors of the gallery as well as in the courtyard.

At the small dinner party afterwards, I invited a Catholic priest to join us, who shared similar interests with Elliot. I sat the two of them together at the end of the table, and almost immediately, the two, sensing kindred spirits, launched into eager discussions that lasted the entire dinner. Here were two men of different faiths sharing ideas about religion, art, philosophy and history in a passionate but respectful discourse that is so rare today. I was sitting next to Elliot, happily eavesdropping, and Robin Salmon, of the venerable Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina, was sitting next to the priest. Smiling, she whispered across the table to me, "You rarely have the privilege of hearing this kind of dialogue—I'll never forget it!" Walking Elliot and Rosemary back to their hotel afterwards, he seemed to be floating on air, so pleased with the exhibition and reception. Thinking of the people who attended from all areas of his life, and knowing his sense of humor, I commented, "You know, most people don't get to attend their own funeral." As expected, he laughed heartily!

The current exhibition features thirty works, many from the artist's estate, spanning all periods of his working life, from his senior thesis project at Yale in 1953, titled *Angel Aaxilla*, to his ecumenical figures, and finally, beginning in the 1970s, to his sculptures invoking the form and fluid movements of wildlife. We are honored that Elliot's children, Dan, Emily and Helen, have chosen Vose Galleries to represent Elliot's estate, and we look forward to continuing our advocacy for one of the foremost realist sculptors of our times.

—Marcia L. Vose, for the Vose Family

Remembering Elliot Melville Offner (1931-2010)

By Robin R. Salmon, Vice President of Art and Historical Collections and
Curator of Sculpture, Brookgreen Gardens

Eloquent, gentlemanly, and talented are words that come to mind when we remember Elliot Offner. Among his attributes were a kindness and warmth that embraced one like a father's hug, and a gentle wit that always brought smiles to those people within range of his voice. A remembered quip, one of many, was: "I am always fond of saying that you never really finish a sculpture; they just come and take it away."

Elliot Offner's distinctive voice was stilled on October 15, 2010 after his valiant battle with cancer. Born in Brooklyn, he studied painting at Cooper Union, held BFA and MFA degrees from Yale University, and was a Life Fellow of Clare Hall at Cambridge University in England. His artwork—both sculpture and graphic arts—is in many museums and public collections in this country and abroad. In a 2006 interview with John Sisko for the National Sculpture Society's *Sculpture Review*, he was asked how he came to sculpture after studying with and assisting painter Josef Albers: "When I started to create sculpture I was about 24 years old. It was clear to me at the time that all the things I had been doing were really preparation to work on more tactile images. So, I would say, the realization that I was a sculptor was a realization that I needed to see a firm, solid object in front of me. As artists, it is not our job to imitate what has been done before. But, if we need to render an eye, it is incumbent upon us, as sculptors, to see how the Egyptians did it, how Donatello did it in the late fifteenth century, to see how Michelangelo did it, how Houdon did it. It seems to me that you are not to rely on just sheer talent. You have to assimilate the efforts of these great historical figures."

In 2004, he was named Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities Emeritus at Smith College in Massachusetts where he had been a distinguished member of the art faculty for more than 40 years. He remarked: "So often people have said to me, 'Isn't it a drain when you teach?'...Yes, I would have really liked to have gotten up in the morning, gone to the studio, and not done anything else. But, what I taught is what I know, what I love, and what I am interested in...It was a recitation of all the things I had been doing and thinking all my life. I think it is valuable for people to be near an artist and understand how he works, how he thinks, how he does things. I had a little of that experience when I was young. It remains blazoned on my memory, how people do certain things. I think that is extremely important—how people observe an artist and how he thinks and maneuvers himself in a work of art. I don't think there is anything more wonderful than seeing how somebody moves from Step A to Step B."

Elliot Offner received an honorary doctorate from South Carolina's Converse College, where he served as artist in residence and directed a program to commission the work of American sculptors for placement on the Spartanburg campus. He also was honored as a Master Wildlife Artist by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin, was a Fellow and past president of the National Sculpture Society, and a Trustee of Brookgreen Gardens, the oldest public sculpture garden in America.

A visible storage facility at Brookgreen Gardens was named in honor of Elliot and Rosemary Offner in 2007. The Offner Center allows the curatorial staff to display small or delicate works from the collection that would otherwise be in warehouse storage. The Offner Center also provides the means to actively allow public research access to these works and others in the collection via an onsite computer database, and to educate the visiting public by arranging thematic displays within the visible storage space. In December 2010, several works in bronze and wood by Elliot Offner, a gift of the Estate of Rosemary Offner, joined the more than 600 sculptures on display—a fitting tribute to a remarkable couple.

An inspiring mentor, Elliot Offner generously gave his time and experience to other artists. When asked with whom he would want to have lunch if he had the opportunity, he said: “I would like to meet people that I could really learn from...If I have any regrets, it is that I did not go to meet many of the artists who I know would have been receptive, but I felt so self-conscious of imposing on peoples’ time. I look back now...and I would have loved to have the opportunity to ask questions of Jacob Epstein and Elisabeth Frink, certain people whose achievement is so spectacular and so original.” Indeed, we can apply those very words to Elliot Offner, a most spectacular and original artist and a beloved colleague with a heart as great as his talent. He is missed.



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Robin R. Salmon is the author of numerous articles and two books of the *Images of America series: Brookgreen Gardens*, and *Brookgreen Gardens Sculpture: Volume II*.

As she notes, “Brookgreen Gardens is the oldest public sculpture garden in America, established in 1931 by Archer Milton Huntington and his wife, the renowned sculptor, Anna Hyatt Huntington. Its collection of more than 1,200 works of American figurative sculpture, many displayed in landscaped gardens within its 9000-acre property, is known throughout America as one of the finest and most comprehensive of its kind. Included in the collection are such prominent American artists as Daniel Chester French, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Paul Manship, Gaston Lachaise, and Anna Hyatt Huntington.”

Image: *Heron, Grouse, and Loon* by Elliot Offner, installed at Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina

Elliot Melville Offner:

Artist, Sculptor, Printmaker, Typographer, Teacher, Father

By Daniel Offner

American artist Elliot Melville Offner (1931-2010) was a first generation American who welded together his eastern European Jewish immigrant roots, a classical artistic education at Yale and the most fundamental elements of American naturalism and folk art, to create a new form of American sculpture. During his prolific five-decade creative career, he captured epic themes from the Holocaust and Auschwitz, to ecumenical and liturgical characters, to finally embodying sculptures of American wildlife with the poetry and complexity of flight and motion, while paying homage to his American and European artistic heritage.

His early training included Cooper Union, which he entered with the goal of becoming an architect. In 1952, while at Cooper Union, he and his mother went for an informational interview at Yale Art School with the Dean, Josef Albers. Offner unpacked his paintings from the family station wagon on Chapel Street in New Haven and showed them to Albers before coming inside for his interview. Albers accepted him on the spot.

After Yale (BFA 1953) Offner served in the Army during the Korean War, and became a designer at Steuben Glass. While at Steuben he met Rosemary O'Connell, whom he subsequently wed and had three children with: Helen, Dan and Emily. Rosemary would be his life partner in all things, and helped him make perhaps one of his most important and profound decisions in those early years, when she convinced him to follow his passion to become a fine artist full-time. He called Albers for a recommendation and an application to Yale, who again admitted him on the spot over the phone. In the fall of 1957, with a wife and daughter soon to be born in New Haven, Offner returned to Yale for his MFA with the goal of becoming a sculptor and teacher.

Offner graduated from Yale with his MFA in 1959 committed to becoming a fine artist and a teacher, but with no job and a wife and baby daughter to support. At Yale, Albers, a founder of the Bauhaus, had reshaped and refocused Offner's career from that of a painter to that of sculptor, printmaker and typographer. This was ironic in that Albers was one of the foremost color theorists of all time, and one of the significant major painters of his generation to have survived Nazi Germany and to make a new life in the United States. Luckily, shortly after graduation Offner found a teaching position at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He soon joined the Smith College faculty in 1960 in the next town over, Northampton, because while they offered him less pay, he would have more time to pursue his sculpture.

He and Rosemary moved with their baby, Helen, to Northampton, where their family grew by two more children, Dan and Emily, and he pursued his dream of becoming a fine artist and teacher, while also serving as printer to the college and Chairman of the Smith Art Department (much to his chagrin) several times over. He retired from Smith in 2008, and continued to sculpt until he lost his battle with cancer two years later in 2010.



Angel Aaxilla—Yale Thesis Project

Hammered brass, 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 inches, 1959



Holocaust Memorial Head

Bronze and Steel 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, 1979

Still in his 40s, Offner entered the pantheon of great American sculptors in creating the Holocaust Memorial at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. After his Holocaust period—his “angry period” as his brother Arnold called it—Offner focused on themes of redemption with a series of liturgical sculptures in wood, bronze, and marble, while exploring abstract forms in bronze and on paper.

In the late 1970s, Offner’s fascination with form led him to increasingly study the forms and motions of wildlife, as well as works by Brancusi and other great sculptors who had captured motion in the static form—one of the great conundrums, contradictions and challenges of sculpture. In 1979, he gave a talk at his son’s prep school, Deerfield Academy, where he laid out how he saw the past and the present of American sculpture and art in light of the traditions of European sculpture, as well as with respect to American sculpture to date, American folk art, abstract expressionism and the Hudson River Valley School, which had influenced him greatly by the virtue of living in Northampton.

When asked at the time by one student whether any American artist had fused these traditions together in painting or sculpture, Offner replied that he would have to think about the question and his answer before responding. Only in retrospect does it all seem clear that Offner, in his 1979 speech at Deerfield, had laid out what his understanding of the past was with respect to European and American art, and what his vision was for the future of American sculpture that would fuse these disparate traditions and elements together. His lyrical and poetic sculptures and watercolors of native American animals would be his eloquent and lasting answer to the student's question in the fall of 1979.

It was clear then to those who were listening that Offner's work going forward in the 1980s would be of birds and fish captured in a unique and distinctively American manner, while still grounded in the classical European roots and training which Albers had given him. Accordingly, today Offner's works can be found in many public and private collections, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Springfield's Museum of Fine Arts and Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina.

Friend and fellow Smith College art professor John Davis summarized Offner's art, and the artist himself, in saying, "Elliot captured the abstract beauty of movement in the natural world, always with a warmth and richness of surface that reminded viewers of the transformative power of the artist's hand."



Lion of Judah

Wood, 20 x 38 x 10 ³/₄ inches, 1979



Heron with Wings Outstretched

Bronze, 19 1/2 x 13 x 14 1/2 inches, 1993



Minneapolis Heron

Bronze, 19 3/4 x 15 1/2 x 11 inches, 1991



Dancing Crane

Bronze, 26 1/2 x 19 x 21 1/2 inches, 1999



Smaller Leaning Heron

Bronze, 16 1/2 x 17 x 10 inches, 1998



Brooklyn Bishop

Bronze, 10 x 7 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches



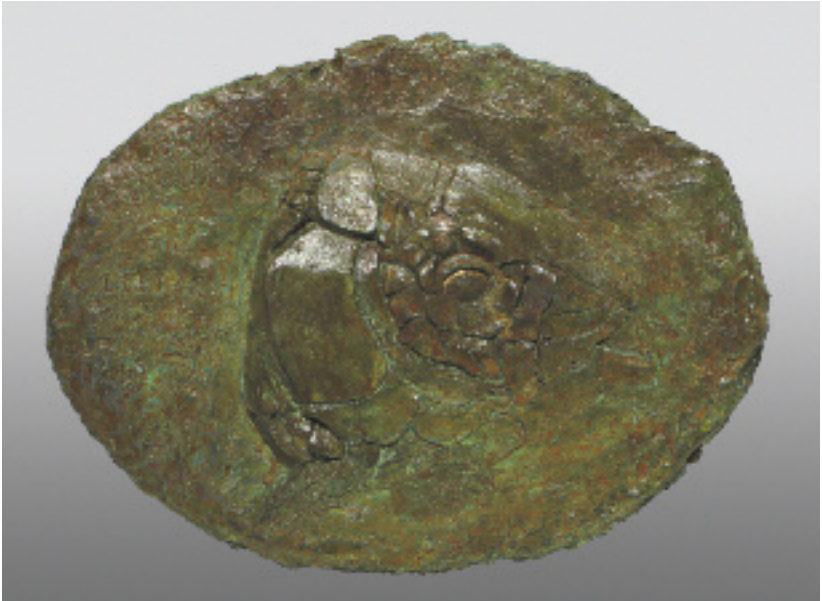
Bishop Bust

Bronze, 8 1/2 x 8 1/4 x 4 3/4 inches, circa 1982



Rico Lebrun

Bronze, 9 x 11 x 8 inches, 1966



Lepidotus Elvensis

Bronze, 11 x 14 1/2 x 1 inches, 1971

Curriculum Vitae (Selected)

Born: Brooklyn, New York, 1931

Education: Cooper Union; Yale University, New Haven, CT, B.F.A. 1953, M.F.A. 1959

Teacher: 1974-2004 Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities, Smith College, Northampton, MA; 1960 Professor of Art, Smith College; 1959 Professor of Art, Univ. of Mass., Amherst, MA

Artist-in-Residence: Girton and Wolfson Colleges, Cambridge Univ., UK; Boston Univ., Boston, MA; Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; Kenan Master Sculptor, Brookgreen Gardens, Murrells Inlet, SC; Royal College of Art, UK; Yale Univ.

Honors & Awards: 2007 Medal of Honor, National Sculpture Society (first such award since 1997); 2007 Dedication of Elliot and Rosemary Offner Sculpture Learning & Research Center, Brookgreen Gardens; 2006 Forbes Library, Trustees Award, Northampton, MA; 2006 Bronze Medal, National Sculpture Soc. Annual; 2005 Gold Medal, National Sculpture Soc. Annual; 2005 Named one of four Kenan Master Sculptors (with Bruno Lucchesi, Sergey Eylanbekov, and Sandy Scott) and group exhibition, Brookgreen Gardens; 2004 Honorary Doctorate, Converse College, Spartanburg, SC; 2003 Named Master Wildlife Artist and given International Master Wildlife Sculptor Medal and Exhibition, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, WI; 2003 Designer of the Brookgreen Medal, Brookgreen Gardens; 2002 Woodson Art Museum Purchase Prize; 2001 Elected Life Fellow, Clare Hall, Cambridge Univ., UK; 2000 Harry Watrous Prize and Gold Medal, National Academy of Design, New York, NY; 2000 Ruth Nickerson Outstanding Sculpture Prize, National Sculpture Soc. Annual; 2000-09 Trustee, Brookgreen Gardens; 2000-02 and 2006-07 President, National Sculpture Soc.; 1999 Visiting Fellow, Trinity College, Cambridge Univ.; 1997-99 Vice President, National Sculpture Soc.; 1997 Tallix Casting Prize; 1996 Ellin T. Speyer Prize, National Academy of Design; 1992 Gold Medal, National Sculpture Soc.; 1983, 1991, 1997 Harnish Fellowship; 1971 Ingram Merrill Foundation; 1969 American Philosophical Society; 1970 Ford Foundation; 1966-67 National Council on the Arts and Humanities; 1965 National Institute of Arts and Letters; 1964-65 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award

Collections: (in alphabetical order) Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH; American Numismatic Society, New York, NY; Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, ME; Bodleian Library, Oxford University, England; Boston Public Library, Boston, MA; British Museum, London, England; Brookgreen Gardens; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA; Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York, NY; deCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA; Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Huntington Library, San Marino, CA; Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY; Milwaukee Museum of Art, Milwaukee, WI; Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA; National Sculpture Society; Smith College Museum of Art; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England; Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA

Solo Exhibitions: 2007 “Celebrating Elliot Offner: Air, Land and Sea,” Vose Galleries, Boston, MA; 2004 Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum; 2003 Smith College Museum of Art; 2002 Forbes Library, Northampton, MA; 2001 Kantar Fine Arts, Newton, MA; 1999, 1993, 1984, 1979, 1972, 1969, 1967, 1964 Forum Gallery, New York, NY; 1999 WM Baczek Fine Arts, Northampton, MA; 1997 National Wildlife Federation Gallery of Art, Vienna, VA; 1987 Franz Bader Gallery, Washington, DC; 1984 Darien Public Library, Darien, CT; 1984 Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield; 1980 Jorgenson Gallery, Univ. of Connecticut; 1978 Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA; 1977 Smith College Museum of Art; 1976 Temple Beth El, West Hartford, CT; 1976 Slater Museum, Norwich, CT; 1975 Nasrudin Gallery, Boston, MA; 1974 deCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA; 1969 Greenwich Library Art Gallery, Greenwich, CT; 1968 IFA Galleries, Washington, DC; 1968 Wells College, Aurora, NY; 1965 Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, MA

Group Exhibitions: 2006 “Annual Professional Sculptors’ & Photographers’ Exhibition,” The Century Association, NY; 2005 “Four Masters: Selected Works from 2005 Kenan Master Sculptors,” Brookgreen Gardens; 2005 “Salon d’Arts: Invitational Fine Art Exhibition & Sale,” Colorado History Museum, Denver, CO; 2004 “Realism Now: Traditions & Departures, Mentors & Proteges,” Vose Galleries, Boston, MA; 1999 “Idea/Form: Looking At The Creative Process,” Smith College Museum of Art; 1988-98 “Annual Sculpture Exhibition,” National Sculpture Soc.; 1994 National Academy of Design 169th Annual Exhibition

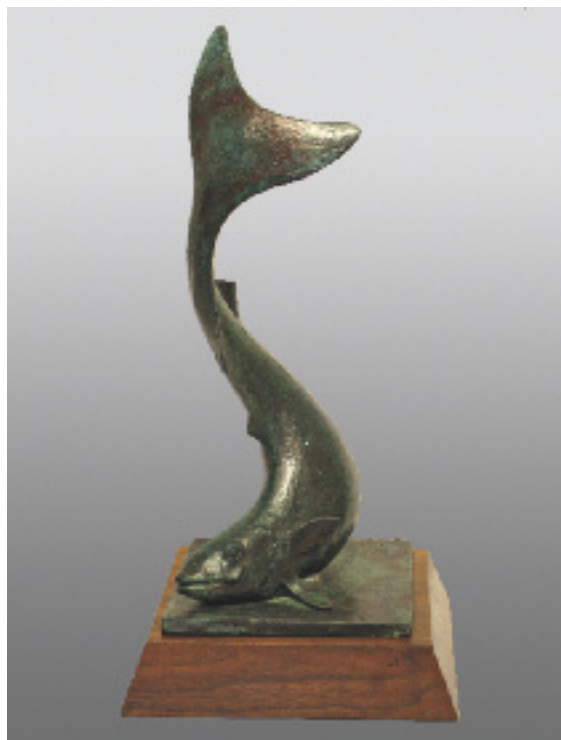
Public Works and Commissions: 2003-05 Project Director, ten eight-foot high sculptures of outstanding & historic American women, all by leading American sculptors, Campus of Converse College, Spartanburg, SC (first sculpture, *Maria Mitchell*, by Elliot Offner); 2003 *Striped Bass and Alligator*, 2003 Brookgreen Medal, Brookgreen Gardens; 2002-04 *Strand Fire Memorial*, Brockton, MA; 2001 *Heron, Grouse and Loon*, Huntington Sculpture Gardens, Brookgreen Gardens; 1996 *Memorial Horse* (memorial for Christy Johnson), Smith College; 1992 *Loon, Great Blue Heron and Grouse*, Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis, MN; 1991 *Bates College Memorial Dog* (memorial for Danny Goldstein), Bates College; 1990 *Child With Dog*, Children’s Inn, National Institute of Health, Bethesda, MD; 1989 *Monument to the Letter Carriers of America*, National Association of Letter Carriers, Milwaukee, WI; 1988 *Memorial Cross*, Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC; 1987 *Great Blue Heron*, Smith College; 1987 *Great Blue Heron*, Darien Public Library, Darien, CT; 1984 *Cockrell*, Springfield, MA; 1981 *Karl Lehmann Memorial Plaque*, Archaeological Museum, Samothrace, Greece; 1980 *Pheasant*, Deerfield Academy, Deerfield, MA; 1978 *Holocaust Memorial Figure*, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, NY; 1978-86 *Fifteen High Relief Sculptures*, Veda Corporation, Arlington, VA; 1977 *St. Francis of Assisi*, St. Charles Seminary, Overbrook, PA; 1962 *Ten Commandments*, Congregation B’nai Israel, Northampton, MA

We are pleased to announce the launch of www.elliottoffner.com, the comprehensive website devoted to the life and work of Elliot Melville Offner.



Salmon

Bronze, 16 1/4 x 10 1/2 x 16 inches, 1994



Spiraling Fish

Bronze, 17 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 8 3/4 inches, 1996



Whale I

Bronze, 30 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches, 1998

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Front cover: Elliot and Rosemary Offner at Brookgreen Gardens, South Carolina

Above: Elliot Offner, *Rising Crane*, bronze, 26 x 32 x 24 inches, 1998