

Module 7-1 Project:

Leonard Baskin's *The Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children*

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5-Foot-Tall Woodcut Brings Onlookers Face-to-Face with the Holocaust

Towering over museum visitors with vacant eyes and a harrowing grin, *The Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children* is a massive woodcut that stands 65 inches tall by 35.5 inches wide, and resides at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine (Leonard Baskin Monumental Woodcuts, n.d.). According to a plaque on the wall at the Farnsworth, the work was completed by artist Leonard Baskin in 1998. Baskin combined just three colors to form a ghoulish depiction of a man-turned-monster: the yellow backdrop catches the unsuspecting visitor's eye; the body of a man is formed by black, vein-like strings, his mouth spread into a grin and his naked body exposed; above him an inscription written in Hebrew stands out in red, harsh in contrast to the rest of the print (Weiss, 2022). This woodcut is part of a Holocaust series called *I Hold the Cracked Mirror Up to Man* (Leonard Baskin: I Hold the Cracked Mirror Up to Man, n.d.). Once quoted as saying it took him "50 years to deal with the Holocaust at all," Baskin was born the son of an orthodox Rabbi in 1922 (Weiss, 2022). His grim depictions of man and the terrible things they are capable of is on full display in this work. Visitors to the museum cannot help but be captivated by the sheer size of this woodcut alone. Once enticed by its immensity, onlookers find themselves all but forced to recall the horrific events of the Holocaust, some specifically considering child survivors and all that they endured.

As viewers take in *The Specially Ordained Slaughter for Children*, questions of the Holocaust and human behavior can be considered. How did child survivors of the Holocaust process what happened to them as they aged? What were the common underlying psychological themes and characteristics shared between those who carried out the atrocities of the Holocaust? How do people impacted by events other than the Holocaust interpret this work? The answers will likely lead to a deeper understanding of the Holocaust and other events fueled by racism.

To identify the answers to these questions, one could start by learning more about child survivors of the Holocaust. Beth B. Cohen wrote a book in 2018 that recounts the stories of child survivors through stories told directly by the survivors themselves, titled *Child Survivors of the Holocaust: The Youngest Remnant and the American Experience*. From there one could learn more about the history of the Holocaust and those who orchestrated it in Marin Gitlin's 2011 book *The Holocaust*, diving into the psychological component in Peter Suedfeld's 2000 journal titled *Reverberations of the Holocaust fifty years later: Psychology's contributions to understanding persecution and genocide*. Reviews of Baskin's art, specifically the *Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children* print and his *I Hold the Cracked Mirror Up to Man* gallery, will provide insight on how others compare Baskin's work to more recent events.

Human Expression and Baskin's Influence

When viewing any work, observers may question the event that inspired the artist. In Baskin's case with *The Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children*, his inspiration was the Holocaust. Beyond that, Baskin was specifically interested in expressing himself through male human figures, with art historian Irma Jaffee naming his main themes: mortality, grief, suffering, and homage (Jewish Museum, n.d.). The idea of expressing emotions through art is something Baskin formally began teaching in 1953 at Smith College (Brandeis University, n.d.). As a result of his teaching, many artists would later credit Baskin with influencing their woodcuts (Hecht, n.d.) (Klann, 2016). The artform was eventually streamlined after becoming popular as early as the 5th century, leading to a decline in woodcutting by the early 19th century (Britannica, 2021). Baskin is credited with bringing woodcutting back as a method of expression in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Britannica, 2021). It can be concluded that his work led to a cultural shift, with people such as Anthony Hecht reflecting that "it would be difficult to overstate [Baskin's]

singular greatness and widespread influence” (Hecht, n.d.). This resurgence is especially important as it makes art accessible to anyone. Woodcuts the size of *The Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children* are costly in time and labor, but Baskin himself often used recycled paper, old doors, other wood he found discarded, and just 1 to 3 colors to create his prints (Klann, 2016) (Weiss, 2022). The availability of resources to make woodcuts will continue to empower artists to use the medium to express themselves for years to come.

But why exactly do humans express themselves through works of cultural and historical significance? One point of view is that it provides a space in time for humans to concentrate on what they’re feeling, affording them the opportunity to focus on – and ultimately process – the emotions they experience. Expressing emotions through art can lead to works that are both culturally and historically significant, especially as they relate to cultural and historical events that impact many people within the same culture or subculture, like Baskin.

The Impact of the Holocaust on Baskin, and Baskin’s Impact on Jewish Culture

The Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children depicts arguably one of the most gruesome acts in human history (Weiss, 2022). “The woodcuts make but a faint stab at the appalling actuality of the Holocaust, but they have granted me a gesture to somehow deal with the crashing reality of the Holocaust,” Baskin said of his art (Weiss, 2022). As Baskin worked through the events of the Holocaust by creating *The Specially Ordained Slaughter for Children*, he also partnered with the Ann Arbor Holocaust Memorial Foundation in 1994 to complete a bronze sculpture that resides at the First Jewish Cemetery in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Holocaust Memorial, n.d.). This statue leaves an impact on Jewish culture, evidenced by the June 22, 2000, edition of the *Jewish Advocate*, in which Melody Wilensky writes that Baskin’s sculpture, “is a resolute expression of pain and misery, yet contains a gesture of hope.” When considering that

Baskin's art is curated in galleries such as *I Hold the Cracked Mirror Up to Man*, and his sculptures are on display at places like the First Jewish Cemetery, one could argue that Baskin's impact on Jewish culture is profound. That impact was solidified in 1994, when he won the Jewish Cultural Achievement Award from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (Leonard Baskin, n.d.). Baskin's work continues to be viewed well past his passing, provoking thought around the world as onlookers interpret its meaning.

How the Creative Expression of Baskin and Others Impact Today's Issues

The themes found in *The Specially Ordained Slaughter for Children* permeate human history; from the genocide of Jewish people between 1941 and 1945 (Gitlin, 2011), to the school shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas that claimed 21 lives (Day, 2022). If Irma Jaffee's interpretation of Baskin's themes being mortality, grief, suffering, and homage is to be believed, the subjects of his various works, including *The Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children*, will remain timeless. One can argue that all human creative expression is timeless, and all works of art can be applied to a vast array of issues. Consider *The Specially Ordained Slaughterer for Children*; some may clearly see the perpetrator of evil acts against the children of the Holocaust in Baskin's work, others may see someone who has abused their own child, they may even see George Michel Zimmerman, the person who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (CNN, 2022). This idea is generated by the concept that the cultures and subcultures people identify with help them build a lens in which they view the world, or in this case in which they view a work of art. This is a concept one may learn when taking a course such as Perspectives in the Humanities, something that will hopefully lead the student to gain new perspectives, forming commonalities with other cultures and subcultures through shared experiences.

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