ForeWord Reviews

The Woodcut Art of J.J. Lankes
Welford Dunaway Taylor
David R. Godine
978-1-56792-049-9
(May 1999)

One should not judge a book by its cover, but this handsomely bound volume deserves to be admired for itself. Its dark cloth cover with a single woodcut affixed, its letter type styles for chapter headings with extra decorative curlicues, the creamy vellum paper and the striking woodcut illustrations, all evoke an earlier era when expert craftsmanship exerted on a useful object was more esteemed. It successfully exemplifies the artistic vision of the subject of the book, American artist J.J. Lankes (1884-1958).

Taylor describes the artist as a man who strove for simplicity and honesty in his woodcut designs, and someone who felt a kinship to craftsmen who applied the same individuality and care to their products. He tells of Lankes' collaboration with Marvin Neel, a postmaster, farmer and sometimes printer in Virginia. Neel published small editions of folktales he gathered from old-timers in his rural region that he printed on an ancient foot-powered press. Together they published Weather Sayings in 1951. Neel supplied the text of collected back-woods weather lore, and Lankes created fourteen landscape woodcuts which capture the sound of wind, stillness of a starry night, splendor of an August sunset, steely sting of an icy morning or soft April rain. Taylor calls this one of Lankes? signal accomplishments.

More stories abound in Taylor's biography, as he tells of Lankes' associations with Robert Frost, Sherwood Anderson and other authors whose books he illustrated. He includes information on the art and history of woodcutting and how it became Lankes' passion. He explains that the artist came to understand the image he carved into the wood as "the white line," as opposed to the black line one would imagine. The reader can scrutinize the extensive portfolio of illustrations and marvel at this technique.

Taylor is an author and editor of books on American literature and thus became interested in Lankes and his distinctive illustrations. Dubbed an “American original,” Lankes successfully taught himself the art of woodcutting. He revived an art form that began in the fifteenth century and created 1,300 works in this medium over a period of forty years. Taylor believes his unique talent and the significance of his contribution to American art has gone unrecognized. The reader will meet a prickly, stubborn, industrious, creative individualist of a bygone era, while exploring the evidence Taylor has gathered to support his thesis.

Joyce Moore