

SGCI 2015 History / Sphere

Good Evening, Dear Hearts! I am Boyd Saunders, one of the founders of The Southern Graphics Council International.

Once upon a long time ago I had the good fortune to be friends with a wonderful artist named Fritz Eichenberg.

Fritz was a wood engraver and illustrator whose wood engraving illustrations became the definitive visualizations of such classic literary works as *War and Peace*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, and others.

He was considerably older than I was, also wiser and much more talented. I greatly respected his work and found that it had a strong influence on the direction my own art journey was to follow.

In his hands an engraver's burin and a block of polished, end-grain maple wood took on truly magical powers.

As this visitor from afar sat before my print class at the University of South Carolina with a blackened block of wood in one hand and an engraver's burin in the other he said, "When I see that darkened block I say to myself 'Within that darkness there is light. I will let the light out'".

He then took the engraver's burin, deftly flicked the darkened surface with it, and behold, a tiny spot of light appeared.

Then another and another and soon an image made of many little points of light took shape.

I was overwhelmed by the poetry and power of that moment.

That statement has been with me ever since, and I have returned to it many times. “Within the darkness there is light. I will let the light out.”

We printmakers are part of a long and noble tradition of artists who spent their lives manipulating matrix, paper and ink to “Let the light out”, and in so doing, perhaps change the world around them.

It has not always been easy, and the light we let out has not always been well received.

Our message has often been an advocate of justice and human worth and has often challenged the rich and powerful and the forces of evil alike, sometimes with painful results.

We have all been appalled by the recent carnage in France and Denmark which seems to have been precipitated by political cartoons.

These events followed close on the heels of the uproar over a movie which tweaked some Korean sensibilities.

Strangely, I took a certain morbid satisfaction in these events.

As an artist, I have spent my career being reminded in a hundred different ways, that what I do and what I have to offer is unimportant and inconsequential.

These current events served to remind us that the printed picture still

has its long-standing power to inspire greatness and to drive the mighty and the lunatic alike into a spittle-spewing frenzy of fear and loathing, and sometimes mass murder.

One is reminded of the great nineteenth century political cartoonist Thomas Nast's destruction of New York's Boss Tweed, and Tweed's classic comment that "I don't give a fig what they write about me, most of my constituents can't read anyhow, but they can't help seeing them damn pictures".

With the ending of World War II, the attempt of the world to return to normal, and the advent of the G.I. Bill, many American colleges and universities expanded rapidly and increased the size of their art offerings.

Many began offering courses in printmaking, which had seldom existed before, except in certain art academies.

These print studios were directed by a new generation of artist-printmakers, most of whom traced their artistic ancestry back to a small cadre of senior printmakers such as Mauricio Lasansky, Gabor Peterdi, Stanley William Hayter or a few other masters of similar exalted vintage.

Many of these new artist - printmakers wound up teaching at institutions of higher learning in the American South which did not have a long and glorious history of commitment to the visual arts in general or printmaking in particular.

These adventurers shared a common pioneer spirit and a missionary zeal to break through the darkness and let the light out.

However, they often found themselves cast as strangers in a strange land.

They were usually the only printmaker in the department, or school, or town, or anywhere around, for that matter.

Traditional academic professors and deans saw them as outsiders, and so did the local townspeople.

They also shared the common experience of shoestring budgets, makeshift equipment, and lack of emotional or professional support.

There was no local market for their editions and the closest thing to a supply source was usually the local frame store.

1972 was a very good year!...

- Richard Nixon was president,
- Elvis Presley was King,
- American astronauts were in space,
- The Godfather was at the movies,
- Easy-Bake ovens were in the kitchens,

- and Beauvais Lyons was 14 years old, and probably already convincing other people to do things they had never even considered.

In that same year I sent letters to every printmaker in the South that I knew of and asked them to meet me in New Orleans at the upcoming SouthEastern College Art Conference (also known as SECAC) to try to form some sort of a professional organization of

Southern printmakers.

Most of you have, in the past, heard me tell the story of that fateful event;

How the SECAC conference was an administrative disaster and quickly descended into utter chaos;

How a handful of us printmakers abandoned the fleshpots of Bourbon Street long enough to meet up in my room at the old St. Charles Hotel and, guided by a bottle of Jack Daniels' finest ardent spirits, agreed to form a printmakers' support organization.

In this case, the light that was let out came, not from a wood block, but from the blinking red neon sign outside the window.

You have probably heard me tell how I returned to South Carolina and filed the necessary papers to get us chartered the following year as THE SOUTHEASTERN GRAPHICS COUNCIL.

We chose the word "GRAPHICS" to reflect the fact that we were open to anyone who worked in the larger field of graphics, such as prints, drawings, design, illustration, etc.

We worked hard to hold down the cost of membership and make sure that the members got more than just a membership card and dues notices for their trouble.

We organized traveling print shows of our members' work.

We arranged international exchanges.

We lobbied for protective legislation.

We published a newsletter which, in time, became a very excellent journal entitled "GRAPHIC IMPRESSIONS".

Under the guidance of Tom Dewey, our organization's historian, we established an archive which was housed for many years at the University of Mississippi, but has now found a new home at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia.

We did many worthwhile things, but perhaps the most important of all was the establishment of an annual conference where we could come together, exchange ideas, and spend quality time in each other's company.

Our first such conference was hosted by the unforgettable Bernie Solomon at his home institution of Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia.

It lasted all day, and all presenters were members of the organization.

We soon became like a family and got to know and love each other.

After a few years we were approached by printmakers from states west of the Mississippi River and were asked to expand our territory out their way.

After some discussion, we agreed to accept their offer, and so we expanded westward and changed our name to THE SOUTHERN GRAPHICS COUNCIL.

It was a good move, and we were soon joined by many new and talented friends from the Southwest, who brought high energy and fresh ideas to the organization.

Over the years a veritable host of wonderful and talented friends have come into the Southern Graphics Council and made our family their family.

As we have have laughed together, and worked together, a small, regional support group has become an international organization with over 2,500 family members from the four corners of this sphere called earth.

We are now officially named SGC International.

It is an impressive success story by any standards. However, for me the most important part is the human dimension.

Through this group of friends, I have had the good fortune to know and work with some of the finest and dearest people I have ever known, and my life has been greatly enriched by them.

Many have found special and unique ways to pierce the darkness and let the light out.

Who among us old timers can ever forget Linwood Krenek's hilarious slide illustrated spoofs on such illuminating and uplifting topics as "The International Printmaking Hall of Fame in Pocatello, Idaho", or "The Care and Feeding of an MFA Student" or, my personal favorite, "Teaching a Printmaker How to Paint"?

I will never forget President April Katz asking everyone at our final banquet one year to write messages of love and support on dinner napkins which she collected and sent to dear Ken Kerslake who was terminally ill with cancer.

That gesture moved me to tears and meant more to Ken than anyone else will ever know.

In 2012 our annual conference site was returned to New Orleans to celebrate our 40th anniversary.

New Orleans was where we had begun all those years ago, and it seemed fitting to celebrate this landmark event back there at our birthplace.

Beauvais Lyons thought it would be appropriate to recreate that first meeting in that hotel room by organizing a series of INKubator Sessions in similar hotel rooms to discuss where we are and where we might be going.

These events were well attended and the discourse recorded for our archives.

In the spirit of true authenticity, Beauvais, silver-tongued devil that he is, even persuaded the Jack Daniels Distillery to provide some of their fine whiskey to refresh and lubricate these events.

The discussions, dear hearts, were indeed quite lively.

That INKubator Session tradition has been a standard part of each conference since then.

The final event of that 2012 conference was a grand Birthday Party with an enormous birthday cake topped by 40 blazing candles which let the light out in spectacular fashion.

And a grand time was had by all; but no one there celebrated any more joyfully than Roger Steele, one of our original members and a constant stalwart in SGCI.

Sadly and ironically, a few months later, he suffered a major heart attack and passed from among us.

He is deeply missed.

I am sure that none of us who met in that hotel room 42 years ago had any idea what lay ahead.

It has been a grand and glorious adventure.

One can only imagine what the next decades will bring.

Thank you, Dear hearts, for being here and allowing me to share these moments with you.

Good night and God Bless!