

Memorial Minute for Elliot Offner

Read by John Davis at the December 8, 2010 Faculty Meeting

Elliot Melville Offner, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities and Printer to the College Emeritus, died on the 15th of October, 2010. He had battled cancer for many years, bringing to that struggle the quiet strength and dignity characteristic of all his endeavors.

The son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Elliot attended PS 181 during the war years. He was a Brooklyn boy who became, in his own words, “a Yale man”—receiving his BFA (in painting) and MFA (in sculpture) in 1953 and 1959. Along the way he also studied for several years at Cooper Union, served in the U.S. Army, and worked as a designer and calligrapher at Steuben Glass.

Elliot’s time at Yale coincided with the teaching of the former Bauhaus professor, Josef Albers, whose principles of color theory, best known through his uncompromisingly abstract series of paintings, *Homage to the Square*, were then attracting notice. The virtues of Elliot’s own work are many—line, tone, surface, movement, chiaroscuro—but they do not often include brightly hued primary colors. Yet it was as an exponent of Albers’s bold color theory that Elliot was hired as a lecturer in design by the University of Massachusetts in 1959. Before a year had passed, President Thomas Mendenhall, another Yale man, wrote a courtly letter to his counterpart at the university, giving him fair warning that Smith was about to steal away the young artist. Elliot joined the Smith faculty as an Instructor in 1960.

Elliot’s talents and passions spanned more media than are commonly found in an entire faculty of art. As a sculptor, his direct carving in wood and his mastery of the bronze casting process unlocked the formal potential of these media. He 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. Three of his bronze sculptures grace the outdoor campus of Smith College, including the most recent addition, his *Bittern Mother and Child*, installed just months ago outside the window of this room. His *Great Blue Heron*, completed for the Darien Public Library in 1987, with a cast installed at Smith shortly thereafter, has become a virtual symbol of the college, with its exhilarating unfolding of wings and elastic curve of neck—lithe and filled with potential.

Elliot had an unsurpassed facility for relief carving, as exemplified by his plaques outside the Jacobson Center and Weinstein Auditorium. He was devoted to the numismatic arts, and his medals always benefited from his life-long devotion to the expressive possibilities of the finely crafted letterform. Here, too, Elliot’s touch is pervasive at Smith, from the Presidential Medal worn by the College’s leader on ceremonial occasions to the Charis Medals that grace the necks of our senior colleagues. Each letter carved by his chisel or issuing from his pen was a work of art. He passed on his love of calligraphy to his many students, and among his friends, Elliot’s correspondence was always saved and treasured for its sheer virtuosic beauty.

Beyond the hand-wrought letter, Elliot, who was named Printer to the College in 1975, was a formidable champion of the book arts at Smith. The position of Printer to the College, unusual in any institution, was created by President Mendenhall in emulation of the similar “Printer to the

University” title at Yale. In that pre-green era before the appreciation of fine paper had become a guilty pleasure, Elliot designed hundreds of hand-set, superbly produced sheets of presidential letterhead, envelopes, invitations, and broadsides.

In his beloved and challenging course, *An Introduction to Printing*, Elliot ushered students into this centuries-old tradition of page design, typesetting, illustration, and letterpress printing. Students in his all-consuming class produced limited edition books of astonishing scope and craft. The fruits of this course were one of the most eagerly awaited end-of-the-semester aesthetic treats in the Art Department, and a complete collection of this work now resides in Smith’s Mortimer Rare Book Room.

As a printmaker, Elliot specialized in woodcut, the most sculptural and elemental of graphic processes. He reveled in the expressive simplicity of black and white, line and space, matte ink and richly textured paper. His prints of the “Mendenhall Porcupine, “ the landscape of Hampstead Heath, the Camperdown Elm of the Smith Botanic Garden, or a simple sprig of rosemary—a tribute to his wife Rosemary ‘53, partner in all of his undertakings—were prized by those who collected his work, or who were the beneficiaries of his generous tokens of friendship, always magnificently inscribed and signed.

Elliot’s works are in a number of public collections. He received over a dozen major sculptural commissions, and in 2000 he was elected President of the National Sculpture Society, a storied and prestigious organization founded in 1893 by, among others, Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French.

But most of all, Elliot was devoted to the mission of Smith College, and nothing made him prouder than to describe himself as a servant of the institution where he made his life for 50 years. His gifts to that institution, its students, and its faculty are broad and deep. Within the Art Department, Elliot instilled in his younger colleagues his love for Smith College and schooled us in its history and traditions. We mourn the loss of such a remarkable colleague and friend.

John Davis