

Paul Landacre's artistic journey

A comprehensive survey sheds new light on one of America's most celebrated wood engravers

Jake Milgram Wien, an independent curator and historian, has devoted a considerable part of his career to researching the life and work of Paul Hambleton Landacre (1893-1963). Wien's *Paul Landacre: California Hills and Beyond. A Catalogue Raisonné of the Prints, Drawings and Paintings*, has recently been submitted for publication in the United States. It includes more than 700 illustrations, many never previously published, and extensive notes. Wien answered questions from *Block & Burin* about the project.

How did you come to undertake the production of the catalogue raisonné, and what challenges have you encountered in assembling these materials?

My years of studying history and law at Stanford, UCLA, and UC Berkeley deepened my passion for the visual culture and dramatic beauty of the West. Paul Landacre came to my attention in 1983, when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art organized a retrospective of his work and Dawson's Book Shop published Anthony Lehman's biography of the artist. Aware that a catalogue raisonné of Landacre's life work would make a meaningful contribution to the field of American studies, I undertook the project, at first in collaboration with a print specialist in Santa Barbara, and for the past twenty years, independently. Compiling the 350 catalogue entries is now completed.

Although the inspired and technically masterful oeuvre Landacre produced clearly merited a definitive catalogue raisonné—Kevin Starr, dean of historians of California, called the artist a “genius”—my dedication to its completion and publication ramped up when I came to realize that Landacre had been the most decorated American printmaker of his day. Thirty of his wood engravings won competitive awards in national, regional, and local exhibitions—and many more were published as decorations and illustrations for four books selected by the American Institute of Graphic Arts as among the *50 Books of the Year*, including *California Hills and Other Wood Engravings by Paul Landacre*. In 1947 the Smithsonian accorded Landacre the rare midcareer honor of a retrospective exhibition of his wood engravings, curated by painter and printmaker Jacob Kainen.

The author of a catalogue raisonné must meet the challenge of finding and accurately dating an example of each work the artist produced. Landacre's much younger half-brother, Joe Landacre, who courageously took on the Landacre estate after his brother's untimely death in 1963, made certain to retain at least one impression of each print. Consequently, many unique impressions from the more experimental years of Landacre's career survive, and it is these early works that clarify the artist's ambition and strengths. Because no impressions from five large linoleum blocks and one wood block were located, Bruce Whiteman, Head Librarian of the



Figure 1. *Cloud Stream*, linoleum cut, c. 1929. Posthumously printed by Richard Wagener in 2009

William Andrews Clark Memorial Library (the repository of most of Landacre's linoleum and wood blocks and correspondence files), agreed to arrange for their posthumous printing. In 2009 California wood engraver Richard Wagener expertly pulled impressions from the blocks so that

their images (albeit with uncorrected surface blemishes) could be included in the catalogue raisonné. (Fig. 1)

The broad outlines of Landacre's career are well known. What have you discovered in your

research that adds to our understanding of his life and work?

Research and interviews revealed that the Landacres nurtured cross-cultural relationships with Japanese American painters and their wives living in Los Angeles. Among them were Tokio and Suye Ueyama and Sueo and Mary Serisawa. Landacre synthesized Asian and Western wood block traditions, which he united with a strong modernist impulse. In his quest to forge a unique style, Landacre championed three qualities as

essential to originality of artistic expression: imagination, simplicity, and design.

Countless fresh insights and revisions to extant records are discussed in catalogue entries by way of notes and sidebars—narratives that enlighten the reader with historical and cultural context. For example, *Amateurs*, which won first prize at the 1939 Los Angeles County Fair, portrays a motley crew of three figures in bold silhouette repairing the leaky roof atop the Landacre bungalow. (Fig. 2) In a sidebar their

identities are revealed—all three were first generation Americans of European Jewish ancestry, and their contributions to the social and economic development of southern California are described.

In one of your articles (“Paul Landacre’s World,” *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, July/August 2016), you describe a group of prominent Hollywood film producers and actors who formed an association to support his work. How important was Hollywood to Landacre’s development as an artist?

In 1928, the Landacres moved into a rustic bungalow on the “Hill” in Edendale, an historic neighborhood now part of Echo Park. Edendale was an early film colony near Hollywood and home to the Keystone Cops and Charlie Chaplin, who built early silent-film reputations in studios on both sides of Glendale Boulevard. Also in the vicinity were the early Walt Disney Studios. Because of their proximity to Hollywood, the Landacres received many movie industry professionals as guests, including Delmer Daves, actors Kay Francis and Lloyd Nolan, animator T. Hee, and cinematographer Karl Struss.

Delmer Daves—actor, screenwriter, producer and director, and Jake Zeitlin—bookseller and gallerist, spearheaded the Paul Landacre Association. Members of the Association committed \$100 annually for one of Landacre’s prints each month and this financial safety net gave Landacre the freedom to withdraw from the government-sponsored Public Works of Art Project.

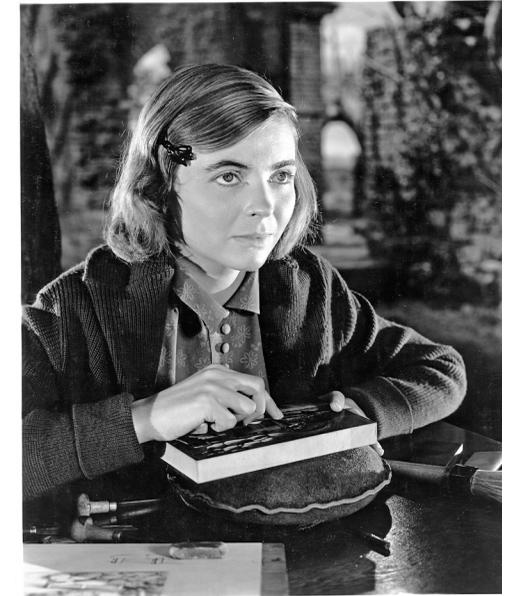


Figure 3. Dorothy McGuire simulating the art of wood engraving in *The Enchanted Cottage*, 1944

During the Association’s existence from 1934 to 1940, Landacre produced the majority of his award-winning prints. Daves was the founding treasurer of the Association, and by 1937, several more Hollywood celebrities, including Frank Borzage, Ruth Chatterton, Kay Francis, Mrs. Samuel Goldwyn, John Halliday, and Karl Struss joined as patrons.

Daves and Landacre enjoyed a 30-year friendship during which time Daves became Landacre’s most fervent patron and devoted collector of his prints. Daves also looked out for the financial welfare of the Landacres. In 1934 he underwrote repair of the roof and remodeling



Figure 2. *Amateurs*, wood engraving, 1937



Figure 4a. Paul Landacre and Margaret McCreery, c. 1924. Previously unpublished snapshot courtesy the Paul Landacre estate

of their newly purchased bungalow, and in 1939 he paid Margaret's monthly insurance premium, probably for the Ford V-8 she had received as a gift from Daves's former love interest, actress Kay Francis.

Wood engraving received its Hollywood close-up when RKO brought Landacre to the set of *The Enchanted Cottage*, a movie released in 1945. He was paid \$685 to teach actress Dorothy McGuire how to simulate the art of wood engraving, her character's pastime. Landacre showed her how to hold a graver and work on a

woodblock he had prepared, inked, and partly engraved. (Fig. 3) Discovered while inventorying the artist's estate were unsigned and undated impressions of a print that had been posthumously and descriptively titled *Farm House*. In actuality, these were impressions pulled from the woodblock Landacre engraved for RKO. The title *The Enchanted Cottage* was later confirmed when the only signed and titled impression of the print was found in the collection of Daves, who likely engineered the technical advisory role to gain Landacre wartime income. The catalogue raisonné devotes a sidebar to Daves, and for an article destined for a journal of cinematic history, I provide evidence of the cinematic influence of Landacre's early western landscapes on Daves's Hollywood westerns, including *Broken Arrow*, *Jubal*, and *3:10 to Yuma*.

Many critics have observed how Landacre's compositions mirrored the modernist aesthetic of his time. Which specific artists and photographers did Landacre turn to for inspiration?

Landacre participated in the rise of California modernism whose artistic vanguard was promoted by such dealers as Jake Zeitlin in Los Angeles and Dene Denny and Hazel Watrous in Carmel. Works by Edward Weston, Landacre, and Henrietta Shore, among others, were shown at Zeitlin's bookshop gallery in the late 1920s and 1930s and were also included in a group show that opened in late 1931 at Denny-Watrous gallery. Landacre's modernist designs converse

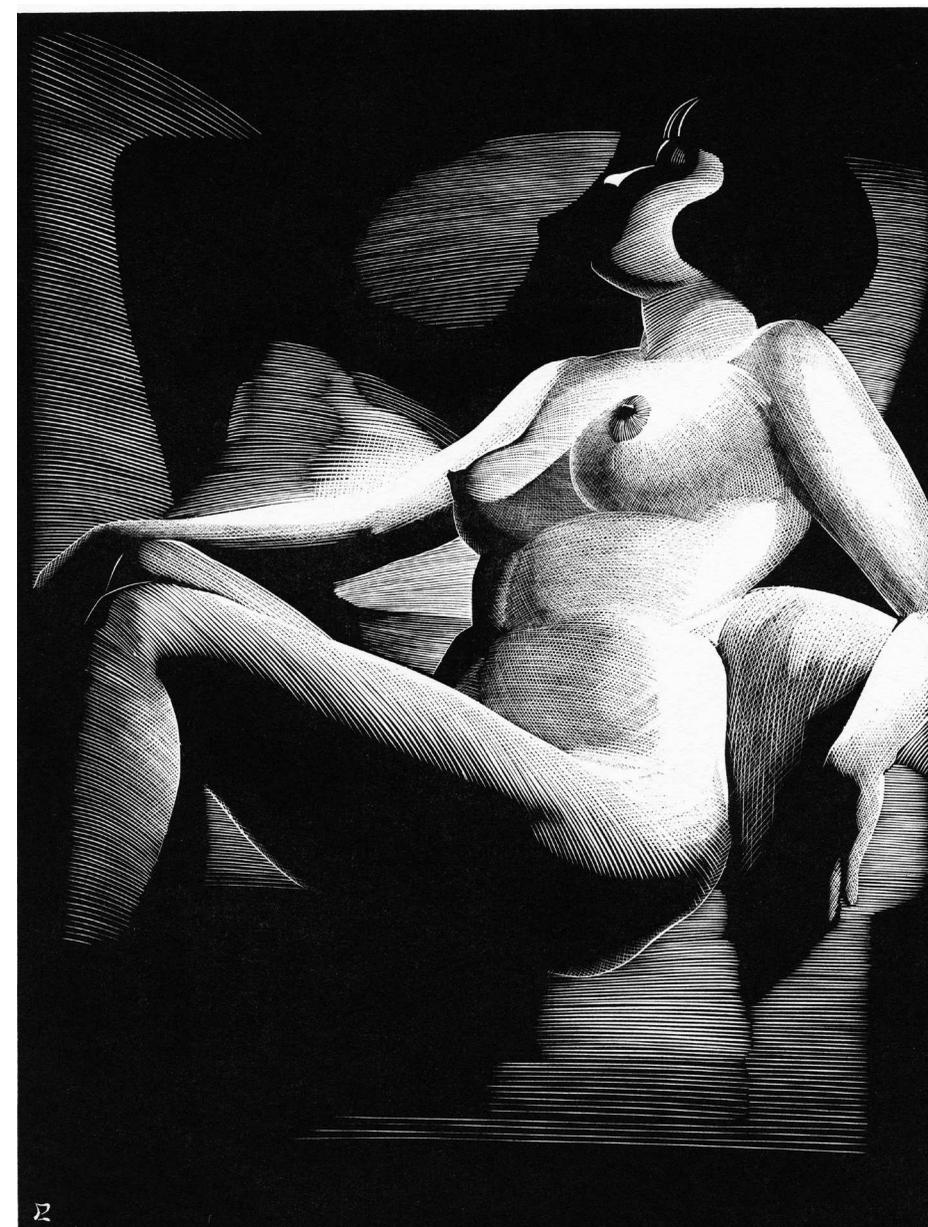


Figure 4b. *Experiment*, wood engraving, c. 1932-33

on occasion with photographs taken by his avant-garde contemporaries, including Edward and Brett Weston and Imogen Cunningham. One critic perceived the influence of Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp in Landacre's design for his wood engraving *The Press* (see page 32), but the more proximate influence may be the photographic work of Edward Weston and Paul Strand. The dual female forms in Landacre's wood engraving *Counterpoint* evoke a multiple-exposure photograph or one where two negatives are overlaid and printed, such as in the photographic work of Charles Sheeler, one of Weston's colleagues.

What have you learned about the role that Landacre's wife, Margaret McCreery, played in his artistic process?

Margaret McCreery played a vital role in her husband's career. Both were Midwestern emigres who met in San Diego, moved to Los Angeles, and married on the beach at the stroke of midnight, July 9, 1925—a moment belonging to each of their birthdays (his 32nd and her 34th). (Fig. 4a) Margaret handled much of Paul's business correspondence and record-keeping, managed their social engagements, cooked, cleaned house, edited and acted as a critic, and boosted Paul's morale. Given Paul's physical challenges following a serious illness he contracted as a sophomore at Ohio State, she drove their car and even helped push the lever of his press when he printed a large block. Late in his life Paul wrote: "Any art coming out of my studio is a dual production, for sure." Margaret also served as muse, modeling in the nude for the

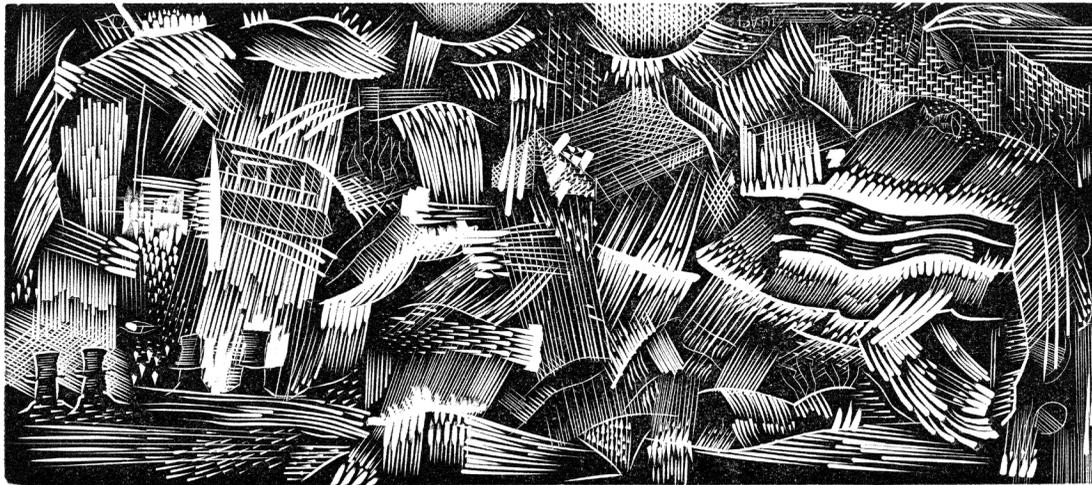


Figure 5. Practice Block IV, wood engraving, c. 1933-47

wood engravings *Sultry Day* (1935) and *Experiment* (Fig. 4b), the title of which may allude to the artist's sustained use of cross-hatching for the first time or his possible use of a tint tool to engrave the finely cut lines that model the arms and torso. The prematurely gray streak in the hair that is highlighted with the same ray of light that defines the contour of the nose identifies the model as Margaret.

Landacre taught himself wood engraving, and he refined a technique that relied on extraordinarily delicate cross-hatching. Does his correspondence mention wood engravers who influenced his technique? Was he in touch with other engravers of his day?

Landacre admired the work of printmakers who unconventionally exploited the technique of wood engraving as a mode of independent, creative expression. According to Ward Ritchie, Landacre first saw the wood engravings of Blair Hughes-Stanton, Gertrude Hermes, Robert Gibbings, Eric Gill, and Rockwell Kent in Jake Zeitlin's bookshop gallery in downtown Los Angeles. A few of Landacre's early wood engravings display a familiarity with the stylistic innovations of Hughes-Stanton, Hermes, and Gibbings, all of whom contributed to the renaissance of wood engraving in London following World War I. Landacre's *Sapling Slim and Shadow Naked* (1928), for example, recalls the dramatic "vanishing line" style Gibbings used in several of his early prints from 1919-21, including *Trees at Oxenbridge and Clear Waters*.

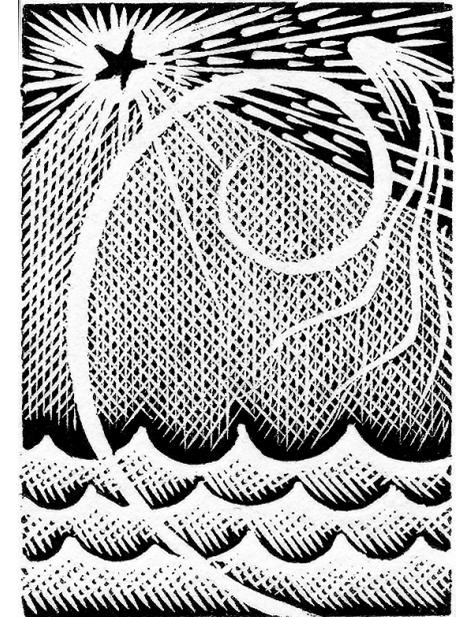


Figure 6a. XV Poems for the Heath Broom, wood engraving, 1933-34

It is interesting to note that the linear technique in Landacre's early body of work is distinguished principally by its absence of cross-hatching. Light, tonality, the illusion of form, and recessive space found in his acclaimed prints of California hills and deserts are the result of modulations in the thickness and spacing of lines cut by the graver. Darkening skies, for example, are created by the subtle thinning of parallel lines, a versatile technique used in the 1920s by such American woodcut artists as Howard Cook, J.J. Lankes, and Thomas Nason.

Given their large areas of black and subtle

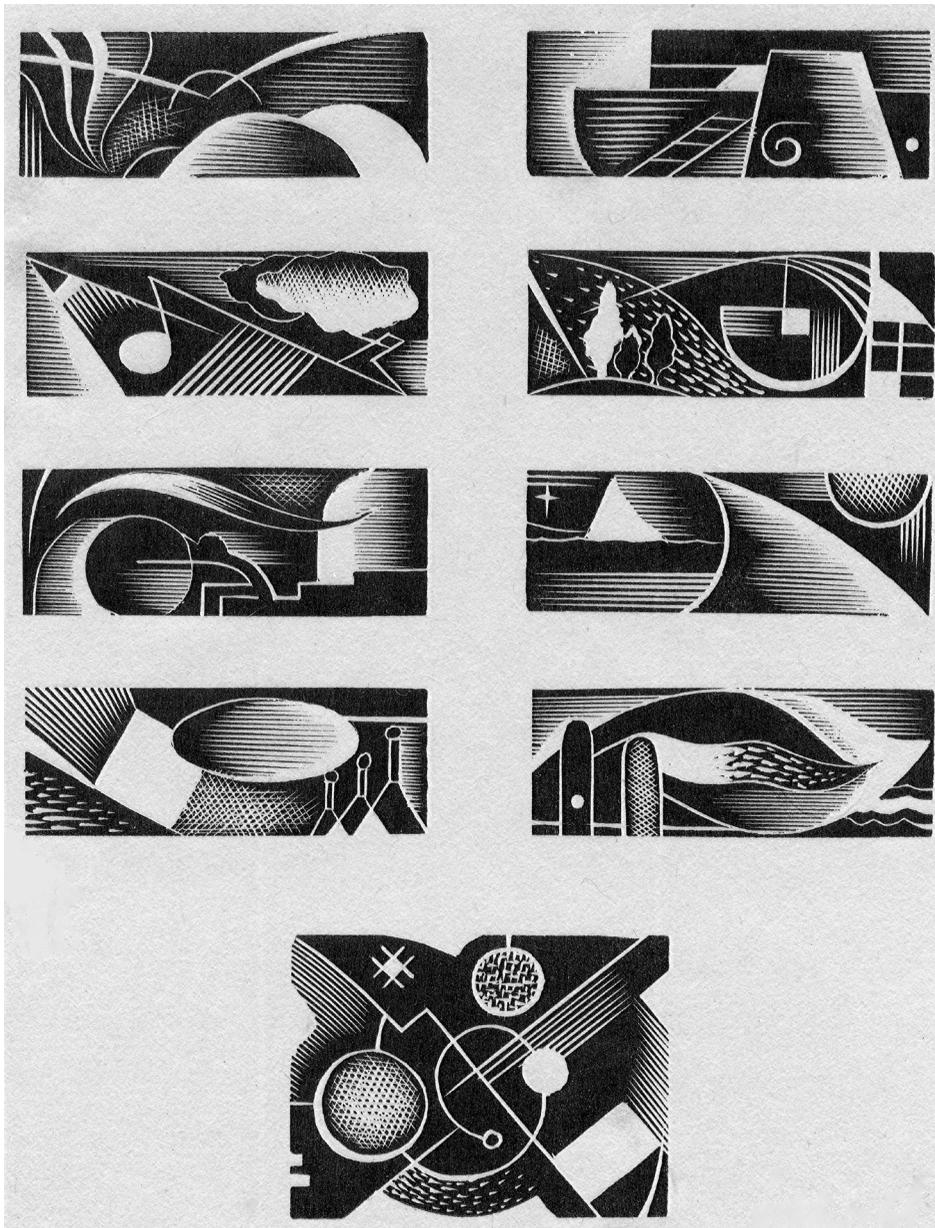


Figure 6b. Decorations for *La Encina*, wood engravings, 1938

gradations in tone, Landacre's blocks were probably very difficult to print. What do we know about how he printed and how long it took him to produce an edition?

Landacre provided a comprehensive guide to his printmaking process in a long article published over three issues of *American Artist* (September, October, and November 1941). His generously informative overview of the art of wood engraving easily outshines that of Rockwell Kent's *How I Make a Woodcut* (1934) or Claire Leighton's *Wood-Engraving and Woodcuts* (1932). The latter omits discussion of a fundamental step in block printing—how the preliminary drawing which gives rise to the composition might be optimally transferred to the block in reverse.

Landacre routed out the background of his woodblocks by hand until 1939, when he acquired an electric router. The power router facilitated the previously painstaking work of removing those surface areas of the block, including the background, which remain uninked.

Landacre advocated a working methodology that included keeping handy an extra block on which to experiment. Although he disposed of almost all of his practice blocks, he pulled impressions from several of them that survive, and each has its own catalogue raisonné entry. They demonstrate how he organized, ordered, and extracted beauty from the serendipitous accumulation of engraved practice strokes. (Fig. 5)

When one looks closely at Landacre's technically precise designs, particularly those

with finely engraved parallel lines that may be spaced closely or widely apart or even curve as they sweep across the composition, the question arises whether he used a graver equipped with multiple blades (a "multiple tool") for cutting two, three, or more parallel lines with one stroke of the hand. No multiple tools were located among the wood engraving implements Landacre used that remained in his estate and were deposited with the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. Nonetheless, Landacre may not have entirely abstained from using the multiple tool. In his wood engraving *Hill*, for example, dozens of short parallel strokes fill the outer edge of the hill's white aura as it merges into the darkened sky. These strokes are barely visible to the naked eye, which may explain why Landacre might have abandoned the strict rule he otherwise evidently followed of avoiding use of the multiple tool.

Landacre is best known for iconic prints of landscapes and nudes, but he did extensive work in book illustration as well. What do you consider most remarkable in his work as an illustrator?

Landacre was not driven by ambition to enter the field of book or magazine illustration, with its constant demand for narrative detail and figuration. Although he did accept commissions for illustrations throughout his career, Landacre is rarely mentioned in the same context as Fritz Eichenberg or Lynd Ward, two other wood engravers working in America who were

primarily illustrators. In the 1930s Landacre conceived small wood engravings to decorate books privately printed by The Ward Ritchie Press, including the very scarce *XV Poems for the Heath Broom*, which was awarded one of the *50 Books of the Year* for 1934. (Fig. 6a) Among the earliest semi-abstract works on paper produced by an American-born printmaker are Landacre's scarcely known decorations for *La Encina*, the college yearbook published by the Associated Students of Occidental College and printed under the supervision of Ward Ritchie. (Fig. 6b) During and after WWII, Landacre collaborated with naturalist Donald Culross Peattie. Their final project comprehensively documented the trees of America. Landacre drew his illustrations on scratchboard because he felt that the medium, rather than wood engraving or pen and ink, would produce more nuanced and less humdrum effects. The second of their two volumes—*A Natural History of Western Trees*—was selected as one of the *50 Books of the Year* for 1953.

Landacre achieved his finest work of wood-engraved book illustration for George Macy, publisher of the Limited Editions Club. In 1954, from a list drawn up by Macy, Landacre selected the 2000-year-old epic *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Titus Lucretius Carus—an influential work of speculative physics based on precepts articulated by the Greek philosopher Epicurus. When studying dozens of Landacre's preparatory drawings for this book, I came to recognize which ones were the early, bold submissions Macy rejected. These graph-

ite or charcoal sketches are some of Landacre's most ambitious works on paper and reflect the avant-garde nature of Lucretius' philosophical system, which included atomic theories far ahead of his time. Macy, however, considered them to be too contemporary and requested a style more reflective of Greco-Roman culture at the time of Lucretius. Landacre complied, sent further drawings in a newly forged modernist classical style, and proposed the book design that prevailed, including small square coral red spot decorations adjacent the richly black vertical illustrations. (Fig. 6c)

The forthcoming catalogue raisonné devotes a sidebar to the history of the making of this extraordinary book, which included 30 wood engravings Ward Ritchie printed from Landacre's engraved woodblocks. (To Landacre's good fortune, Macy replaced Bruce Rogers—who intended to design the book with printer's ornaments only—with Ritchie.) *De Rerum Natura* is the high-water mark of Ritchie's 25 years of collaborations with Landacre, and the book garnered them posthumous accolades. In 2011, it was one of 77 books selected for inclusion in *The Best of Both Worlds: Finely Printed Livres d'Artistes, 1910-2010*, an exhibition (with accompanying catalogue) at the Grolier Club in New York.

Block & Burin is grateful to the Paul Landacre Estate for permission to reproduce the works in this article.

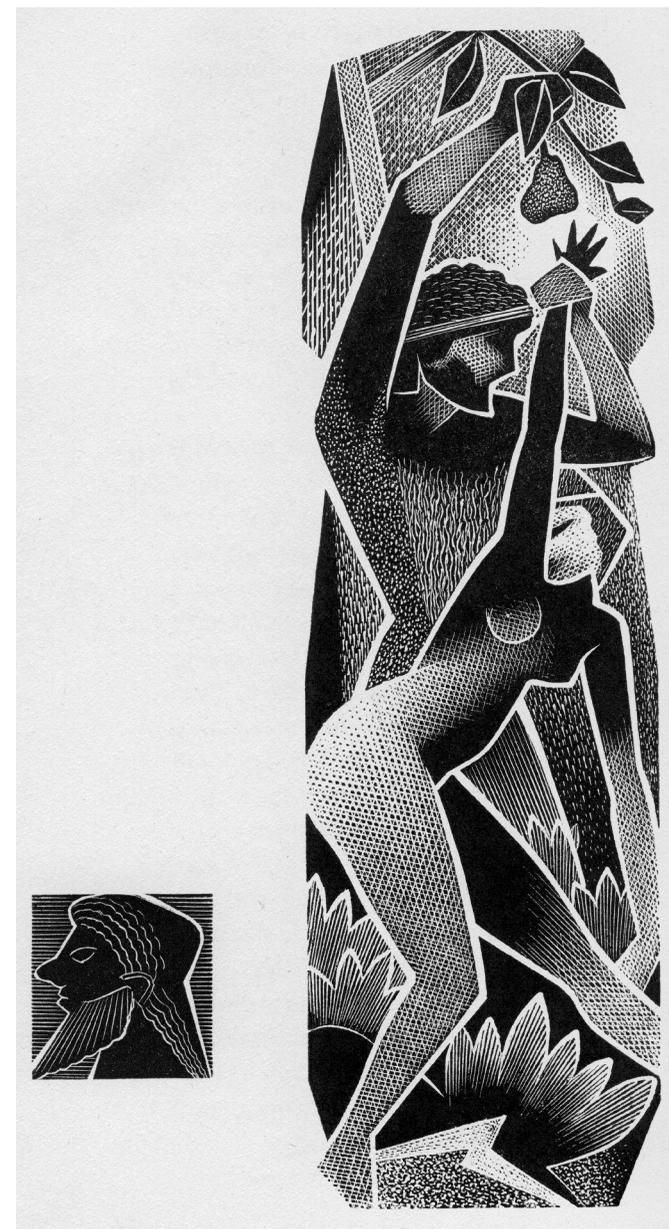


Figure 6c. *De Rerum Natura*, wood engravings, 1954-56. The decoration on the lower left was printed in coral red.