

Prophet with a Brush

The Life of Jacob Landau

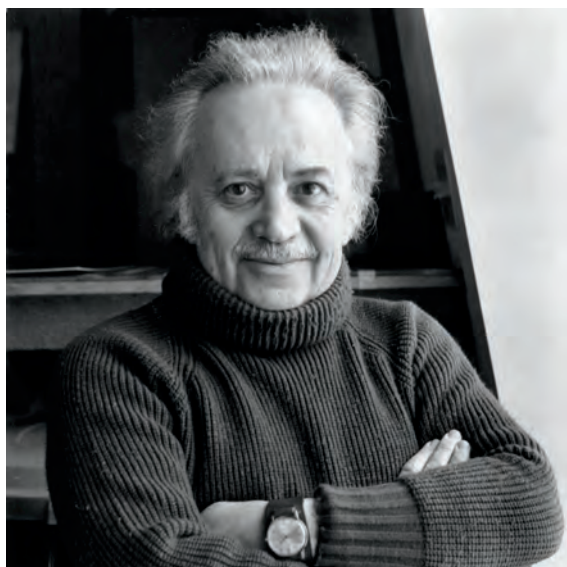
Andrew D. Scrimgeour

Few artists can claim to have won a national art competition and captured the attention of the press while still in their teens. Jacob Landau can make that boast, and his victory included an unusual bonus—a one-person show that toured the country with stops in San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, and New York.

For almost a century, Scholastic, publisher of classroom newspapers for middle and high school students, has conducted an annual competition—the prestigious Scholastic Art and Writing Awards—to discover and honor highly talented teenagers.¹ While a student at Overbrook High School in Philadelphia, Landau won top honors in Scholastic’s graphic arts competition. And not just once, but two years in a row.² Only four other students have achieved that two-time distinction. (Even Andy Warhol, another Pennsylvanian who won the art competition ten years later, is not a member of that elite group.³) But before Landau’s first award was finalized (1934), an astounded but wary jury felt compelled to telegraph Landau’s principal and ask him to certify that the portfolio Jacob had submitted was truly his own work. In their judgment, his brush-and-ink illustrations for Kipling’s *Jungle Book* were too exquisite for even the most advanced teenager. Upon announcing the second award a year later (1935), Scholastic packed up Landau’s portfolio of fifty-eight animal sketches for a cross-continental tour.

Landau’s early maturation as an artist was hardly a fluke. Born on December 17, 1917, in Philadelphia, he grew up in a family, a public school system, and a city that valued the arts and knew how to nurture young talent. His father, an immigrant from Warsaw, Poland, was a painter in the Cubist tradition and a poet.⁴ Jacob’s first professional group exhibition found him and his father appearing together in the 128th Annual Exhibition at the National Academy of Design in New York.⁵

But his father’s studio was not where it dawned on Jacob that the world of paint and palette could be more than a splendid hobby. That happened at school, in the sixth grade. As the Great Depression deepened and art supplies became precious commodities, his principal gave him a coveted bottle of Higgins India ink for his sole use.⁶ That



LEFT Jacob Landau. From the private collection of Rosa T. Giletti.

RIGHT Jacob Landau at work in his studio. With permission of the Archives of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel and Temple Judea Museum, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.



affirmation of his ability from a respected authority outside the family was akin to an anointing. It awakened in Jacob the realization that he was seen not as a dilettante but as a budding artist, and he began to take on that role with great seriousness.⁷ He devoted every spare moment to drawing, and he ranged over the city on his bicycle, a bespectacled, eagle-eyed detective looking for subjects to capture in his sketchbook.⁸ The Philadelphia Zoo and nearby Fairmount Park were rewarding territories for investigation, as were the docks on the Schuylkill River and the doorways of downtown buildings that harbored the homeless.⁹

Whenever Jacob could, he headed to the epicenter of art in Philadelphia—palatial Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park, the predecessor to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a durable symbol of Philadelphia's long embrace of the arts.¹⁰ He did not linger in the ornate rooms of European masterworks or along the corridor of medieval stained glass panels.¹¹ On most occasions, his destination was an exhibit room on the lower level, where he peered through porthole windows, each no larger than a soup bowl, to take in a riveting diorama—the destruction of Pompeii. Transfixed, he could not take his eyes off the anguished tangle of human figures fleeing the fiery flood of Mount Vesuvius. Those scenes scorched his soul and haunted him for the rest of his life.¹²

Because Landau had earned national attention as a precocious artist and had graduated at the head of his high school class, he won a scholarship to the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art, located in the Memorial Hall that he already knew so well.¹³ During his college days and three years beyond, he studied with artists who

not only enjoyed national reputations for their work but also took pride in teaching the crafts of illustration, etching, drawing, painting, and printmaking—Earl Horter, Henry C. Pitz, Franklin Watkins, and Benton Spruance, among others. Even World War II and the long arm of the draft board did not derail his artistic progress. During the final two years of the war, he was stationed with the Army in Naples, Italy, and served as the art editor, photographer, and reporter of *At Ease*, a Special Services magazine.

With the help of the GI Bill, he resumed his formal studies at the New School for Social Research, where he met Leonard Baskin, artist and founder of the renowned Gehenna Press, which published finely illustrated books. Later, Baskin shared a house in Paris with Landau and his young family, and he introduced Landau to the art of the woodcut. Landau's three years in Paris were crowned by his first one-person show, a series of woodcuts and lithographs, at Galerie Paul Lebar (1952). Not only did the show win critical acclaim, but many of the artists Landau most admired purchased prints for their own collections.¹⁴

When Landau returned to New York with his wife and two young sons, he knew it was time to change his “artist in a garret” approach to living. While illustrating books and LP record jackets, he also discovered what proved to be long-term financial security—mentoring college students. He began teaching studio arts part-time at his old alma mater, now renamed the Philadelphia College of Art. Three years later, he was invited to join the faculty of the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he achieved tenure.¹⁵ Classes in drawing, printmaking, and illustration were his forte, and he gained a reputation as a master teacher. Recalling his early forays into Philadelphia neighborhoods, pad and pencil in hand, he said, “Art education must make the student into an active forager, a shaper of meaning and purpose, rather than a passive recipient.”¹⁶ For almost thirty years, he commuted three times a week to the Brooklyn campus from his home in central New Jersey, reserving the other days for work in his own studio.

Landau had moved to Roosevelt, a small town in rural New Jersey, in 1955 at the invitation of Ben Shahn, a nationally known artist who was dedicated to the New Deal and the relief of those suffering under the Great Depression. He and Shahn had become friends in New York. Both men, along with Baskin, valued art as a tool for social transformation. They also pursued figurative art despite the dominance of the abstract expressionist movement that had captured the art world.¹⁷ The opportunity to have such a friend as both neighbor and interlocutor—and to live in the country—made Roosevelt irresistibly attractive for Landau. He was able not only to purchase a house but also to build an additional room for his first real studio. The days of cramped quarters in tiny loft apartments, with the kitchen table doubling as an art space, were over.

Landau flourished in Roosevelt. The village was an enclave of artists, many of whom were Jewish immigrants from Europe. Originally founded as an agro-industrial cooperative under the New Deal, it initially housed two hundred garment workers, formerly employed in New York City sweatshops, and their families.¹⁸ Landau lived



Jacob Landau's studio, Roosevelt, New Jersey.
Photo: R. Blair Stiefhold.

there for the rest of his life. The move to Roosevelt was not only good for his art but good for his health as well. He had developed an allergy to oil paints and solvents. With the encouragement of Shahn, his neighbor, he switched to watercolors and was thrilled with the endless variations of color he could create. A few years later, in 1963, he won the coveted Philadelphia Watercolor Prize at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Annual Show.

Landau became known in town as the artist with the most distinctive studio. In 1975 he built a geodesic dome as his studio, which was a ten-minute walk from his house. It was designed by his friend Buckminster Fuller and constructed by a company located in Roosevelt. This dome, suffused with light—with its two-story great room, an abundance of plants, the music of Beethoven's piano sonatas playing, and Lustau deluxe cream sherry waiting in the cupboard—became his haven.

To explore the breadth of Landau's artistry over the decades, whether by thumbing through his catalogue raisonné or by walking through an exhibit of his work, is to be struck with at least three undeniable impressions. First, the intricacy of the designs. The compositions are complex, asking to be read. The eye cannot take everything in, and you return to them again and again and find new elements, as though the works were alive and generating new elements as a tease. Second, the human body is everywhere. Landau was obsessed with the human body. The sinewy agony from the Philadelphia Vesuvius dioramas was never far from his consciousness. For him the human figure was not only an object but also "a symbol expressive of our common predicament, of the beauty and horror of existence. . . . It is paradigmatic of the human condition . . . every emotion, trait, and fate can be conveyed through the body."¹⁹ It is the locus of great joy and of great suffering. His gauge of the moral integrity of a society or group of people throughout history was how people in power treated the bodies of the powerless.

Finally, Landau's canvases are not pretty. The colors are always dazzling but the paintings, woodcuts, and illustrations as a whole make the viewer uncomfortable.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Jacob Landau, watercolors (pochoir) of Isaiah and Malachi. Jacob Landau Collection, Monmouth University Galleries. Courtesy of Monmouth University.

Gravestones of Jacob and Frances Landau. Photo courtesy of Tristen Herrstrom.

Jacob Landau, self-portrait and autograph. From the private collection of David Herrstrom.

A humanist, Landau insisted that art must do more than entertain or please; it must join hands with “the tradition of protest that comes from the prophets of the Old Testament. They were concerned with justice and injustice.”²⁰ They were angry, but hopeful, too. So was Landau. As one poet wrote, his art would have us soar “with prophets leading away / from stumbling, dark pits, and / satanic wheels / toward the New Jerusalem.”²¹

After the death of his wife and the waning of his own energies, Landau became increasingly concerned with end-of-life issues, especially his finances and the disposition of his art. Would his art endure? He became alarmed when a friend of his, a local artist, died and his family hurriedly divested themselves of his work, tossing the art into dumpsters, oblivious to their value or his legacy. Consequently, Landau’s representative, Rosa Giletti, assumed a larger role, aggressively placing his art in major museums and university collections and arranging shows across the country. Later, she became the executrix of his estate.

He also asked for advice from a certified financial planner, Constance Herrstrom, a neighbor, whose practice was in Princeton. Their client relationship had already been established several years earlier. In exploring the options for his estate and financial affairs, she proposed a framework that put the responsibility for his art and legacy into the hands of trusted friends, so that after Landau’s death there would be time to ensure his legacy. He agreed, and several years later, the Jacob Landau Institute was born. Subsequently, the Institute entered into agreements with Drew University and Monmouth University for the permanent care of his papers and works of art. Unlike many artists, he gained the satisfaction that his life’s work would be valued in perpetuity.

After a long struggle with Parkinson’s disease, Landau died on November 24, 2001. He was 83, the same age his father was when he died. Located on the brow of a small hill at the edge of the Roosevelt cemetery and standing next to the tall memorial of his friend Ben Shahn, Landau’s black granite tombstone is readily identifiable. Etched in its surface are the words “Jacob Landau—Painter, Printmaker, Prophet.” Above the letters rises an exultant angel, as if in flight, its arm uplifted—a drawing by Landau.²² Yet his signature words below add tension to this final canvas: “Without art we are an endangered and endangering species.”²³ Armed with words and images, the artist presses his prophetic claims, even in death.