

THE BRAUER MUSEUM OF ART

MAY 15 – AUGUST 9, 2015



HERMANN
GURFINKEL

HIDDEN NORTHWEST
INDIANA LEGEND

We at the Brauer Museum of Art are pleased to present Herman Gurfinkel: Hidden Northwest Indiana Legend, an exhibition of the remarkable work of an artist highly regarded throughout the Northwest Indiana and Chicagoland regions. Gurfinkel was a man of many talents who through fine craftsmanship and innovative uses of abstract and representational techniques was able to give form to his visions of his subjects and Jewish faith.

While several Brauer visitors suggested over the years that we mount a Gurfinkel exhibition, it was community member Trent Pendley who offered a thorough proposal at just the right time to set exhibition plans in motion. Pendley appointed Gurfinkel an honorary member of the Indiana Jewish Historical Society and has been of great assistance every step of the way; it was he who suggested that Barbara Stodola write the biographical brochure essay, and we are delighted with Stodola's informative essay that reflects her diligent original scholarship.

At this time, I wish to acknowledge those individuals and agencies that made this exhibition possible: Rudolf Adamczyk, Paula Barber, Dorrance Halverson, President Mark Heckler, Pennie M. Helenhouse, Integrated Marketing and Communications, Melvin and Nancy Kemp, Dean Jon Kilpinen, Fred and Sue Kobak, Eleanor Lewis, Trent Pendley, Virginia Phillips, Gloria Ruff, Michael and Debra Silvert, Barbara Stodola, Temple Israel Valparaiso, Mildred Thompson, and James and Tracey Wetzstein.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the wonderful works of an artist tragically underknown but beloved by those who knew him and experienced his marvelous creative spirit.

GREGG HERTZLIEB, DIRECTOR/CURATOR
Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University



Hermann Gurfinkel (1916-2004)
Man of Steel, 1976
Painted wood, 25 x 14 1/4 x 17 3/4 inches
Collection of James and Tracey Wetzstein

HERMANN GURFINKEL

HIDDEN NORTHWEST INDIANA LEGEND

1916 – 2004

Hermann Gurfinkel, a refugee from Nazi Germany, pursued his artistic career from one continent to another, and finally settled in Valparaiso, Indiana, where he spent the last 35 years of his life. The Brauer Museum of Art at Valparaiso University, sponsoring a retrospective exhibition of his work, is honoring a man whose greatest glory was the freedom to create.

In 1938, just before Kristallnacht (“the night of broken glass”) erupted in German-Jewish communities, the 22-year-old artist sailed on a Dutch ship to America, at the urging of relatives in New York City and Detroit. During a career that spanned seven decades, he plied his crafts, ranging from blacksmith to goldsmith to steel welder, producing fine jewelry as well as larger-than-life sculptures. He won awards and commissions, from public and private patrons, and in 2000 received the German Cross of Merit, his native country’s highest civilian award.

Gurfinkel is best-known in Northwest Indiana for his large public sculptures: the 22-foot *Man of Steel* (1977) in Harrison Park, Hammond; *The Reader* (1984) at Lake County Public Library, Merrillville; an eight-foot bronze relief, a *Menorah* (1986), for the façade of Temple Israel in Valparaiso; and the bronze *Mother And Child* (1999) in a courtyard at La Porte Hospital.

The culminating achievement of Gurfinkel’s life was his *Lion of Judah* (1997), the highly evocative sculpture he designed for Cologne, Germany, to commemorate headmaster Erich Klibansky’s heroic efforts to save the lives of his Jewish students. Although he arranged for 130 students to be relocated in England, another 1,100 were later deported, along with Klibansky and his family, and executed. Their names are engraved around the base of the fountain-monument which stands in a public square, formerly the site of Jawne, the German-Jewish high school the artist had attended. Gurfinkel’s bronze sculpture used the Biblical lion to symbolize this

endeavor, a powerful figure with massive claws and teeth bared to the heavens, crying out, as the artist recited: “This is a difficult task you gave me, dear Lord. Why don’t you help me?” Even the lion, the strongest of animals, needs help for the task that was assigned to him: guarding the Ten Commandments.”

At the time the sculptor received this commission from the project’s initiators, Cologne schoolteacher Dieter Corbach and his wife Irene, Gurfinkel too was suffering and struggling to regain his strength. Paralyzed on the right side from a stroke, he was attempting to model the clay using his left hand, and undergoing therapy to retrain his right hand. Already in his late 70s, he still exhibited the artistic skills and determination that had distinguished his early career.

Following high school, where Gurfinkel excelled in art, his application to an arts academy in Dusseldorf was rejected, because of a recently enacted Aryan-only policy. However, he then was granted a three-year apprenticeship with Hanns Rheindorff, a Catholic metalworker who did projects for a monastery and the Cathedral of Cologne. There he learned to work on details, the hands and wings of angels, and to create small silver ceremonial objects, such as chalices. From Rheindorff he also learned a lesson that never ceased to guide his development: “One has to be a craftsman first, before becoming an artist.”

After spending a year in New York, with little success, the young artist headed west “to paint Indians.” He got as far as Detroit, where he talked himself into a machine shop job, and for three years he handled complex and demanding assignments. Yearning for a return to fine art, he paid a visit to Cranbrook Academy, near Flint, Michigan, and was immediately awarded a fellowship – and the next year a teaching position.

Gurfinkel was now in his early 30s, he had accumulated “a little nest egg,” and his career was on the rise. An opportunity to teach at IIT Institute of Design brought him to Chicago. Here he worked alongside another faculty member, R. Buckminster Fuller, famed designer of the geodesic dome, and they became friends. Gurfinkel also taught metalworking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. But his major ambition at this time was to have his own place, a jewelry shop on Chicago’s Gold Coast.

The most successful of his jewelry ventures was a shop on Oak Street, in the upscale shopping and nightlife district between Michigan Avenue and Rush Street. In this prime location he attracted prestigious clients from Motorola and Leo Burnett Advertising, plus young couples ordering wedding rings. Gurfinkel wrote about other, less rewarding experiences. His first shop, at 123 West Goethe, was burglarized while he was out to dinner, and his precious metals were stolen, along with gemstones – star sapphires, opals and rubies. He recalled opening

another shop on Rush Street, in a former popcorn stand next to the Carnegie Theatre, but ran into more bad luck: a restaurant fire destroyed most of the block. By that time the artist had his fill of Chicago.

Deciding once again to specialize in Art with a capital "A", he settled in an old farmhouse near Glenwood, Illinois, and determined to earn his living doing sculpture in the south suburbs. It was never easy. Sometime in the late 1960s he met another sculptor, Peter Ciancio, who suggested he come to Indiana. Gurfinkel's first sighting of the Indiana dunes made an indelible impression: "Like the ocean, Lake Michigan revealed its vastness and, on shore, one giant plant after another forging American steel. I felt at home, and moved to a blacksmith shop in nearby Valparaiso."

Many changes resulted from this move. Gurfinkel became affiliated with Temple Israel, whose members gave him encouragement and support. Sue and Fred Kobak, surprised to rediscover him in Valparaiso, commissioned more work. Sue's college roommate, Ruth Fruchtlender, was Gurfinkel's second-cousin, and the Kobaks had bought wedding bands from his shop on Oak Street. In Valparaiso, the artist resumed using the name Gurfinkel. When he received his citizenship papers, in Detroit in 1945, he had changed his name to Herman Garfield, in an effort to become "Americanized." But now he felt comfortable enough to return to his Jewish roots.

The home Gurfinkel found in Valparaiso (for \$50. /month) was a small place on an 80-acre farm that U.S. Steel engineer Owen Biller and his wife Mildred had transformed into a country estate, with gardens and a pond. Gurfinkel, a vegetarian, grew his own vegetables and was very particular about how they were prepared. "He was a perfectionist, in his personal life and his work," observed Michael Silvert, another friend the artist had met at Temple Israel. He enrolled in a public speaking course, to improve his English. He spent hours doing sculpture, alternating between classical human figures, energetic animal forms (observed during visits to zoos) and abstract sculptures that were more expressionistic in style. He perfected his penmanship, and wrote lengthy letters to his sister Eva, in Detroit, and younger sister Edith, who had emigrated to Israel.

In 1975, the Indiana State Department of Public Instruction selected Gurfinkel as artist in residence for Greater Jasper Consolidated Schools. The salary, \$300. /week for eight weeks, helped to augment his frugal and solitary existence. He guided students' art work, gave sculpting demonstrations, spoke to local civic groups, and also created a large mahogany sculpture depicting students' faces. It is currently on display in the high school cafeteria.

Man of Steel (1977), Gurfinkel's first major outdoor sculpture, became a community-

wide undertaking. The project was funded by the Indiana Arts Commission, and its local sponsor was the Northern Indiana Arts Association, based in Hammond. Inland Steel Company had donated the steel, and Gurfinkel's design had to be worked materials already provided. He drew plans for a giant head, square-jawed, facing the sky, set on a massive base – a more geometric design than usual – to stand an impressive 22 feet high. NIAA program director Sandy Starrett, after selecting Gurfinkel as sculptor, then had to find a large enough space and equipment to get the job done. Hammond industrialists Peter Knoerzer, George Meyer, Bernie Vance, Vic Kirsch, George Vidimos and Richard Gardner were among those who contributed space and services. Help also arrived from the City of Hammond park department, Hammond Technical Vocational High School welding students, and the building and construction trade unions – altogether eight different unions, most particularly the operating engineers, who used a crane to lift the 10-ton piece into place in Harrison Park. It was painted bright orange – because, the sculptor said, "all ironworkers recognize this color, used to protect steel in the outdoors." With commissioned work, Gurfinkel did not always have his choice of materials. For *Man of Steel*, he would have preferred stainless steel, but in the end felt this sculpture "expresses the dedication to the people who make steel, fabricate steel, transport it, build with it, use it and depend on it." The \$4,000 prize money awarded for the Lake County Public Library sculpture would not have covered the cost of bronze; and so he devised a larger-than-life figure of reinforced concrete. Painted white, placed in the front window and spotlighted, *The Reader* became a stunning landmark, capturing the attention of motorists along U.S. Highway 30 for many years. Today it is in the building's entrance lobby.

For *Mother And Child* (1999), Gurfinkel's final commission, bronze was the material specified by La Porte Hospital director Leigh Morris. The piece was to be a gift from Clarian Health Services. Before completing it, the sculptor suffered another stroke. Only the clay model was shown at the dedication ceremonies, which he attended in a wheelchair. Gurfinkel never recovered fully from this stroke; he died in 2004, almost 88 years old. The sculpture, cast in bronze, stands in the hospital courtyard, Serenity Place. "It perfectly reflects the hospital's mission," Morris said, "to nurture and to encourage health. Hermann did a spectacular job."

Barbara Stodola, an experienced journalist and art historian, writes about art for publications in Northwest Indiana. For 15 years she was director of the John G. Blank Center for the Arts in Michigan City, and prior to that time was a board member of the Northern Indiana Arts Association in Hammond. In 1976 she met Hermann Gurfinkel, and served as his liaison with the City of Hammond and with the building and construction trades unions. She also produced the booklet for the dedication of his sculpture, "Man of Steel," in Harrison Park.



Hermann Gurfinkel (1916-2004)
Lion of Judah, 1997
Bronze, 30 x 10 x 10 inches
Collection of Temple Israel, Valparaiso



Hermann Gurfinkel (1916-2004)
Untitled, undated (est. 1980s)
Plaster, 59 x 23 x 17 inches
Gift of Dr. Yacoub Massuda in honor of his wife, Elena Massuda
Brauer Museum of Art, 2013.18



Hermann Gurfinkel (1916-2004)
The Reader, 1990
Bronze, 14 x 30 x 13 inches
Private Collection



BRAUER MUSEUM OF ART

Valparaiso University, Center for the Arts
1709 Chapel Drive, Valparaiso, IN 46383
Phone: 219.464.5365 • Fax: 219.464.5244
gregg.hertzlieb@valpo.edu • valpo.edu/artmuseum

Summer Hours:

Closed Monday

Tuesday - Sunday: noon - 5 p.m.

*These exhibitions were made possible through funds provided by
the Partners for the Brauer Museum of Art.*