

GRACE GLUECK

You Can't Tell a Book by Its Cover?

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Retired New York Times art critic Grace Glueck composed the following to accompany an exhibition of MR cover art originals. The show will run from April 22 to May 24 in the University Gallery at the Fine Arts Center on the UMass campus, as part of our fiftieth birthday celebration.*

IT ISN'T EVERY LITERARY MAGAZINE whose covers serve as visual appetizers for what's to be found inside. One rare example is the *Massachusetts Review*, the quarterly gathering of poetry, fiction, art, belles-lettres, and political/philosophical essays that first made its appearance in 1959 and is still going strong. Its stimulating covers, adorned by paintings, drawings, photographs and such, give salient visual clues to each issue's contents, suggesting the intellectual bounty within.

This show of fifty years of cover art—limited to photography and works on paper—was chosen by the editors as part of the magazine's fiftieth anniversary celebration. It highlights the far-flung selection of artists and themes that help give the magazine its worldly presence.

Shining forth on these covers are graphic images by Leonard Baskin, Vanessa Bell, and the Mexican printmaker Posada; photographs by Jerome Liebling, Walker Evans, Roy de Carava, Dorothea Lange, and Lotte Jacobi, drawings and paintings by artists ranging from Fernand Leger, Romare Bearden, and Fred Becker to today's practitioners: Richard Yarde, John Grillo, Oriole Farb Feshbach, Hanlyn Davies, Christin Couture, and Barry Moser. They touch on or directly illustrate subjects like Latin America, black culture, contemporary Ireland, the novelist James Baldwin, and the poet Allen Ginsberg.

Look back at an early issue, Spring 1965, in which a cover boasting Leger's delightful semi-abstract of Charlie Chaplin, viewed as a robotic comedy machine, makes a snappy overture to an issue in which Chaplin and Leger loom large. Abigail Rorer's sprightly color etching of a bombastically bewigged eighteenth-century fop introduces us to the Winter 1981 issue on comedy. An august profile of the copiously bearded bard Walt Whitman by none other than Thomas Eakins announces the major subject of the Spring 1992 issue. John Grillo's colorful cover couple doing a "Tango Under the

Moon” makes a playful lead-in to the Summer 2000 issue on the performing arts. And surely we can infer from “The Kiss,” Laylah Ali’s two totemic figures in a cool cheek-to-cheek, that the subject of the *Review* for Spring/Summer 2008 is, well, gender.

The magazine sprang from a memo of October 23, 1958, outlining possibilities for it, sent to David R. Clark of the English Department at UMass, by Jules Chametzky, a department member. Chametzky soon became, and served for years as, *MR*’s guiding spirit. But its actual format was conceived by the artist Leonard Baskin and Sidney Kaplan, another professor of English at the University. They took as models two magazines of the 1930s and ’40s: *Hound and Horn*, the short-lived but influential esthetic journal founded by the connoisseur and dance impresario Lincoln Kirstein while still a student at Harvard, and *Twice a Year*, produced by the photographer and patron Dorothy Norman, which covered the arts and also dealt with social issues.

Baskin, a superb graphicist, contributed many covers, and inside art as well, to the *Review* before his death in 2000; among those shown here the portraits of Socrates and Bertolt Brecht. In the 1970s, the photographer Jerome Liebling, arriving in Amherst to teach at Hampshire College, came on as photography editor of the magazine, and contributed many gems himself, producing the memorable covers shown here of the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky and the African American writer John Edgar Wideman, as well as lesser-known subjects, like his poignant shot of a Palestinian boy in East Jerusalem.

Important contributions were also made by Lisa Baskin, who as art editor from 1984 to 1993, gave Chinese political art like Li Hua’s powerful woodcut “Roar China” (Winter 1984) a place on the cover, and focused attention on women’s and feminist concerns. The Spring 1972 *Review* entitled “WOMAN: An Issue,” was superbly illustrated with a photograph by Dorothea Lange of a woman in purdah; the magazine’s contents also included some of Ms. Baskin’s own drawings, as well as fifteen self-portraits by women artists of the past and essays by Anais Nin and Bella Abzug.

You can’t tell a book by its cover? For now, that old adage is laid to rest by this important and intriguing display.