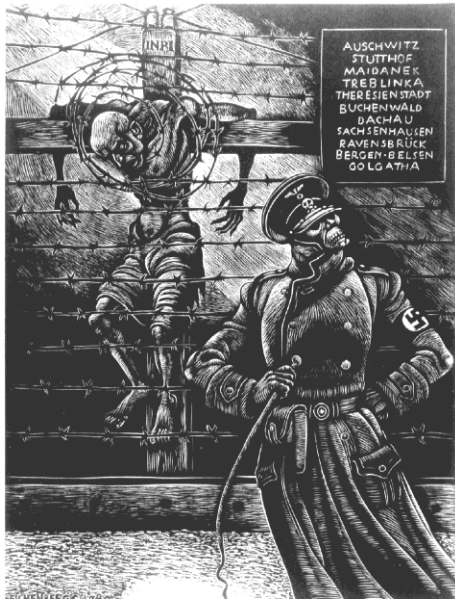


Fritz Eichenberg: Witness to the Twentieth Century

by Terry Hammond

Director and Curator, Guilford College Art Gallery



The Guilford College Art Gallery's opening exhibition for the fall season is *Witness to the 20th Century: The Artistic Biography of Fritz Eichenberg*. This engaging exhibition chronicles the life and career of Fritz Eichenberg, artist, printmaker, teacher, author, social activist, and Quaker, whose life bore witness to the political, military, and social follies of the past century. *Witness to the 20th Century*, the first comprehensive presentation produced with the cooperation of the Fritz Eichenberg Trust, contains previously unexhibited works from the artist's personal collection, as well as other pieces on loan from museums and private collectors.

As the title "Witness to the 20th Century" indicates, Fritz Eichenberg observed and commented on many of the pivotal events of the past century, including both World Wars, Weimar Germany, and post-war social activism.

Born in 1901, as a young child living in Germany during World War I, Eichenberg endured the nightly bombing raids sustained by his industrial city of Cologne. It was during this time that he realized his desire to become "an artist with a message," and examine the human condition through caricature. Eichenberg noted in his autobiography, "During the last days of the war I used to go up to the roof of our house to pick up shrapnel souvenirs from the night's bombing raids. Undernourished, as we all were, I collapsed one morning in front of Dr. Fritz Witte's door. He was a famous art historian, priest and curator of the Schn• tgen Museum of Religious Art." Dr. Witte, after discovering Eichenberg's artistic desires, gave him a book that contained works by Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, William Hogarth, and other artists who commented upon their milieu. For the young Eichenberg, this provided the impetus and encouragement that he needed to begin pursuing his career.

After an apprenticeship at a printing shop, where Eichenberg learned the basics of lithography, he began designing advertisements for a department store. During this time, he continued to sketch his surroundings and capture the essential elements of a situation through sharp observation, infused with great empathy for his subjects. Desiring to further his artistic training, Eichenberg enrolled in the Academy of Graphic Arts in Leipzig and found a mentor in Professor Hugo Steiner-Prag. His professor, a central figure in 20th-century European book illustration, introduced the art of book illustration to Eichenberg. Encouraged by his teacher, Eichenberg resolved to become a successful book illustrator in order to support himself and express his social conscience.

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #18, Summer 2000

For ten years, Eichenberg lived and worked in Weimar Berlin, creating illustrations for Ullstein's magazines, newspaper, and books. His biting images for the satirical magazine *UHU* mocked the political and military elite, including the ever-growing Nazi Party. As the political and economic situation of Weimar Germany spiraled downward after the worldwide economic depression of 1929, and the National Socialist party gained strength, Eichenberg looked toward the future with great foreboding. By March of 1933, with Hitler and the National Socialists in control of Germany, Eichenberg planned a business trip to the Americas under the pretext of drawing illustrations of the United States, Mexico, and South American countries for German publications; however, feeling uneasy about the situation in Germany, Eichenberg was searching for a new and safe home for his wife and child. Upon his return with numerous sketches, he arranged for a second trip to the United States late in 1933; however, this time he planned to bring his family and not return to Germany. Soon after the Eichenbergs arrived in New York, the editors at Ullstein, now under the control of the Nazi party, fired him from his position. In order to support himself in his new country, Eichenberg turned to teaching.

Eichenberg began teaching wood engraving at the New School for Social Research, and creating images for the Federal Arts Project and *The Nation*. During this period he developed contacts within the publishing industry and once again began illustrating books. During the next years of his career, he received a consistent stream of projects for illustrating major works of literature, including books by Shakespeare, the Brontë sisters, Swift, Poe, and the classics of Russian literature, including *War and Peace*, *Fathers and Sons*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

He found that book illustration was a suitable medium for his personality, as he found literature to be a means for personal escape. Eichenberg brought his own intense identification with the author and the characters to his illustrations, thus his images opened a new world for the reader's understanding of a text. Already established as a successful and prosperous commercial illustrator of literature, in 1949 when he met the Christian social justice activist Dorothy Day, he began a parallel career as an illustrator of religious images for Day's newspaper *The Catholic Worker*.

Eichenberg became a member of the Religious Society of Friends in 1940, shortly after the sudden death of his first wife. He wrote and illustrated two pamphlets, *Art and Faith* (1952) and *Artist on the Witness Stand* (1984), for the Quaker-affiliated press, Pendle Hill Publications. It is perhaps his religious images that provide a glimpse of the persona to which Eichenberg aspired, and were most personally rewarding.

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page added June 2002