Shaped by Books: The 42-Letter Name

Robert Kirschbaum
Robert Kirschbaum

SHAPED BY BOOKS:
THE 42-LETTER NAME

A Print Folio and Its Sources

An Exhibition at the Watkinson Library

March 5 – April 13, 2012

Raether Library and Information Technology Center
Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut
Robert Kirschbaum received his MFA from Yale in 1974. In his art, he explores Judaic concepts of sacred space derived from ancient Jewish art and the Kabbalah. He divides his time between New York City and Hartford, Connecticut, where he is currently professor of fine arts at Trinity College.
Engrave them, carve them, weigh them, permute them, and transform them, and with them depict the soul of all that was formed and all that will be formed in the future

~ The Sefer Yetzirah describing the forming of letters as elements of Creation.

The abstract forms of Robert Kirschbaum’s print series The 42-Letter Name belie the many influences that have gone into its creation. The series is a blend of many forces: Jewish mysticism and symbolism, the language of mechanical drawing, abstraction, and the act of creation itself. Kirschbaum uses the geometry of the nine square grid and the cube to explore forms reminiscent of Hebrew letters, the symbolism of sacred space in the Temple, and of geometry that relates to the creation of the cosmos. The title, The 42-Letter Name, refers to one of the secret names of God as it was described in ancient Jewish texts. Kirschbaum’s art works on several levels: as abstract design and as symbolic representation. This exhibition displays books and images that have influenced the making of the prints and of Kirschbaum’s work in general.

The seeds of collaboration for the exhibition go back to 2005 when Bob Kirschbaum brought his print-making class to the Watkinson to view artists’ books. On that occasion, we discovered a commonality of interests in design and creative things, especially of the 20th century. Since then, Bob has visited the Watkinson, loaned books for exhibitions, and donated several titles relating to the book arts. When he began incubating the idea of his own artist’s book in the form of a boxed print folio with accompanying essays, I was happy to give input on some of the more practical aspects of the project. The content of this exhibition, however, is all Robert Kirschbaum—his memories of childhood and adolescence, his bar mitzvah, industrial arts class, summer camp, and reflections on the more mystical elements of his Jewish heritage as embodied in isometric forms. It is the goal of this exhibition to tell the story behind The 42-Letter Name by displaying books and images collected by Kirschbaum over the years which have informed his creative process.

Sally Dickinson
Associate Curator, Watkinson Library
The 42-Letter Name.
Robert Kirschbaum

**THE 42-LETTER NAME**
Middletown: Robin Price, 2009

For *The 42-Letter Name*, Kirschbaum selected drawings from his *Devarim* series to form a suite of relief prints. *Devarim*, Hebrew for both words and things, can also mean *elements or letters*, and speaks to the idea of early Kabbalists that the world was created from such elements.

The images for *The 42-Letter Name* were created in 2007 and 2008. The suite of prints was printed letterpress in 2009 by Robin Price in an edition of twenty, plus five artist’s proofs.

Accompanying essays were written by Ronald C. Kiener, professor of religion at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut ("Secret Names"), and Robert Kirschbaum ("The 42-Letter Name"). Designer Ken Botnick composed the English text in *TheSans*, a typeface by Lucas de Groot, accompanied by the Hebrew Raanana. Sarah Creighton designed and fabricated the portfolio box. *The 42-Letter Name* was supported in part by a Faculty Research Grant from Trinity College.

From the collections of the Watkinson Library.
Overall, my art can be viewed as a speculation on the symbol of the temple, its history, and its meta-history from Creation forward. I purchased this image of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem in 1995. I was struck by the simplicity of Calmet’s depiction; his use of descriptive geometry and soaring space were a paradigm for my own attempts to achieve a link between form and idea. — Robert Kirschbaum (RK)

**Engraving of the site and elevation of the Temple of Solomon**
from
Augustin Calmet, 1672-1757
*Dictionnaire Historique, Archéologique, Philologique, Chronologique, Géographique et Littéral de la Bible* Paris, 1730. Vol. 3

**Temple of Jerusalem after Ezechiah**
from
Georges Perrot, 1832-1914
and Charles Chipiez, 1835-1901

From the collections of the Watkinson Library

**Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation**
Aryeh Kaplan, editor & translator
York Beach, Maine: Samuel Wiser, 1993

*The Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Formation, is an early magical and cosmogonic text lovingly embraced by later Kabbalists. It describes the forming of the letters of the alphabet as the elements of creation, the building blocks of the cosmos.*

Kirschbaum used this popular modern translation in his studio.
Diagram of the creation of the cosmos

from

Hartmann Schedel, 1440-1514
*Liber Chronicarum* [Nuremberg Chronicle]
Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1493

The heavens are depicted as a simple circle, a restatement of the link between plane geometry and cosmogonic speculation.

From the collections of the Watkinson Library

---

Reproduction of cube drawing

from

Robert Record, 1510?–1558
*The Whetstone of Witte*
London: John Kingston, 1557

Source: Internet Archive
www.archive.org/details/thewhetstoneofwitte
The utopian idealism of early modernism was linked with and expressed through the use of isometric drawing by El Lissitzky in painting and Theo Van Doesburg in architecture. Lissitzky's art expresses both the practical ideal of a perfected society and the principle of tikkun olam, a precept of Jewish mysticism. Van Doesburg used axonometric projection as a means of meditating on space. Henryk Berlewi, an associate of Lissitzky and Van Doesburg, was a modernist painter and typographer. For his cover of Albatros, an avant-garde publication in Yiddish, Hebrew letter forms are rendered in plane geometry.

And red organizes a settlement on the black square

Of Two Squares. ‘And red organizes a settlement on the black square’

from
El Lissitzky: Life, letters, texts
Edited by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers

Of Two Squares was originally published in Berlin in 1922.

From the collections of the Watkinson Library

Counter-Construction
(Analyse de l’architecture) 140-143

from
Theo van Doesburg, 1883-1931
Theo van Doesburg: Painter and Architect

From the collections of the Trinity College Library

Henryk Berlewi, 1894-1967
Reproduction of cover
Albatros. No. 3 & 4 (1923)
Berlin, 1923

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York
Many layers of memory are invested in this work: In late 1961, I spent nights learning Hebrew and to read Torah in preparation for my bar mitzvah. During the day, I also studied mechanical drawing, thanks to the New York City public school system, which required middle school students to take industrial arts classes. In one such class, a graphic arts shop, I had my first experience with letterpress and intaglio printing. While I never became the architect that, as a thirteen-year-old boy, I thought I'd be, the language of the drawing board—of the T-square and triangle—became the basis for much of my art, and printmaking became my primary medium.—RK

Joseph Jopling
**The Practice of Isometrical Perspective**
New ed., improved
London: M. Taylor, [1842?]

Alpha Pierce Jamison
**Isometric Drawing: A Treatise on Mechanical Illustrating**

Joseph J. Almon
**Visualized Basic Mechanical Drawing**
Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1961

Cassell's Technical Series:
Ellis A. Davidson
**Orthographic and Isometrical Projection: Development of Surfaces and Penetration of Solids**

Ellis A. Davidson
**Model Drawing: Containing the Elementary Principles of Drawing from Solid Forms**
London, New York: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, [1875?]

Theodore De Postels
**Fundamentals of Perspective.** Enl. 2nd ed.
New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1951
Comic books, Flatland, and the graphic novel God's Man were the types of books that fascinated me as an adolescent ... my copy of Flatland is one I bought mail order when I was at summer camp.—RK

Edwin Abbott Abbott, 1832-1926
Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, with illustrations by the author, A Square
New York: Dover, 1952
This book was first published in London, 1884.

Claude Fayette Bragdon, 1866-1946
The Frozen Fountain: Being Essays on Architecture and the Art of Design in Space
1st ed.
New York: Knopf, 1932

Lynd Ward, 1905-1985
God's Man: A Novel in Woodcuts
New York: J. Cape and H. Smith, 1929
From the collections of the Watkinson Library

World's Finest Comics: “The Negative Superman!”
June [1962], no. 126
As a child, I spent much time in my parents’ basement, looking through our family genizah—the repository for old, fragile prayer books my grandparents brought to America from Bessarabia and Belorusse at the end of the 19th century. To me, the Hebrew pages were then totally indecipherable, but I knew they were an important discovery, a kind of personal Dead Sea Scrolls. Still worn and crumbling, my grandparents’ books are now part of my library. While working on Devarim, I easily found the Ana B’koach in one of these prayer books. So … despite my never hearing the prayer spoken aloud, the Ana B’koach, which invokes God’s ‘powerful right hand,’ has been preserved and renewed as a source of inspiration.— RK

Mahzor
Late 19th c.
Two family prayer books for the high holy days

The prayer Ana B’koach

from
The Pentateuch with Haftaroth and Five Megiloth
New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1928

Associated with the Creation, the Zohar or Book of Splendor speaks of “the first forty-two letters of the Holy Name, by which heaven and earth were created”—the 42-letter name is one of the ‘secret’ names of God. The letters consist of the first letter of each word in a nearly 2,000-year-old, 42-word prayer, the Ana B’koach.

All items in the exhibition are from the collection of Robert Kirschbaum unless otherwise noted.
Aknowledgements

This exhibition was on display at the Dodd Research Center, Dodd Gallery, University of Connecticut, January 2 to March 2, 2012. Thank you to Jane Recchio, University of Connecticut Libraries, for her help and support in mounting the exhibition there.

The checklist was designed by Rita Law, creative services manager, Office of Communications, Trinity College. Covers were printed letterpress by Cannelli Printing. The text block was printed by Central Services at Trinity College. Peter Knapp, College Archivist, provided editorial assistance.

Publication was made possible through funding by the Trinity College/Watkinson Library Associates Fund.