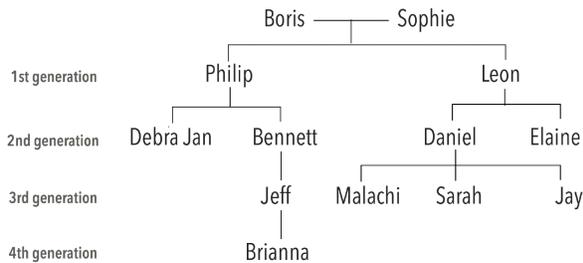


Foreword



Problem-solving is a basic human attribute, so everyone is creative at times, but serious, lifetime artistic creativity is mysterious, not readily explained by genes or upbringing, by nature or nurture; it's almost a kind of magical mutation. The artist fathers of Picasso and Max Ernst, both artists, recognized the talent of their progeny — and abandoned their own work, so say the legends. Various artistic dynasties — the Carracci, the Gentileschi, the Peales, the Wyeths, the Westons and the Ernsts — prove that genetic talent banks do exist, although they are still undoubtedly the exception rather than the rule. The painter J.A.M. Whistler, who had ego enough for a dynasty, recused himself with typical insouciance: “I can't tell you if genius is hereditary, because heaven has granted me no offspring.”

Nine members in four generations of one northern California family can lay claim to an unusual vein of artistic creativity. The descendants of Boris [1889–1981] and Sophie Bibel [1886–1963], Ashkenazim who emigrated from Poland just over a century ago, include: the brothers Leon and Philip Bibel; Philip's children Debra Jan and Bennett, and Leon's daughter, Elaine; Leon's grandchildren, Malachi, Sarah and Jay; and Bennett's grand-daughter, Brianna. Two families with two different yet complementary heritages combined when Boris (Boruch) Bibel and Sophie (Sosia) Begleibter married: the Bibels were rabbis and educators in Spain and Chelm, Poland; the Begleibters, successful, respected woodworkers and furniture craftsmen in Szczecbrzeszyn, in eastern Poland. The combination of the Bibel legacy of writing and teaching and the Begleibter respect for quality craftsmanship makes for a remarkable genetic heritage of thinking and doing. Appreciation for aesthetic beauty can be nurtured and learned, but creative drive cannot: it's a gift to the beneficiary, the community, and posterity. As Lewis Hyde wrote, in *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*: “When we are moved by art we are grateful that the artist lived, grateful that he [or she] labored in the service of his gifts.”

That marriage of creative drive, artistic talent and intellectual curiosity recurs in all four generations of artists, but one of the Bibels seems to exemplify both the creativity of the family and the urgent sociopolitical and aesthetic issues of our day. Leon Bibel, known today primarily as a Depression-era social realist and artist engagé, is poorly served by that restrictive label, since his interests and talents were wide-ranging, although it is safe to consider him a dedicated modernist — just one who slipped the traces of specific styles when they no longer served his needs. His realist portraits and landscapes of the 1930s (*Woman with Polka Dots*, *Portrait of Japanese Man*, *San Francisco Street Scene*) show the influence of Cézanne; his politicized paintings and prints of the late 1930s explore Cubo-Expressionist (*Elco*, *Shattered*, *Subway Scene*, *Windy City*) and Surrealist (*Queer Birds*, *Surrealistic Landscape*) distortion; while his landscapes of the same period alternate between urban

melancholy (Railway Station) and the jazzy Cubism of Stuart Davis (Farm Scene, Moored Boats, Archway). The paintings of the 1960s and 1970s — Bibel stopped painting for a period because of family obligations — show the painter influenced by Abstract Expressionism, with one caveat. His paintings never lose touch with the external world of objects and his internal world of symbolically charged beings and forces (Clock, Amen, Eyes On, Moses, Four Fields, Still Life with Pitcher, Study: Black, White and Red); they never let style become the content, as sometimes happens with AbEx and its decline into easily identified — and marketed — trademark styles. Bibel's last body of work, composed of carved wooden reliefs, explored Jewish and other religious themes with unpainted abstract cutout shapes, somewhat reminiscent of Louise Nevelson's reliefs, but combining figurative elements (Adam and Eve in Eden, Fruit Tree, King of the Birds, Holy Ark). The sculptor George Segal, who knew Bibel as a young artist in 1940s New York, wrote upon reviewing the work from the Depression, years later: "I was struck ... by how uncannily they catch the inner psyche ... of those times.... The tidal wave of sympathy for the Common Man, the interest in Socialist ideas, the Puritanical indignation, [and] the ... Oppressed Workers Unjustly Suffering ... [capture] perfectly the fervent, almost religious idealism of the Thirties." Segal felt in 1980 that Bibel's sociopolitical work deserved wider recognition; given our current situation, nearly forty years later, with the many parallels to the tumultuous Thirties, there is an even stronger case for re-examining the work of this driven, prolific (and unfortunately prophetic) painter.

The diverse legacy of this unusually gifted family proves that beautiful, powerful art can both serve as a window into history, and yet transcend time, residing in the eternal realm of William Butler Yeats's right-now, right-here "artifice of eternity."

DeWitt Cheng
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