

Arnold Singer

March 4, 1920 — January 10, 2005

Arnold Singer was born in New York City in 1920. After graduating from Flushing High School, he was awarded the St. Gaudens Prize and scholarship to the Art Students League of New York. He studied there with the celebrated artist/teachers Bridgman, Nicolaides, and Abels. During World War II, Singer served as a camouflager for the Corps of Engineers returning again to the Art Students League after the war to work under the guidance of Cameron Booth, Byron Browne, and most importantly, Will Barnet, who remained a long time devoted friend and mentor. While at the Art Students League, he gravitated to a group of young artists interested not only in the European modernist tradition of Picasso, Mondrian and Matisse, but also Gothic and Romanesque painting, eighteenth and nineteenth century classicism, Cezanne, as well as works produced by the indigenous peoples of Africa and the tribes of the northwest coast. While very much influenced by abstraction and what at the time was referred to as “non-objective” abstraction, Singer focused a great deal on the study of the human figure and the urban environment—a source of imagery seemingly at odds with the most rigorous forms of abstraction. As a result, he forged an approach to image making that conflated the formal purity of abstraction and the intense observation of nature.

He was a founding member in 1952 of the Hansa Gallery, one of the pioneer cooperative galleries on the lower east side in New York City. During the 1950s, Singer had three solo exhibitions at the gallery, as well as a solo exhibition at the Stein Gallery in 1956. Since the early Hansa exhibitions, solo exhibitions have been held at the Arkansas Art Center in Little Rock; the Pratt Graphic Arts Center; The Gallery in Morgantown, West Virginia; and at Wells College in Aurora, New York. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions in this country—at the Chicago Art Institute, the Philadelphia Print Club, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Kornblee Gallery in New York City—and abroad at the Studenterforenigen in Denmark and the Galeria Wstolzesna in Warsaw. The collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Pasadena Art Museum, and the Print Club in Philadelphia, among others, include Arnold Singer graphics.

While still a student at the Art Students League, Singer studied lithography (the first printmaking department in the country founded by Joseph Pennell), eventually teaching the printmaking medium at the League as well as Pratt Graphic Arts Center, where he became a master printer. A major participant in the renaissance of lithography that took place in New York in the fifties, Singer assisted in establishing some of the earliest workshops and introduced the medium to many leading American artists. He printed editions for Rufino Tamayo, Stuart Davis, Larry Rivers,

Ellsworth Kelly, Adolf Gottlieb and Barnett Newman. Considered an authority on graphic processes, he published technical articles in educational journals, and his work has been reproduced in *Art News*, *Artist's Proof*, and many others. He has published lithographs for *Time-Life, Incorporated* and provided technical data for the section on lithography in the Life Science Library series. A 1957 woodcut collage by Singer appeared on the cover of Fortune magazine, and another Singer print was selected for the 1966 UNICEF calendar.

Arnold Singer came to Cornell in 1966, recommended by Peter Kahn (late Professor Emeritus in the History of Art Department) as a leading expert in lithography. He inaugurated the program in lithography at Cornell and devoted all his energy to its development. A few years into his career at Cornell, he encountered a certain technical problem and began research to find a solution. His inquiries led him to the work of a leading British practitioner who declared that the ultimate authority was an American named Arnold Singer. By the 1970s, he had focused his teaching and studio practice on painting and drawing. He was a dedicated and generous teacher and took great pleasure in discussions of principles and style, conveying to his students the importance of drawing, composition and design as the prevailing and fundamental structure of works of art. His intense interest in cultural history had a profound effect on the development of his own artistic production and guided his approach to teaching and the mentoring of younger artists.

Singer had a passion for music, with a strong inclination toward the classical—periods and styles incorporating clarity of structure and form.

“Arnold loved traditional jazz and he exposed his art students to the beauties of New Orleans and Chicago styles. He would play recordings during class and encourage them by noting that this was music that Mondrian had loved. He himself harkened to these eras because he could hear the individual voices.”

Marty Laforce

He drew and painted continuously, working and reworking every painting and often creating numerous interpretations of a single subject. His paintings and drawings of still life subjects, figures, portraits and landscapes were composed with incomparable elegance and simplicity. He was a passionate believer in the Classical tradition and had little patience with what he looked upon as the frivolous experimentation of the avant-garde.

“A classicist he certainly was but he was, first and foremost, a humanist. His sensitivity to and intimate involvement with people could not help but surface in his classically arranged depictions of them. This was abundantly clear in his images of his family, and also in the many compositions with friends and students he found to be interesting subjects. He was brilliant in selecting the telling gesture or pose or physical characteristic, never reduced to caricature, that would reveal deep levels of observation, empathy and understanding.”

James Zver, MFA 1969

Arnold had a great passion for debate over a wide variety of topics including painting, photography, music, politics, and literature. He often held unpopular positions, but reveled in discussions with friends who represented opposing views. Those on the other side of the conversation were continually challenged to clarify and re-evaluate their positions. For Arnold, the debate was an expression of respect and friendship. He surely would have been very disappointed if everyone had agreed with him.

In addition to maintaining his deeply held artistic convictions, he will be remembered for his love of children, his friends and the ocean. He lived on Parker Street in Ithaca until December 2004, when he joined his son, Tony Singer, in Ringwood, New Jersey. He is also survived by his daughter, Poppy Singer of Ithaca, and four grandchildren, Simnia and Leo of Ithaca and Michael and Christopher of New Jersey; as well as his brothers Herb Singer in California and Morton Singer in Florida.

Victor Colby, Gregory Page, Stanley Taft