Bronislaw Marion Bak

The Life and Legacy of a Contemporary Renaissance Artist

A Biography by
By the Artist's Son

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1 St. John's Window wall, left of entrance

INTRODUCTION

It's been 53 years since my father and his team completed the enormous stained glass window at St. John's. The building and much of the campus is now on the national historic registry. St. John the Baptist Church, designed by Bauhaus Architect, Marcel Breuer in 1961 continues to draw comment; even more so today in the age of the internet. Nearly every image reference to the church online includes a view of the great north wall stained glass window. And very few contain any reference to the artist who designed and created this signature work of art, along with a team of monks and students he personally trained.

When I first began to write about my father, Bronislaw Bak, I had a very simple objective in mind.

After an artist passes away, there is no repository that looks after art in this country for all time unless it is recognized

as historically valuable. That is where the artist's family must come in if there is any hope of preserving the work. Writing about his life helps to present the artist behind the canvas to those who never knew him.

This also tends to generate interest in viewing and exhibiting the work some of which hopefully may someday become part of our nation's public domain. Time unfortunately is moving swiftly by and many who knew him well are themselves moving to a different world. Hundreds of his paintings and original prints have been sold over the years and may never be accounted for unless some efforts are made to draw attention to his contribution to the arts in this country.

In the course of researching and writing; interviewing his friends and contemporaries and the long hours interviewing my mother, Hedi Bak, his wife, fellow artist and companion for more than 30 years, I came to realize an equally important reason for writing his story. I believe that in his powerful imagery; his portrayal of humanity in hundreds of different paintings, lithographs, woodcuts and drawings, one finds a timeless and provocative insight into the workings of the human soul that draws on his life experience which becomes all the more relevant with the passage of time.

From his earliest work in monoprints and woodcuts to later drawings and oil paintings there is a powerful use of expression, symbolism and emotional feeling. He relished the study of human nature in and its frailty, weakness as well as in its nobility. He was a protagonist, who used his creative vision to confront and often ridicule hypocrisy, snobbery and airs of superiority, racial, cultural or political. He identified with the lives of ordinary people of the world, often capturing a poignant moment or an empathetic expression in many of his drawings or woodcut illustrations.

My father's vision was shaped by in the turbulence of war as was my mother. The passion of his convictions was rooted in the cauldron of hell that was the Second World War. A Polish soldier at the age of 17, he was captured by the Germans in 1939. Three years later he was an escaped prisoner of war laborer who upon recapture in 1943 experienced life and death behind the grim walls of a Nazi concentration camp near Strasburg, France. This camp was filled with French resistance fighters, Jews from Holland and France, other Eastern Europeans, and political and racial "undesirables" of all nationalities including Germans. And it was in their friendship and solidarity that helped him survive and stamped his character. Life was a battle between good and evil; truth and courage triumphing over fakery- themes, which he returned to

frequently in his work in later life. Simple acts of kindness and comfort by total strangers trapped together in this hellish place gave lie to the righteousness of the Nazi jackboots.

I started writing this biography in 1991, ten years after my father died to tell his story. Now 23 years later, I am finally publishing his story here.

My objective has been all along, to preserve and protect his legacy. Now that task has extended to Hedi Bak's legacy as well. Hedi died in 2010 in Georgia. Part of their story includes a number of other significant artists and friends who played an important part in their lives and who have now moved on.

I mention a number of them in this book, but there are a couple who deserve special recognition.

This project began soon after I had moved to Georgia, to live near my mother, Hedi Bak. My younger brother Pieter had died in 1984 in a car accident in Statesboro. In 1988, Recovering from a debilitating stroke and the loss of her home and studio in Statesboro, she was "living out her days" in a senior center in Sandy Springs and hating it. Not ready to settle down, and not one to ever give up, Hedi started to travel down to some of the galleries and studios in Mid-town. Along the way she met an interesting potter, Charles Counts, who for a number of years had been spending part of his time in Georgia and most of his time teaching in Nigeria.

Charles too had left a significant legacy, particularly in the Southeast. He, along with his first wife, Rubynelle ran the Beaver Ridge Pottery Workshop in Rising Fawn, Georgia on Lookout Mountain for over 25 years. He was a prolific writer and talented craftsman and designer. By the mid-80's his marriage ended, his primary residence had become Nigeria. On one of his trips back, he met Hedi. Not long after they married and both returned to Africa.

My mother's life in Africa was hard on her health, but great for her spirit. Living with Charles was some of the best times of her life she told me later. Charles died in Africa in 2000. I went to Maiduguri and spent a month, closing down the household and helping my mother return to the US. For most of the next decade she spent her time writing about her early life as a child growing up in wartime Germany. Her book, Mazel will also be published here as well.

It was during this time that I learned I had a younger sister, someone I had known since she was a baby. In most respects my father was a very conventional man so it was a small surprise to me that in later life I learned that he had a very close

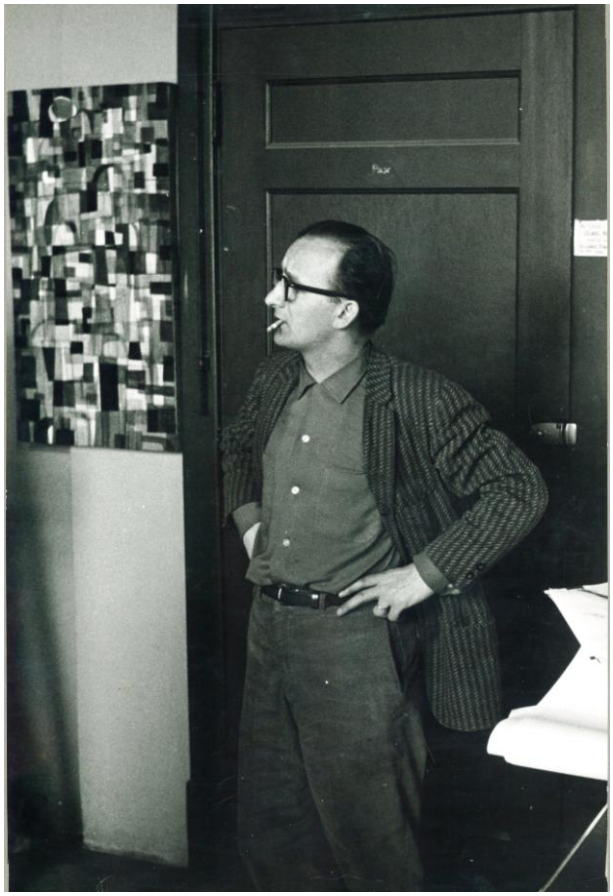
relationship with one of his students and our family friend Jean Diehl, in the early 1960's. Our sister, Joanna was born in Chicago and moved with her mother to Savannah, shortly afterwards. We continued to visit Jean on occasion, and she remained a close friend of both my parents till the end of her days. Jean's first husband had died in Chicago and she never married again. It wasn't till after her death and long after my father died that I learned the truth about their brief relationship and became aware of my sister, Joanna. For my mother, Hedi, this was painful episode years earlier, but in later life she grew to accept and love Joanna for the daughter she never had and always wanted.

There is a private side to everyone's life, and I don't presume to know everything about my father or Jean or even my mother over the years, but I do know one thing, they shared a passion for art and a respect and loving companionship for as long as I knew them. My father was a young man who was raised in a small village in Poland and set out to conquer the world with his art and ideas. And among the many gifts he left us was a wonderful and loving sister and now her daughter Serena, my niece, both artists and both sharing the same passion for art.

Many people have seen a painting by my father , or a window or other work of art and have been impressed. But there has never been a well organized exposition of his overall achievements presented in a way where the merits of his work, and the breath of his life's experiences as well as my mother's can be seen and understood easily. Hopefully with this virtual presentation we can finally accomplish what has been a central goal in my life for nearly 35 years.

This book is dedicated to my wonderfully gifted daughter, Emilia Noelle Bak and my equally endowed son Daniel Miguel Bak. May their exceptional talents and creative potential lead them to greatness.

OF EUROPEAN ORIGINS



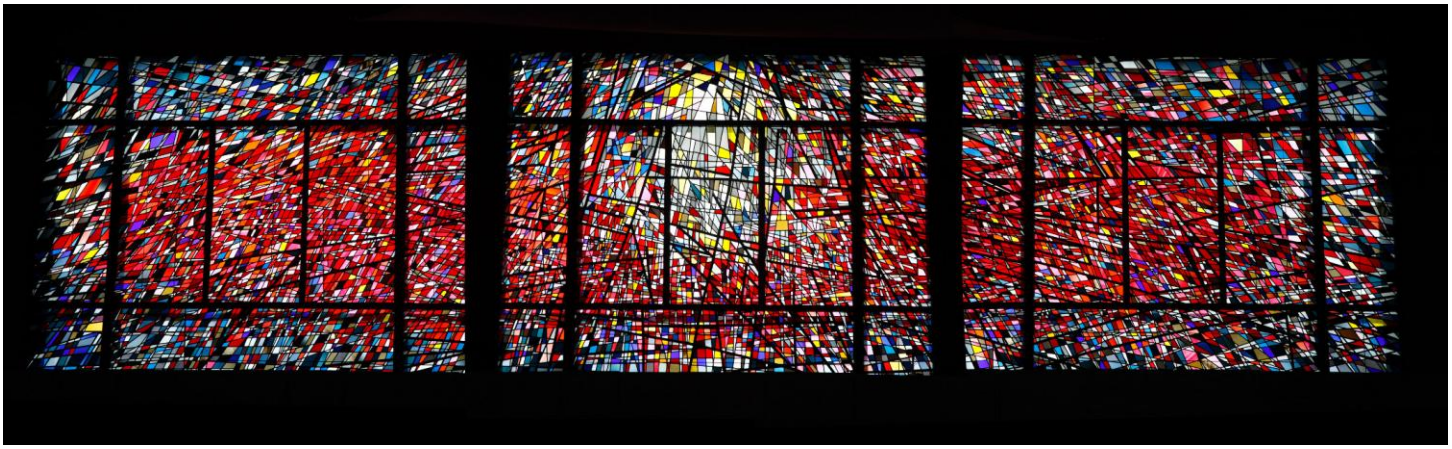
2 Bronislaw Bak circa 1963

I grew up watching my father work before an easel, the harsh smell of turpentine dampened by the pungent odor of the pigments smeared on the palette, his clothes and the canvas before him. Music filled the room from the ancient Grundig radio/phonograph in the corner, usually something like Brahms, Mozart or Ravelle, or occasionally a Polish folk tune or Jazz. He would literally dance in front of his work, stepping back frequently to get a better look, whistling under his breath to the music.

Often I would be in the studio playing or busy at a table helping him, tracing out the broad outlines of one of his sketches for a woodcut on a blank board on which he would later cut out the transposed images, working well into the night. To me he was a big man, as I guess any child's father would be, though he wasn't tall. But strong he was, his brush strokes firm and decisive, full of energy. I rarely knew the title of the painting or woodcut he was working on at the time, yet it always communicated something, a feeling or an image that resonated in my mind -a person, or a composition in color, like the music that was still hanging in the air. As a child, I had the advantage of being surrounded by art. Both my parent's work hung on every wall. I didn't have to understand art to feel its strength and emotion. It was simply a part of my life from the beginning.

Bronislaw Bak was an immigrant who worked and lived in this country for most of his adult life. He tolerated being called Bruno by most of his friends in this country, although he secretly hated this shortened Germanic nickname. In critical reviews of his exhibited work through the years, his original style and forceful approach was often noted.

His work ranged from figurative illustrations, surrealism, collages, to complete color abstractions. He was a master printmaker, painter, sculptor,



3 Temple Emmanuel Synagogue

4 St. John's Prep school relief panel

designer, and craftsman who left a substantial legacy of work in this country and in Europe.

The sheer volume of his three decades of work in this county underlines the passion and drive which characterized his work. Bronislaw Bak, up until his death in 1981, produced hundreds of paintings, thousands of limited edition graphics and designed a number of major architectural commissions in stained glass, concrete relief sculpture and mosaic.

In 1961, he designed and executed one of the largest stained glass windows in the world, in a cathedral-like church. Designed by the well-known Bauhaus architect, Marcel Breuer it can be seen today, located on the campus of St. John's University and monastery in Central Minnesota (fig. 2). It took him two years of hard work to complete the project; with the help of several students and monks he personally trained.

Unfortunately, due to internal discord in the church hierarchy that focused on the window's design, his achievement was

virtually ignored during his lifetime, even though the church and its world-famous architect received frequent notice and acclaim.

Another stained glass window designed and executed by Bronislaw Bak is in the Temple Emmanuel Synagogue on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago (fig 3). Completed in 1968, its theme is the Holocaust and it is dedicated to the memory of the victims of Nazism. A very complex design, it contains a brilliant explosion of intricately cut shards of glass in a powerful array of hues.

In the area of sculpture he was a pioneer in a new art form. In 1971 while living in Europe, he was selected to design and build a wall in the reception foyer room in the Kaiserslautern Pfalztheater in West Germany, a center for opera and theater in that area. His 15 feet high by nearly 30 feet long three-dimensional concrete wall, whose theme was inspired by the forests surrounding the town, was completely hand molded. Earlier sculpture relief work in poured concrete (freestanding and structural), walls can be found in Chicago and Central Minnesota (fig 4).

Listed in Who's-Who in the Mid-West and the International Arts Directory in the 1970's, Bronislaw Bak's work is in many private and public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Penn. and the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. in this country.

In gathering the materials, interviews, and old clippings for this manuscript, my objective was to put my father's work into the context of his life. As the American artist and educator, Allan Leepa explains quite well in his book, The Challenge of Modern Art, "A work of art is the product of the total personality of the artist; it is not simply the result of a number of isolated special sensibilities. The artist's point of view, his philosophy of life is reflected in his emotional projection on canvas. This projection is an integrated statement of himself. To understand his work it is valuable to know something of his way of thinking, the kind of problems he sets for himself, his viewpoints of the past and present, his ideas and feelings about himself and his relationship to the world, and the objectives toward which he strives. Then the various kinds and types of emotional communications he offers may become clearer in our experiencing of his work." 1.

5 Main Gate, Natzweiler-Strutthof Concentration Camp

An artist is a social being, who is particularly perceptive, and a cursory examination of Bronislaw Bak's work shows him to be a keen observer of society around him and the arts. As a modern artist and educator, he was well read, and fully aware of the work of his contemporaries as well as that of the past masters.

The foundation of his personality include significant events in his life's odyssey, as well as the training and foundations of his art in Europe that impacted his work and contributed to his outlook on life.

Born September 3, 1922, in Leszno, Poland, he didn't begin his formal training in Germany until after WWII. Bronislaw Marion Bak was 17 when the German army invaded his Polish homeland in 1939. He was the eldest of 7 brothers and a sister, the son of the village librarian in the small town of Rawicz, Poland near the German border. His father, who left the family when the children were quite young, died during the war in the Ravensbruck concentration camp.

Eagerly joining an irregular unit of the Polish army at the beginning of the war, Bronislaw, at the age of 17, was captured after three weeks of fierce fighting in the battle of Kutno. Overwhelmed by the German army's greater numbers the Polish army had been quickly defeated. Afterwards, he and thousands of other Polish troops who survived the battle were forced to march through a mob of hissing and spitting citizenry in the German city of Koenisberg who sneered at the "sub- human" Poles. For the next five years he served as a prisoner of war laborer in various camps, factories and farms, escaping, being recaptured and eventually ending up in the Schirmeck – section of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp near Strasbourg, France, for the duration of the war (fig 5). His anguished memories of war and imprisonment were told to family and friends in later life in small but sometimes harrowing bits and pieces.

That he survived at all was due to his youthful strength and the watchful support of his older fellow prisoners. But it was the many stories of acts of courage,

kindness, solidarity, and even humor among his fellow prisoners, of all nationalities and backgrounds, which had the greatest impression on him and his art in later life. His enduring faith in the humanity of all races can easily be seen in many of his his graphic illustrations through the years.

After being freed by American troops, he joined a Polish work battalion of ex-POWs working for the Americans at the Kaefertal U.S. army base, near Mannheim, West Germany. Being young and small, he was a favorite of his fellow laborers, and many knew of his talent for drawing. In 1947, his friends and comrades encouraged him to attend a small art school; the Mannheim Freie Akademie, which had just reopened amid the rubble of the stonewalls of the Mannheim Palace.

Today there is little evidence of the bombing and fire that nearly totally destroyed the city of Mannheim during the war. It is a massive bustling metropolis, with many stores and fine buildings. The beautiful Rose Garden fountain in the center of the commercial district is surrounded by museums, theaters and cafes. Coming in from Ludwigshafen on the Autobahn, one of the few remaining WWII bomb shelters, a tall grey bullet- shaped structure surrounded by high grass and railroad tracks, can still

6 Mannheim after the war

be seen. During the dark days and nights of the allied bombing raids, this last ominous reminder once gave shelter to over 100 city dwellers.

The Mannheim Schloss, an imposing Baroque palace covering several city blocks, formerly home to the Freie Akademie Mannheim, is now the residence of the Mannheim University and filled with students streaming out of the many miles of corridors or relaxing on the lawns between classes. These young students weren't even born yet back when my parents studied within those same walls, and many know little of the war years of their grandparents. But it was in Mannheim, where important clues can be found in my father's background and training that helped mold his approach to his art in later life.

In America we tend to want to categorize artists by their style or philosophy, sometimes assuming that if an artist did not adhere to a defined trend or school he must not give the content of his work much consideration, and just worked with "feeling." For Bronislaw, nothing could be further from the truth. While he experimented constantly with different themes, working equally well with figurative and non-objective compositions, his approach to his art was firmly grounded and remained consistent throughout his life. As he developed and matured as an artist, he built on the foundation he acquired in Germany.

The Freie Akademie which he attended was one of the first art schools that opened up right after the war in Germany, in a section of the palace not completely bombed out. The school had a history going back to the time of Grand Duke of Mannheim in the 1760's as a royal art and music academy.

In 1947, it had a class of about 100 students of various levels enrolled, with a core group of 20 full time students. There were three principal teachers, all with forceful personalities and a rich background in art. Their teaching stressed an understanding of the fundamentals, and much time was spent drawing from nature, not to imitate nature but to understand natural form and the laws of nature, as well as the mastery of technique.

Carl Trummer, the director, was the drawing instructor. He was a sculptor who had studied with the prominent French sculptor, Aristide Maillol, in the Akademie Jullian in Paris, during the 1930's. His approach to drawing was consistent with Maillol's popular human torsos in stone as described by the writer and critic, Sheldon Cheney; "Maillol, in spite of all his contempt for realistic interest, never violates the accepted visual aspects of nature. He simplifies, summarizes and selects, but he keeps discreetly within observed natural normality.... He goes half the way with the moderns; he seeks form, but he sacrifices no broad visual truth to intensify... 2. Here then Is a giant or his own time." Trummer’s drawing class always worked with a live model. In Bronislaw Bak's early work one can see the force of this training with his simple but elegant figure studies.

Professors Paul Berger-Bergner and A J Cherlé both studied in Dresden, but their styles were completely different. Cherlé taught painting and watercolor and stressed color theory. He and his wife were students at the Bauhaus in Dresden. At the time Cherlé was the least favorite of my father's teachers; however his ideas on color continued to germinate in Bronislaw's mind, and in later life he

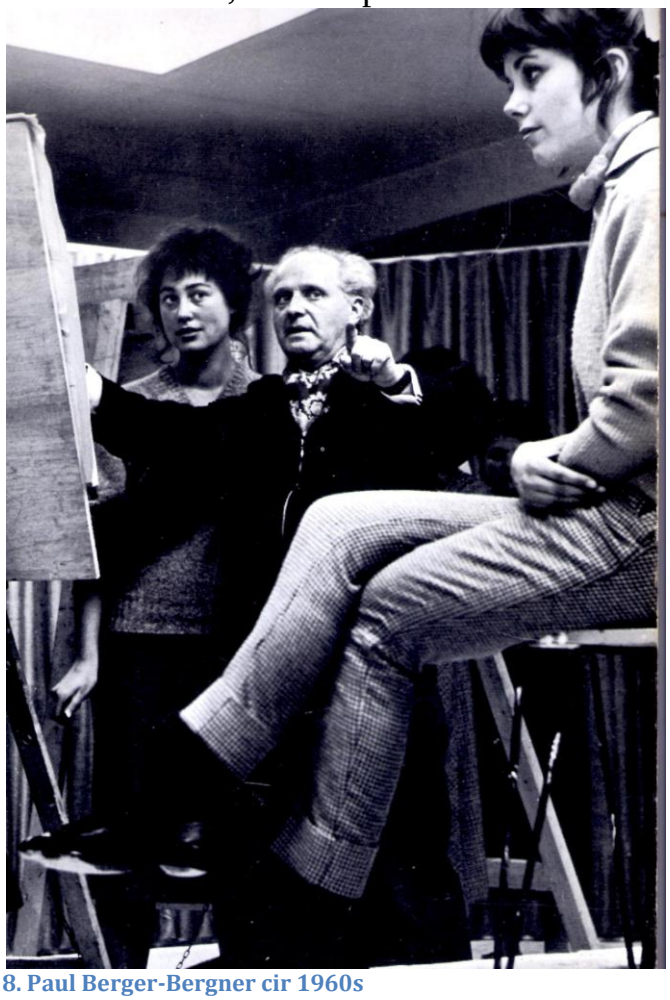
spent much of his time in the study of color theory and it's application to art. Berger-Bergner was the best known of the three, and most directly involved in the artistic development of the young student. For almost three years, Bronislaw was the "Meister- Schuler," of Berger-Bergner and lived in his studio. Walter Stallwitz, a fellow student of my father's at the Freie Akademie and today chairman of the Kunstlerbund Rhein-Neckar, remembers Bronislaw as a workaholic even in those days. He talked about my father's debonair demeanor, an exaggerated youthful tongue-in-cheek charm in spite of his ragged paint splattered clothes.

Joining the faculty in 1948, Berger-Bergner had already established a regional reputation, before and after the war, as an abstract expressionist painter. He was born in 1904 in Prague, where his father was director of the Staatsgalerie des Rudolfinum. He began his art career quite early at the age of 16. He studied in Vienna, Berlin and Dresden, including a year with Professor Emil Orlik. In the 1930's he was a cofounder of the Dresdner Secession with Otto Dix, a noted German painter of the 1930's. In 1934, he began working as student and associate of Oskar Kokoschka the internationally prominent German expressionist painter whose 20-year close collaboration and friendship had a powerful influence on his work and teachings. Herbert Read, the noted English critic and art historian refers to Kokoshka as, " . . . The artist who, more completely and more persistently than any other in our time, has embodied in his painting a visionary and symbolic humanism ... "3 Berger- Bergner's relationship with Kokoschka continued up through the mid-1950's, as a number of his students were frequent participants at Oskar Kokoschka's Sommerakademie in Salzburg.

7 Oil Painting by Paul Berger-Bergner

Like Trummer, Paul Berger-Bergner focused on the human form, often painting children. However, primarily through Berger-Bergner, the students were exposed to the passion and visionary approach reflective of the Figurative Expressionism in painters like Kokoschka and Emil Nolde, among others. The artist's search for the "inner truth," or self-

expression, was the heart of German Expressionism. In Berger-Bergner's work one can see the strong and dramatic emotional content that marks much of Bak's work as well. By the time Berger- Bergner passed away in 1978, he was considered one of the most important contemporary artists in Central Germany. In 1979, the City of Mannheim organized a retrospective exhibit of his works, along with a number of his students, in the Kunsthalle (Mannheim's Art Museum), which celebrated his contribution to the area's art, both as painter and teacher.



8. Paul Berger-Bergner cir 1960s

H. W. Janson, Professor of Fine Arts, New York University, wrote in his introduction to History of Art· A survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day; that works of art are linked in a chain of relationships that arise somewhere out of the dim and distant past and continue into the future: "All works of art anywhere are part of similar chains that link them to their predecessors. If it is true that "no man is an island," the same can be said of works of art. The sum total of these chains makes a web in which every work of art occupies its own specific place, and which we call tradition. Without tradition- -the word means that which has been handed down to us--no originality would be possible; it provides, as it were, the firm platform from which the artist makes his or her leap of the imagination. The place where one lands will then become part of the web and serve as a point of departure for further leaps." 4.

In this respect the small art academy assumed a special responsibility to familiarize its first post-war generation of students with the history of art, Classical as well as 20th Century works. Germany like the rest of Europe had been demolished, and was just beginning to dig out of the ruins.

However, unlike the rest of the world, the destruction of culture and the banning of all but the most atrocious works of Nazi

propaganda had been state policy for over 12 years. Nearly all of the students had grown up with little or no knowledge of their own country's magnificent heritage. This included Bronislaw and the several other "Auslanders" (foreigners) among the students whose formal introduction to the arts began with the Akademie. There were few museums or exhibitions, few standing libraries or galleries and only a handful of art schools in the whole country. It was as if a window was opened for the first time offering each student a tremendous view about a whole new world, amidst the rubble of the old one. For the students it was a time of wondrous discovery and excitement following years of darkness.

The effect of WWII on the arts, and particular the impact of the Nazi era, has not been widely understood in America. I have looked over several popular college textbooks on Modern Art history which give this subject only fleeting coverage, or pass over it entirely. Up until the outbreak of war, Europe was the acknowledged center of Western Art. While Paris dominated the continent, important contributions were also being made in Berlin, Dresden and Munich as well as a host of other smaller German cities. Art movements such as the Brücke group, the Blaue Reiter group, Dadaism and Surrealism, Constructivism not to speak of German Expressionism, attained international stature before the rise of Hitler. All of these movements were condemned and literally destroyed by the Nazi Government.

9 Hitler at the Entartete Kunst Exhibit

In 1937 the Hitler regime organized an exhibit entitled "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art), held in the House of German (Art fig 8). Twenty-five museums were plundered and one hundred and twelve of the finest painters in Germany were "disgraced" in this exhibit. The vaults of Germany's most important museums were further rifled in 1939 when the famous Lucerne auction of over 12,000 drawings and 5,000 paintings was held. Those not sold, which included 1,004 paintings and 3,825 drawings, were later burned in a symbolic bonfire in the courtyard of the Main Firehouse in Berlin in 1939.

The Nazis established criteria for art which flowed from their political ideology, and which by definition contradicted true art. Art must serve the "master race" and extoll its moral codes, i.e. Propaganda. It must be

understandable to everyone and be true to nature. And every work of art must be" beautiful." Suffice it to say that the works of the overwhelming majority of German artists were banned, and many of the most prominent living artists were forced to flee into exile. A number were also imprisoned and several executed. Lesser artists and students of the masters were simply prevented from working. Often conscripted into the army, many had died or were captured on the various fronts. Paul Berger-Bergner was a medic on the Russian front, and was taken prisoner by the Russians towards the end of the war. It was among those survivors like Berger-Bergner whose task it was after the war to breathe new life into the corpse of German culture.

This gap in the development of the arts in Germany, particularly visual arts, meant that those art students of the first post-war generation like Bronislaw Bak were more familiar with the "Post-Impressionism" of Cezanne, then they were with the latest Abstract Expressionist exhibit in New York. They were barely aware of the works of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, Mark Rothko and others of the New York School in the euphoria of what became to be called Abstract Expressionism.

The first post-war international exhibit from America was held in 1948; an exhibit of the non-objective work of Moholy-Nagy and his students at the Kunsthalle. By the early 1950's the art throughout Europe, as well as Germany, began to parallel art movements in the States, and the gap began to close. In today's modern art it is virtually impossible to distinguish national characteristics; as Jackson Pollock said, "... The basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country." 5.

While at the school, Bronislaw met Hedi Mueller, a fellow student and his future wife. As the daughter of Fritz Mueller, Social Democratic Party (SPD) chairman for the state of Rheinland Pfalz, her life had been a hard one during the war years. As a child she was witness to the rise of Fascism in Germany; book burnings, house- searches and social ostracism.

Her father was arrested several times and spent several years in prison, including an early stint in Dachau. During the war she was conscripted into a forced labor battalion and forced to work in an ammunition dump loading trucks.

Trained as a draftswoman in the Hochschule in Kaiserslautern during the war, she came to the Akademy in 1946, and was one of the first students to enroll. Married to Bronislaw in 1950, they were to remain together through thick and thin for the next thirty- one years, sharing a

family and a passion for art. A serious artist in her own right, her paintings and graphics work have been in many exhibits throughout the country and in Europe. She has illustrated several children's books published in the 1960's and taught art classes at the college level.

10 Bronislaw circa 1948

In 1950 Bronislaw was invited to submit work to the International Exhibit of Religious Art in Rome. His "The Way of the Cross," was a series of stark monoprints whose figurative imagery showed the strong influence of the work of artists such as Emil Nolde and Edvard Munch.

In 1951 he won the Pfalz Prize, a full year's scholarship to the Arts Colony in Koblenz. For some time the couple had been considering immigrating to the U.S. Germany was just beginning to be rebuilt, and opportunities for artists were few. In 1952, Bronislaw, Hedi and their two infant sons migrated to America, along with thousands of other "displaced persons" to begin a new life.

Although Bronislaw Bak was educated in the tradition of German Painting, he did not remain strictly a European artist in America. His work evolved and was influenced by his life's experiences in this country. His later work underwent substantial changes, retaining only his grounding in the fundamental laws of color, harmony, balance and composition, and skill. In this respect he shared the special ability to subordinate style to more significant pursuits with some better known artists, chief among them Picasso, whose work ranged from cubist, classical, realist to surrealist at any particular stage. Yet in looking back though my father's work, one can easily see his interest in form, color and contrast, whether it be a non-objective color or figure studies.

In 1978 Bronislaw wrote: "It is my conviction that we cannot lead our action by intuition alone. Creativity means shaping, means molding, and requires all the potential- intuitive and rational. Especially in times of massive misunderstandings, of enormous and contradictory information, one has to employ all the faculties. It is in the formulation of a proper question which may lead to an answer; and aesthetics is somewhere between the formulation and the answer. I believe that one has to engage in a constant search; for only this search will give one a chance to find quality - which is synonymous with fullness and beauty. Paintings, sculpture, graphics, all are accidentals-good painting, good sculpture, and good graphic is art". 6.

There is no doubt that over time his work grew and matured. Various stages in his work focused on different problems of art and life. In the last years of his life, he was particularly concerned with aesthetics and environment. His large oil canvases, color studies in various moods, were a reflection of that inquiry. Earlier work in the 1970's focused on the quality of human life. Some reviewers at the time found his work to be focused on the darker side of humanity, perhaps recalling his war experiences and at one point in his life he certainly was.

But in general he saw himself as an observer of humanity, not to admonish but to elevate awareness- to challenge the mind. R.G. Collingwood, one of the most prominent 20th century art scholars suggested that above all -art must be prophetic. "The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts. His business as an artist is to speak out, to make a clean breast. But what he has to utter is not, as the individualistic theory of art would have us think, his own secrets. As spokesman of his community, the secrets he must utter are theirs. The reason they need him is that no community altogether knows its own heart; and by failing in this knowledge a community deceives itself on the one subject concerning which ignorance means death ... Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness." 7.

In the world of art today there is a great divergence of styles and creative talent that contribute to contemporary visual art. There is no dominant approach that summarizes the present, where a convenient label would be appropriate, although attempts have been made - "Post- modern?"

It is a function of time to look back, sort out and weigh past art as it is for all

historical phenomena. R.G. Collingwood, wrote in 1924: "Contemporary history embarrasses a writer not only because he knows too much, but also because what he knows is too undigested, too unconnected, too atomic. It is only after close and prolonged reflection that we begin to see what was essential and what was important, to why things happened as they did, and to write history instead or newspapers." 8.

I am confident that as time goes on the works of my father will find their place in the scales of history, and that future generations will have the opportunity to know of him and his work. It is knowing that time has a double- edged sword that prompted me to write about my father. Even today a number of his paintings, drawings and graphics are scattered and perhaps lost forever, and many of those who knew him best are passing on. Some of his sculpture and even stained glass windows are neglected and in danger of being destroyed over time.

The underlying premise of this book is that putting Bronislaw Bak's work into the context of his life can show that he came to his art from a unique perspective- one which gave him an extraordinary advantage and insight. His eyes were not focused on the past and neither was his work -on the contrary, he sought out the future with zeal. It is in the quality of his background and his international roots combined with the synthesis of his experience with life in America as well as his skills as an artist, that makes his contribution unique in the context of American Art in his lifetime.

WELCOME TO CHICAGO

"The city is as old as civilization; perhaps it is civilization. Many of its characteristics go back almost to its beginnings: extremes of wealth and poverty, elegance and depravity, mass crowding and individual isolation, dazzling variety and strangling conformity, architectural magnificence and monstrosity, order and chaos, the security of frenetic activity and the loneliness of the desolate street. It is where the "action" is, and, paradoxically it is where everyone is waiting for the "action". Who, other than the artist, has the concern and the means to confront the city?" Professor Marvin Mirsky, University of Chicago 1.

The winter of 1967 was as cold and blustery as any in Chicago. The beaches and stonework along Lincoln Park were covered with thick sheets of ice sculpted by the offshore winds that roared down from the northern reaches of the Great Lakes. It rattled the windows of the old storefront on the twenty-two hundred block of Lincoln Avenue, where the lights of the studio-workshop glowed late into the night through frosted panels, warmed by the glow of a vertical free standing stained glass window.

STUDIO 22 as it had become known, was a scene of happy chaos. The culmination of months of inspired work was fast approaching, as a handful of friends, volunteers and family members wound their way around tables stacked with pages waiting to be hand collated. The rumble of the old hand - fed platen letter press in the background added to the noise and confusion, as my mother fed each page through the press. Dozens of prints hung from wires stretched across the far corners of the room, others were laid in wooded racks to dry.

Nearby stood the ancient Washington hand press; a 100-year-old newspaper press. Often Bronislaw or Hedi would use this old monster press to print woodcuts. One would roll the bed, woodcut, paper and platen under the cast iron lid of the

press. Pulling the great oak handle across the ways, the hand cut black images would be transferred to the paper beneath.

Through the month of December of that year, 500 portfolio editions of One Hundred Views of Chicago were hand-printed, collated, signed and sold literally "off the press." Only a few copies remain of my father's compelling portrait of the "Windy City," and the woodblocks themselves are long gone. This edition represented a full year's work, starting with hundreds of sketches of street corners, landmarks, people and street scenes. The simple woodcut illustrations, with brief two or three word commentary, convey an impression of Chicago difficult to match in any other media. The write up in the Chicago Tribune Skyline magazine announcing the book's publication that winter referred to it as an "unprecedented graphic study" of the city: "Bak has interpreted the city through its people rather than its buildings. Although the viewer will quickly recognize many familiar corners, landmarks and even commercial establishments, he will be more engrossed in the thoughtful, unusual portrayals of Chicago's citizenry. A Gold Coast denizen walking his poodles ... a group of slightly intoxicated workers watching the world from a tavern doorway ... an elderly gentleman enjoying the afternoon sun…all occupy a place in **"One Hundred Views of Chicago."** Each print tells its own complete story; together, the 100 pages provide an in-depth, overall graphic description of the Chicago scene." 2.

The 100 views of city life tell as much about the artist as they do about the recorded scenes. Bronislaw sought to capture the flavor of the city, and his insight shows both humor and compassion. Each woodblock print is a vignette of the mix of nationalities and race, squalor and beauty, happiness and

sadness that was Chicago, suspended in the recorded moment of an artist's vision. The sensitive portrayal of humanity celebrated the many differences that was the Chicago that he had come to know and enjoy.

Inspired by the works of Frans Masereel, and other German Expressionists who turned to woodcuts as the medium of choice to portray European city life, the project was suggested to Bronislaw the year after arriving in America by the then Curator of Graphics at the Chicago Art Institute, Mr. Otto Schniewind. After 13 years the idea finally materialized, shined brightly and then faded away into the hands of a few collectors, patrons and friends.

The Chicago Book was more than a tribute to a city. Chicago had become our adopted home, as we joined tens of thousands of other immigrants in search of a new life in the year 1952. Following World War II, a steady stream of uprooted war-weary people from all over the European continent flowed to the United States. Many of them were classified as "displaced persons," or DP's for short, choosing to go to America, the land of promise, rather than return to the uncertainty of Eastern Europe.

Most of what I know about the early days is based on my mother's memoirs, and the stories she told us as we were growing up. At the end of nearly every war, there is always a migration of people looking for a new life. We were the "boat people" of our generation. Opting not to return to Poland after finishing school in Mannheim, Bronislaw lost his citizenship and became a man without papers. My mother's German citizenship was also suspended for marrying a foreigner. Cast adrift by government bureaucracy, the letters urging my father to come to the States and offering support from his friend, Richard Godlewski, began to sound quite appealing. Godlewski, who had immigrated several years earlier to Chicago, (the former commander of the Polish labor company under the U.S. forces at Kaefertal), Applying for permission to immigrate, Bronislaw Bak became "Machine Operator Bak" citing POW experience in a factory in Berlin. (*Artists, philosophers and other such intellectuals were not much in demand in the US*). After a long wait in a "DP" camp, we were mustered aboard a rusty Liberty Ship and set our sails for the new world.

My mother, brother and I were quartered on the upper deck along with the other women and children, and my father was berthed below with the other men. The passage was turbulent, the little ship bucking and pitching in a series of winter gales. Little was seen of Bronislaw for the first week; he was spending his time

alternating between being sick below or busy painting the breastworks with the others below decks. Once my mother got her sea legs, she began caring for some of the other women and their children who were quite sick. We took a few courageous walks on the open deck, my brother Matthew pulling on my mother's hand and I practicing my first steps, not yet being a year old. As we finally entered New York harbor, at the end of the two-week voyage, my father joined us to see all the sights for the first time, Staten Island, the Statute of Liberty, the Empire State Building and Manhattan Island. Landing at a pier on the East River, we quickly boarded a train to Chicago and the Promised Land. After a long twenty-three hour train rides we reached our destination.

Bronislaw's friend, Captain Richard Godlewski, and our sponsor, the former Polish consulate, Mr. Moe, met us at the train station and helped us with our luggage. We had been invited to stay with the former Polish soldier, who was a bachelor, and share his small apartment in the heart of the Polish community off Division Street on Chicago's Westside. The small dingy apartment was filled with overstuffed furniture like the lobby of an old hotel on the verge of being closed. When the windows were opened the apartment was invaded by the pungent odor of trashcans overflowing in the back alley and the noise of alley cats and scampering rodents. With two small children in tow this arrangement was unbearable for my parents from the beginning and it wasn't long before they were looking around for their own apartment.

Chicago like New York and Boston was a city of immigrants. Whole neighborhoods were dominated by one language and culture. Schools, churches and stores conducted business in Lithuanian, Polish, German, Hungarian and many other languages. One of my earliest memories is of going to a Polish indoor market holding my mother's hand, standing next to a barrel of pickles taller than myself, reeking of sweet onions, garlic and dill. Huge fish stared up at me from the counters with vacant eyes amid sausages, fresh vegetables and strong smelling cheeses. The air was filled with the exchange of strange dialects. The rapid influx of new immigrants stretched the resources and living quarters in each community to the maximum, and by 1952, when our family arrived, the welcome mat was a bit worn.

Reality quickly took hold. Bronislaw was invited to work as a stained glass window designer for a German-speaking man who ran a small business, and made it a point to hire painters, just "off the boat," who were not able to speak English, and

therefore did not know that the prevailing rate of pay per hour for such work was five times what the gentleman shelled out. (The same fellow showed up in Minnesota years later in the hopes of using his past association with Bronislaw to get a piece of the action on the St. John's window.) At the time, however, he had little use for my father's style and in a dispute over a design, fired him after four weeks of work.

Bronislaw went to an employment agency to find work- any work. After getting turned down several times, the clerk at the agency explained to my father that he must not list his full education if he wanted to get hired. The very next interview was at the Nabisco cookie factory, where he was hired on the spot, after volunteering that he had only four years elementary education. Shoveling dough on the night shift promised to be backbreaking work, but it would allow him a chance to work during the daylight hours in a corner of the bedroom converted into a studio. This soon became an illusion, as often he would return home exhausted, throwing himself on the bed, unable to move.

Before leaving Germany, my parents agreed in advance not to look to Polish or German cultural associations for help. Given the harsh memories of the war they were fearful that one or the other could be made to feel uncomfortable in such a setting. Since the only social outlet in the area were other Poles, my mother's feeling of being a foreigner in the neighborhood were quite understandable. She understood some of the conversation, but couldn't speak the language. Except for one young mother, Pani Fiakowski, she had no one to talk to.

After a few months, Bronislaw was invited to give a lecture at the Polish Arts Club in Chicago. Later several old Polish friends of Bronislaw from Europe stopped off with him, for an "impromptu reunion." It soon became clear that even those with much more impressive academic backgrounds hadn't done any better at that point. One man who had a PhD. in Economics from the University of Heidelberg, and a degree from the Sorbonne and spoke five languages, was working as a clerk at Montgomery Ward. This was typical of the early experiences of many professionals from Eastern Europe who immigrated to the States after the war.

The work at Nabisco was becoming more and more debilitating. My mother began thumbing through the phone book, looking up German names. She came across Mies van der Rohe, architect, at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Grabbing a portfolio of work, she took a cab over to the school and was ferried around to the

Chicago (new Bauhaus) Institute of Design.

There she met Professor Ludwig Hilbersheimer who introduced her to Konrad Wachsman, who in turn introduced her to the daughter of Walter Gropius, who was working as a freelance illustrator. A seasoned veteran of the commercial art world, she looked over the work and advised Hedi that her work was not structured enough to be marketable, and that all she could do was help her get her foot in the door. Hedi would have to do the rest. She made a number of calls but nothing came of it. Eventually my mother got a job as a draftswoman in an architect's office, through Mr. Moe.

Now it was my father's turn to stay home and look after us. That lasted for all of three weeks. Our mother had become sick. Pregnant again, she couldn't eat anything and ended up quitting her job. Bronislaw soon found work as a machine operator in a screw machine factory.

Professor Hilbersheimer from IIT came to visit and look at the artwork. Bronislaw was painting large simple nude figures in oil and doing woodcuts in the same vein. He was still intrigued with floating figures inspired by a dance troupe from East Germany that he had seen perform at the Akadamie in Mannheim. Hilbersheimer liked the work and called his friend, Dr. Otto Schniewind, curator and graphics expert at the Chicago Art Institute, to view it as well. Dr. Schniewind was quite enthusiastic and offered a number of suggestions. Through him, Hedi was able to introduce my father’s work to a number of galleries; however unfortunately none appeared interested in the work at that time.

Directed to the North Shore Art League, Hedi got the same response. Later friends pointed out that most Chicago art circles were not yet ready for nudes, even the tame ones Bronislaw was doing at the time.

In retrospect, one might argue that at a moment in history, when other modern currents such as the modern realists and minimalist artists, the abstract figurative works of an immigrant artist who could barely speak, were challenging the popularity of abstract expressionism and would not have been very exciting to Chicago galleries and art centers. His work understandably still showed the heavy influence of Mannheim. As foreigners, both he and Hedi had important hurdles to cross, not the least was to learn the language. Professor Hilbersheimer suggested that being parents actually gave them some advantages: "Learn to speak English from

your children, they will pick it up quickly, playing with their friends."

It was becoming clearer day by day that the young couple needed to break out of the isolation of the insular ethnic community, and make contact with other artists if they were to maintain their creative energy. In one sense they were both quite different from some of the other immigrants who had preceded them. Many of those had come to settle in the old neighborhoods and worked from the past, recalling scenes from their childhood and native lands. These artists, my parents felt, could find little comfort in the exciting changes going on in the American art world and remained cloistered in the neighborhood. My parents on the other hand, looked to the New World for inspiration. They were eager to get out and get to know America.

To remain in the ethnic confines of the ethnic communities would spell the end of their careers as serious artists. Unable to pursue their livelihood as artists with little opportunity to learn English, they would end up in the trap of working long hours in low paying jobs, too tired to work. Dr. Marya Lillien, a Polish art professor at the Chicago Art Institute, who was to become a lifelong friend and supporter, told them that in so many words. She was an interior architect and a former student of Frank Loyd Wright.

It was she who arranged an interview with Mr. Ballard, director of the Hull House settlement house. Founded by Jane Adams as a Jiving quarter and social center for the city's poor, the settlement had evolved into an energetic international cultural center, housing a number of international artists, musicians and intellectuals. We were accepted, but before we could move, Hedi suffered a serious calamity. In the summer of 1953, late into her pregnancy, Hedi began to feel sharp pains. Bronislaw was summoned from work, while the police took her to Cook County Hospital. After hours of waiting a doctor examined Hedi and determined that nothing was wrong. On the way back from the hospital, she began severe hemorrhaging. By the next evening she had suffered a miscarriage. She continued to bleed, and my father donated blood before reporting back to work. Soon after arriving at the factory that night, he keeled over in a faint. Hedi woke up the next morning to the news that twelve friends had come in and donated blood.

It was only later in a newspaper article that she learned that the friends were Bronislaw’s coworkers in the factory. The kindness shown by my father's fellow workers in the factory demonstrates the affinity that Bronislaw had for those who he often called the simple worker. It was

part of his character molded by his wartime experience perhaps and his childhood that he could often interact better with the laborers he would come in contact with in later life then with many of the more intellectual and occasionally pretentious associates he would meet in art and academic circles. Many of the carpenters, bricklayers and other craftspeople would in turn take a quick liking to this foreigner with his polite friendly manner and often go out of their way to give him a hand with his projects.

My mother remembers coming home two weeks later from the hospital and gingerly working her way up the steps. Bronislaw ministered to her with food and a good deal of comfort. That week he did several woodcuts with the mother and child theme, as well as at least one oil painting. The episode was a tremendous jolt to both of them, and an indication of the stress and poverty that marked that first stage of their life in America.

After Hedi had recovered to a degree, the move was made to Hull House. Located just south of the Loop, all that remains today is a small section of the original center, converted into a museum and surrounded by the campus of the University of Illinois. Of all the neighborhoods in Chicago, Halstead Street and the open-air market of Maxwell Street was the most international and cosmopolitan. A thriving, bustling community of small shops, street venders and exotic restaurants, if there was ever a "melting pot" of American immigrant culture, here were all the ingredients. The area had the look of Manhattan's Lower East Side in its heyday, and both Bronislaw and Hedi found the atmosphere exhilarating. The apartment was large, clean and brightly lit by previous standards, and the living room converted into a sizable studio.

Hedi and Bronislaw met and made friends with a number of people from all over the world. Every two weeks there was a residence dinner, and a full program of cultural activity. Within the thirteen buildings that made up the complex, there were youth clubs, gyms, a nursery school, evening school for immigrants, an art school, a music school, and even a theater.

Our stay at Hull House was a happy one, marred only by one incident that could have turned out much worse. One evening, my brother and I were playing in a window, protected only be a screen, while our mother worked in the adjoining room. Matthew leaned a bit too hard on the screen and fell out, falling three stories down onto the concrete pavement below. Luckily the worse that came of it was a small fracture, but my parents were both shaken by the accident.

Bronislaw did a number of sketches of the street scenes from the surrounding area. One drawing in particular stood out.

Depicting a street vender selling fish from a stall on Maxwell Street, several friends commented that the work was so full of character that one could smell the odors of market produce and food rising from the image. He also did several large multicolor woodcuts, one called MAXWELL STREET, and another titled BUS STOP. Hedi did an oil painting, a view of Halstead Street from our living room window three stories up that is one of my favorites of her early works. It is a simple view of a row of buildings across the street. Bronislaw began illustrating a series of woodcuts, the story of our coming to America, entitled, "On Top of This." Things had gotten to a point where one could look back with just the right sense of humor. [4].

During this time, my parents met and soon became fast friends with two young artists who were chiefly responsible for introducing them to the Chicago art scene; a painter, Chuck Cooper and a photographer, Bob Schiller. The first encounter was rather memorable. Bronislaw had donated a roll of prints and drawings to the owner of a small Polish bookstore he had befriended who was having a difficult time staying in business. He suggested to the old man that he sell the artwork for two dollars apiece and keep the money. One evening the old man called up very excited to exclaim that,
“The son of Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia and his interpreter were there in his bookstore, and wanted to meet the artist." That the shopkeeper had been confused was understandable, considering Bob Schiller's long hair, dark features and large bag of camera gear slung over his shoulder. The fact that Schiller was dreadfully hard of hearing to the point where Chuck had to repeat everything said five decibels louder clinched the impression that here indeed was a famous foreign tourist. As it turned out, these artists were firmly grounded in the Chicago art scene. Schiller was educated at the Illinois institute of Technology, School of Design, and Cooper was from the Chicago Art Institute School. These schools had spawned the two primary art factions in the city, which divided the loyalties of the galleries, collectors and the public. Unaffiliated artists such as my parents often found it tough to break through. That evening they returned home with Bronislaw to see more of his work. Hours passed in animated discussion, as the pair gave my parents new insight on galleries, art shows and competitions and the art establishment. They were impressed with the volume of my father's work. Even in those days, working a full time job, Bronislaw put out an enormous amount of work. Working long hours in his makeshift studio every day, there would always be at least two or three projects going on simultaneously.

The next Friday evening, Bob Schiller drove up in his parent's station wagon. Loading up a number of my father's oil paintings, he left instructions for my parents to come to the Highland Park Art Fair the next morning. With a great deal of apprehension, my parents headed out to Highland Park in a neighbor’s car to see what this "art fair" business was all about. An aversion to self- promotion was always endemic to my father's character, and although like any artist he welcomed recognition and success with the art public, he considered any personal effort to win such acclaim cheap and phony for any true artist. He found the art fair to be a different and somewhat favorable experience. Eight feet by eight feet artist's booths lined the aisles of an expensive

furniture store's parking lot in this well-to-do Northern Chicago suburb. Walking though, my father found his paintings hanging on a fence at the back end of the lot.

There were all sorts of artists and crafts persons and a wide selection of work in style and quality. There were several artists who specialized in creating work specifically designed for quick sales at art fairs. These artists made it a career to attend one after another art fair. Most of the other artists had one or two favorite shows each summer, and looked forward to it as social event nearly as much as an opportunity to bring in a little extra money, much like some people do yard sales.

In the course of the day, a young couple came by several times to look at my father's work. Eventually, they asked if they could borrow a canvas to see how it would look in their living room. Hedi had been doing some kiln fired enamel work in copper, and had laid a few pieces out on the table. She remembers that the response towards her work was less than gratifying. She heard several comments like, "Oh look, my son Bobby is doing that in grade school." However, towards the end of the day the young couple returned with one hundred dollars (a small fortune in those days) to buy the painting. The fact that this was the only significant sale among all the artists that day, helped to convince Bronislaw that art fairs weren't so bad after all.

In later years, it became a regular family event to set up a booth at the "Old Town Triangle Art League's" annual art fair in June. This enormous art fair stretched several city blocks in the heart of the Near North Side of Chicago. While I never remember us selling a great deal of work there, many of my parent's artist friends would be there, and there would be a constant stream of old friends dropping by. The food was always great; one could eat bratwurst and German potato salad at one end of the fair, and roast Teriyaki Chicken outside the Buddhist Temple down the other street.

One could actually enter the Buddhist Shrine and see the neat arrangement of candles and incense burning, but my favorite spot was next door in a great hall where hundreds of inexpensive imported toys and trinkets were on sale. Towards evening nearly every house had a party going, and there was always one or two Jazz concerts or a puppet show underway. Through Chuck Cooper and Bob Schiller, my parents met a number of artists. Bronislaw landed a job with the firm, Sylvestries, designing window displays for department stores.

This was boring work, and he hated it but it was a big step up from the screw factory. At one point, he grew so bored with the repetitive miniature nativity scenes that he began introducing hidden Coca Cola and stop signs into the painted background. Working in the evenings and on weekends, he turned out new work constantly. His paintings were entered into the Chicago and Vicinity annual art show, but were turned down several years in a row. Hedi pounded the pavement, portfolio in hand going from gallery to gallery also always getting turned down. Then came the first break. A gallery owner and friend of Cooper's stopped by and picked out several paintings to hang in his window.

Alex Cower, owner of the Fauve Gallery in downtown Chicago, saw the paintings and came over to see more of the work. Arrangements were made on the spot to organize Bronislaw's first one-man show. The show opened with a great reception and there were a couple of favorable reviews. Despite the fact that nothing was sold, Bronislaw was convinced that he was on the verge of success. While his optimism was a bit premature, the show was a benchmark in registering his progress in becoming accepted in Chicago circles as a respected American immigrant artist. In the mid- 1950's he began working for the Stained Glass Studio, Michaudel, where his modern glass design concepts slowly began to be accepted as well. During this period Bak-designed windows were installed in churches as far away as Florida. It was here that he designed the window wall for the Sacred Heart Convent in Hubbard Woods near Chicago that attracted a great deal of attention, both in religious art circles as well as among artists.

By this time Hedi had begun to teach art classes, including at Francis Parker, a private elementary school just off Lincoln Park and the Chicago Home for Girls, an inner city boarding home for troubled adolescents.

While most of the time my brother and I were in Kindergarten, occasionally we would accompany mother to some of these classes. In 1957, my younger brother Pieter was born, and there were now five in our family. My parents rented an apartment on Chicago's Near North Side, and Bronislaw rented a storefront and turned it into a studio. One friend loaned him a set of Jazz records, and he fell in love with the music. He did one large oil painting of a Jazz ensemble and several drawings. My parents joined a number of other artists and set up one of Chicago's first artist's cooperative galleries, Studio A, challenging the strangle hold of the art establishment, by offering works of local "unrecognized"

talent. Artists from both the IIT faction and the Art Institute were neatly mixed. Among the artists was a black ceramist from Gary, Indiana, Earl Hooks, who was to remain a lifelong friend of Bronislaw, and a strong influence later in my father's understanding of life in America.

Moving again, up to Fullerton Avenue, my parents found a home on the campus of the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago's Lincoln Park Community. This was a large three-story house and a small yard. The entire top floor was set aside for studio space, and it was here that I remember spending many an hour watching my father work. He experimented with figures and form, and became more interested in the association of texture in his paintings.

A graduate of a St. John the Baptist, (a small Minnesotan Catholic university and seminary), Matthew Ahmann, working for the Chicago Archdiocese at the time, had seen the article Bronislaw contributed to in the Catholic Today magazine, and wrote to the school, recommending my father for a teaching position in the school's art department. He knew of my father's window designs and thought that Bronislaw would be a good choice to design the large window for the new church they were building. By 1958, he was at a good point to do the design for the St. John's window. His painting had matured, and he had begun to work with greater confidence in non-objective abstract studies, occupied with form, color and texture. His continued use of figurative work in illustration was a product of his training under Berger-Bergner, who stressed that, "Figurative work was important to be able to do illustration, but painting is always a translation of an abstraction, whether the object in mind is natural or formless."

His sense of confidence was enormous, and there was nothing he was not ready to tackle, including the design for one of the largest stained glass windows in the world. With his appointment to the faculty at St. John's, the first chapter of his life in America, and ours, came to a close. We headed for Minnesota and one of the biggest challenges, accomplishments and ultimately a great disappointment in his life.

ST JOHN'S

The size of a work of art has never been a primary consideration in judging a work of art. There have never been any important exhibits of "big paintings;" or "medium sized sculpture." Size is simply a historical fact in the commission of a work that may tell something of the artist's task - the scope of his or her achievement. One would think that the difference between large or small is that one is more likely to overlook the latter.

Once in a while there are exceptions to that rule; one of these overlooked exceptions, a particularly large one, was a work designed and built by Bronislaw Bak in Central Minnesota in 1961 -a wall of stained glass, over 10,000 square feet in surface area. The window, 60 feet high by 168 feet long is a single abstract composition made up of 430 individual panels ensconced in a honeycomb-like grid of poured concrete hexagons. It is one of the largest works of art of any medium executed personally by an artist in this country.

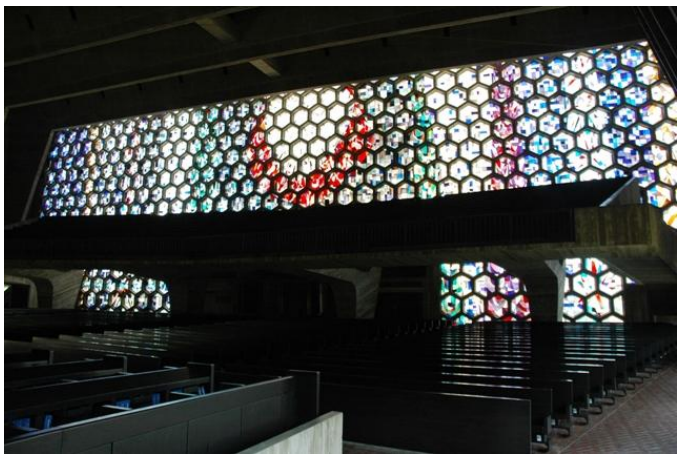
Artists have throughout time been commissioned to design work that has been integrated into the architecture of new buildings, town squares and even parks. Churches in particular have been adorned with works of art that warm the otherwise cold stone and brick. One could not imagine the Cathedral of Notre Dame without its glorious windows or for that matter any other church. And throughout time some artists, like architects, have been credited for their frescoes, nave designs, sculptures and windows that have contributed to the

historical significance of the overall architectural composition.

In the summer of 196l, Bronislaw was thirty-nine. He had just completed the final stained glass panel for the north wall of the huge St. John's Abbey church in Collegeville, Minnesota. The dedication for the new church, designed by one of the most prominent architects in America, Marcel Breuer was scheduled for late August.

Hedi and Bronislaw missed the dedication by just two days, coming back late from a two month- long study tour of Poland because of a foul-up in their travel arrangements. The visit, financed by a grant from the Hill foundation, was Bronislaw's first visit back to see his mother and homeland since the war. Years later carefully preserved in a file drawer is a worn copy of the August-September, 1961 issue of Worship, devoted to the ceremonial occasion of the church's dedication. An appraisal in the magazine of the church's architecture by the Rev. llltud Evans, O.P., sums up what had become the "official" attitude towards my father's window in less then a paragraph: "It is only in the glazing of the immense window, with its hundreds of uniform hexagons, that a note of uncertainty emerges. This could have been the greatest statement in stained glass of our time."

"It is true the problem for the artist was a formidable one, but here the architect should surely have worked with a commissioned artist from the start. To fill so closely articulated a pattern must make enormous demands on the designer, and one cannot pretend that the hesitant abstractions have really succeeded." 1.



In 1988, over twenty-seven years later, the Stained Glass Quarterly journal of the Stained Glass Association of America, published the first article devoted to the St. John's window, including a number of photographs, [Stained Glass Quarterly, Vol 83, No.2, summer 1988]. 5.

An excellent full view of the window from the interior of the church can be seen; a

view spread over two pages. It reveals a bright colorful array of glass full of sweeping motion in curtains of ultra-marine blue, striking reds, greens and yellows. The photograph looks as I remembered the view from inside -- a sea of color warming the vast interior of the church.

I have studied that photo many times, thinking about how Bronislaw felt coming home and reading that patronizing "critique" in Worship which didn't even bother to mention his name, inferred that he was no artist, and furthermore was the only "appraisal" of his window ever written in his lifetime. A project he had worked on for thousands of hours over a two-year period which should have established his reputation as an artist instead fell under an official curtain of silence that continues to this day.

The irony of the matter is that many feel that far from the window being a failure, it is a very strong and successful work of art that fits in quite well with the contemporary design of the church.

In 1980, a publication entitled Sacred Art At St. John's Abbey, published by the monastery's press, contains a description of the window and its theme which supports this impression: "The casual visitor to the church is transfixed by the brilliant colors of the masterful semi - abstract design…the rich textures and the 125 hues of sheet antique glass contribute to the overall beauty of the window." 2.

We came to St. John's in the summer of 1958. The Benedictine Monastery and University of St. John the Baptist, lies at the foot of a beautiful small lake in the wooded hills of Central Minnesota, over an hour's drive from the Twin Cities. For my brothers, Matthew and Pieter, and I, Minnesota was a boyhood paradise. Matthew and I were not yet ten at the time our father was working on the window, and Pieter was just a toddler. We made the most of the wide open spaces, exploring, playing and getting into mischief occasionally. We lived in an old house by the Great Northern Railroad line, with the Collegeville depot at our doorsteps.

Across the tracks was an old log cabin barn where we heard that Jesse James holed up years ago after his raid on the bank in Northfield. In the four years we lived there I only saw the passenger express train stop once, and that was

when the architect, Val Michelson, and some friends dropped in for a surprise visit from Minneapolis, carrying a keg of beer. In one direction from the back of our house, a prairie view of oats and cornfields unfolded. My father's studio looked out that way from the inside of a remodeled old barn at the end of the drive. I can see now, having visited the area around Lezno, how that landscape reminded him of his native Poland.

About 3 miles up the road from our house, across the interstate highway, stood the monastery. Time stood still in Collegeville. The monastic order, with its Medieval traditions intact, had settled into the area over a hundred years before, a self-reliant community complete with carpentry shops, infirmary, and a bakery, where the rich aroma of stoneground wheat bread would hang in the air on a Saturday morning. Saturday was also the day one would often see the cortege of hooded monks file through the monastery's main street on their way to vespers, where one could hear the singing of the Gregorian chants in Latin.

As an alter boy for the parish priest, I remember serving mass early Weekday mornings in a chapel under the old church, the bejeweled skeleton of a child saint, St. Peregrin, beckoning to me from an illuminated glass crypt under the altar stone. There was another side of St. John's that I knew less about, a younger side, one which my father, as a teacher, was part of.

As a Catholic order, the Benedictines saw their future in their role as educators both in Minnesota and abroad. A monastic order with a strong missionary zeal, they maintained missions among the Native Americans in Minnesota and had international missions in Mexico and the Bahamas. The University and Prep school brought a flow of young men and a few women into the community. The younger generation was outward looking and full of youthful energy ready to take up the challenges of a new world. In their efforts to look ahead, the monks anticipated the exciting changes to come with the work of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. The order, considering their future needs, mapped out an ambitious 100 year building program to expand and modernize the campus and monastery.

In their selection of architect and design, their goal was the building of what they saw as the most significant architectural religious edifice in their time. In choosing Marcel Breuer over nine other prominent architects, including Walter Gropius, they planned to embark on," the most exciting architectural story since the building of

the great medieval churches in Europe". Abbot Dworschak had written the architects calling for an, "architectural monument to the service of God." 3.

Marcel Breuer, one of the most internationally renowned architects of his day, had come to America as part of the pre-war immigration of German intellectuals, artists and scientists whose arrival here had a tremendous impact on contemporary life. As an architect who was a "Jungmeister" from 1925-28 at the renowned Bauhaus School established in 1919 in Weimar Germany, his teachings and architectural designs, along with those of Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and others, helped usher in the age of modern architecture. Many of the glass and steel skyscraper of the 1950's and 1960's that dot the horizons of most cities in this country, have their origins in the design theories of the Bauhaus School transplanted on American soil. Representing a break with the traditional decorative styles of architecture, great value was placed on simplicity and the harnessing of modern building technology and materials. The Bauhaus (meaning literally, house of building), saw architecture as the all-embracing art form which brings together the craftsperson, artist and architect.

The church was the second building project in the plan and the most challenging. In April of 1958, the monks voted to start construction of the church. Expanding the seating from 350 in the old church, the new Abbey church was designed to accommodate 2000 persons in a massive hall 225 feet long, 180 feet wide and 65 feet high at the north wall. It was designed with a massive freestanding bell tower straddling the front entrance that towers 112 feet over the campus and monastery. In the spring of 1958, a letter arrived from the Dean of St. Johns University inviting Bronislaw to St. Johns for an interview at the school's expense) explaining that he was a possible candidate for a position in the Art Department. According to his wife, Hedi, when he arrived, "He was greeted warmly by the Dean, who took him around the school, showed him the house we would live in, and presented him to the Abbot who talked to him about the window." 4.

Work had already begun on the Church. Up to that point no serious consideration had been given as to who would design the window, although several glass studios and artist - designers had been invited to submit proposals. The German glass studio, Buschulte, submitted some sample windows and the French artist, Menneussier, was contacted, but was not

interested. Hedi didn't want to move to Minnesota. Life in Chicago was finally going well for them. In the six years since immigrating to the United States, The artist couple had succeeded in becoming established in this country. Hedi taught art classes at several schools, they had acquired quite a number of artist friends and were becoming known as Chicago artists. Bronislaw had his first one- man show at the Fauve Gallery in downtown Chicago. They were both part of an effort to open an artist's cooperative gallery, Studio One, which resulted in some sales and a chance to mix with other artists.

Bronislaw had been working for nearly five years as a stained glass designer for several stained glass shops, including the Michaudel Glass Studios. His style, which was a departure from the stuffy "traditional" approach popular in the glass studios at the time-- the so-called "Munich" design - - was beginning to win acceptance. Introduced to the craft by Alios Stettner (friend and neighbor at the art colony in Koblenz, who had designed the new Cologne Cathedral windows that replaced those bombed out during the war), his designs in glass were very much a part of his art.

His early windows incorporated the flowing line and the simplicity of imagery that dominated his paintings and graphics at the time. For his color pallet he used the strong brilliant imported glass. Using sharp contrast and kiln baked black line drawing on the glass, his windows began to draw attention. In 1957, he designed a series of panels for the window wall of the Sacred Heart convent in Hubbard Woods, near Chicago. That same year, the Catholic Today Magazine published a series of articles that Bronislaw contributed to on the understanding of art, which used his work and others as an example. Bronislaw returned from his trip to St. John's full of excitement, confident that he had the job, convinced he could design the window, and not only design it but actually fabricate it himself at St. John's.

Nothing Hedi could say would dissuade him, even the fact that the move would result in a fifty percent pay cut over what he earned as a stained glass designer. By August we had moved, and the old house by the Great Northern Railroad tracks became our new home. Over the course of the summer, Bronislaw worked on a design proposal. It was to be a bold step for him, a completely non-representational abstract design which drew upon a religious theme for inspiration but allowed for the interplay of the glass, lead and color to uplift the viewers· imagination and match the

majestic concrete and granite stonework. Despite the colossal size and the demands of the church's architecture, the window was designed to maintain a harmony and balance throughout.

Theological student at the time, Susan Karen Hedahl, presented her master's thesis in 1983, entitled, Ambiguity in Glass, A History of the North Wall Window in the Abbey Church of St. John the Collegeville, Minnesota. Among other things, the thesis documented reaction to the window's design. Drawing from the Monastery's archives and direct interviews, her well-researched paper gives a great deal of insight to the background of the controversy over the window, while sadly missing the opportunity to interview the now deceased designer.

Shortly after arriving in Collegeville, Bronislaw presented his proposal to the Church Building Committee. According to Hedahl, the sketch of the initial design was received favorably, including by Mr. Breuer the architect, who was also present at the meeting. Actually building the window at the monastery captured the imagination of a number of the monks, who likened it to the ancient self-sufficient traditions of monastic life.

Although Bronislaw was encouraged to begin work at once on an experimental panel; questions began to surface in the Church Building Committee on the design and the selection of such a youthful and relatively unknown artist for so significant a task. After a time it became clear that not all of the principle church leaders shared the enthusiasm of the young artist-designer.

A key figure in the debates over the window, and a consistent opponent of Bronislaw's design, was Mr. Frank Kacmarcik, a former monk and an interior decorator from St. Paul who functioned as the Abbey's art consultant. The grandiose 100-year Abbey construction plan and the enlistment of an internationally prominent architect had in part been Mr. Kacmarcik's brainchild. My father's selection as the artist was in his eyes the central problem with the design of the window. Hedahl, in summarizing Kacmarcik's position concludes, "In short, Kacmarcik believes that Bak's design falls below any criteria that can be brought to bear on selecting an artist and a design: reputation, skill, knowledge of the field of stained glass, understanding of the architectural context and contemporary symbolism.' 7.

The primary limitation of this criticism is that it is based on perceived weaknesses of the *artist's knowledge and background*, and makes no attempt to evaluate the *design.* Outside of invoking vague generalities; there was no sincere attempt to make a scholarly assessment of the merits of the design. This purely subjective line of argument reveals that Mr. Kacmarcik, and others who agreed with him, were primarily disappointed that a nationally prominent artist had not been selected to do the window. The tone of some of the comments showed the depth of subjectivity that clouded some of the discussions. As one unsigned critique included in the Committee deliberations lamented, "The experiences of the past year lead me to only one conclusion or dilemma; either Bak is an incompetent, would-be artist sincerely unaware of his drastic limitations, or he is a shameless charlatan imposing on a gullible client."

Much was also made of his youth and the fact that he was an immigrant: Frank Kacmarcik stated, "In recent weeks on two occasions men in the profession have asked me what has happened at St. John's. A man, last year unknown, struggling to live in Hull House is this year's publicized artist at St. John's, a great authority on glass." 7.

Actually the majority of the Church Committee voted for Bronislaw Bak's design simply because they liked the design, welcoming its warming affect on the architectural composition as well as its liturgical symbolism. Although the window is dominated by blue and blue-grey, the sections of red, violet and yellow, break up the cold interior like the rays of the sun. From the beginning of his work on the window's design, my father struggled with dynamics of shape and form as well as color. In 1964, in a lecture entitled, Church Art and Society given in Racine Wisconsin, Bronislaw explained his interest in making use of the round or circle affect against the generally square effect in the window. He said it shattered his own beliefs but he found that the circle actually complements the square, and that the created effect broke up the strong formalistic order. 9.

Two months into the project, a memo from Breuer's office concerning a discussion held on October 2, 1958, at St. John's, points to some of the problems the artist would encounter: "It is pertinent to note that Breuer admitted possible difficulties for any artist attempting to work with the hexagonal framework. Mr. Breuer expressed his satisfaction with the way in which Mr. Bak had solved the

difficulties imposed on the artist by the rigid architectural framework of the window." 10.

Anyone visiting the church today can see the architectural limitations on the window were and are considerable. From the outside, a massive bell tower looms, and inside an enormous balcony stretches across the whole lower half of the window, cutting through the window's design. The window panels are recessed a number of inches in their hexagon shaped enclosures, contributing to the lighting difficulties imposed on the color scheme.

One factor that became clear to the architect and the Church Committee late in the construction was that the bell tower's intended function of reflecting light into the church didn't work as planned. As one member of the committee recalled... "We were under the illusion at the time, and Breuer was under the illusion, that the sun would bounce back into the window from the banner (bell tower). That hasn't been the case. The banner casts a shadow." Even after the church was completed, at the time of the dedication, the bell tower was still being described as a reflector of light to the church's Interior. 11.

Initial approval for Bronislaw to implement his design was conditional, perhaps representing some healthy skepticism considering the magnitude of the task and the relative unknown talents of the young artist/teacher.

He was encouraged to build one, then six, then fifteen hexagon panels. A list of materials and glass was worked up, and he and Father Florian, the monastery's procurator, traveled to New York to select the first of several sizable purchases of glass, based on his design. His monthly salary of $215.00 as assistant professor was doubled as the agreed upon method of payment.

An unused dairy barn at the north end of the campus was turned over to the project, and a few monks and students were trained to assist Bronislaw in the effort. The nearly full time crew consisted of Brothers Andrew Goltz O.S.B, Placid Stuckenschneider O.S.B., and Adrian Cahill O.S.B. as well as two students, Richard Haeg and David Riegel, (who has also since passed away). John Kruz, an old stained glass craftsman, was retained to take charge of the cutting of the glass, but withdrew after a short time. Actual cutting of the window's glass was taken over by Brother Andrew Goltz.

The fabrication of the window was done in about a year and a half. Most of the glass was imported from France, West Germany and England, through the Bendheim Glass Company in New York City. In the drafty old barn, space was arranged for a studio, storage for the cases of glass, a kiln to fire the grey-shadow pigments, and tables for cutting, stacking, leading, assembling and soldering the panels. A plate glass easel, raised and lowered on pulleys, allowed Bronislaw to view and evaluate each hexagon panel before it was leaded. Each piece of glass was laminated with beeswax tallow onto the glass plate so that it could be hung, evaluated and in some cases painted before final assembly. As Brother Stuckenschneider described it, "when we had a window on the glass easel, we would call Mr. Bak at home, or if he was on campus, at the art department. We would all become "critics" sitting there sipping tea (from my mother). Bronislaw would in the end have the last word."

While from time to time in his life, Bronislaw's confidence in the Catholic Church wavered; he was always extremely respectful to the men of the cloth. His Polish Catholic upbringing led him to hold the brethren in the highest esteem. The encouragement he received from that august assembly of church leaders of the Building Committee was understood by him as a verbal directive to proceed with the window. There was no talk of a contract and for him no need for one. He was content with the arrangement, and threw himself into the work. He wasn't the only one convinced that he had the job. In late November of 1958, Breuer wrote the Father Abbot, "I welcome your decision to commission Mr. Bak with the design of the north window and I think that this work will turn out very well." 12.

From the recorded minutes of the Church Committee, it wasn't until a year and 40 completed panels later that the body formally granted him the commission - after stiff opposition. According to Hedi, the first hint of any problems occurred when the Abbot was invited to New York to Breuer's office and asked to bring the cartoons (full scale drawings) of the completed panels. Bronislaw was told that the architect compared them with the presentation sketch and was apparently satisfied. In March of 1959, after four panels were completely leaded and soldered (approximately 20 square feet each), Breuer paid the workshop a visit, along with his staff and Mr. Kacmarcik. He indicated his pleasure with the panels, but questioned why the glass was cut in such small sections (in the

sketch the window did not show quite such detail.)
Kruz explained that leaded blown glass couldn't be used over a certain size without risking the structural stability of the panel, causing the pieces to vibrate loose and break over time.
In May, after working nine months on the project, the sky fell in on Bronislaw. A special meeting of the Building Committee was arranged, with Breuer, Kacmarcik, the curator of the Minneapolis Art Institute and another painter from St. Paul in attendance. At noon, Bronislaw was called into the meeting. As he came in the door, Abbot Baldwin Dworschak turned to those gathered and said, "Gentlemen, I urge you to express your criticism about Mr. Bak's design in his presence."

My father was dumbfounded. As Bronislaw related the meeting later, Breuer was unclear and spoke in metaphors- using the comparison of Rousseau and an episode about a critique of a nose; even though the artist changed the nose, it still remained a Rousseau. The art curator questioned Bronislaw's ability to remain faithful to the original design, not understanding how he could work from a relatively small sketch directly to the full size drawing without any step between. (In this the curator overlooked that the hexagonal wall structure provided a natural grid in providing a built-in gauge for the layout of the design.)

The artist from St. Paul began by criticizing several design elements. He was cut short by Father Florian, who wanted to know how many windows he had made. The artist replied that he had designed one window. Father Florian, said, "Thank you sir. Mr. Bak has worked for nearly five years as a designer with an average of 15 windows per year." 13.

According to the minutes of the Church Committee, recalled in Hedahl's thesis, the results of the meeting showed that Bronislaw accepted the suggestions of the architect and at that point was still expected to continue with the fabrication of the window: "The North Window was also thoroughly discussed by Mr. Breuer and Mr. Bak and by Mr. Breuer and the Committee. After a second discussion with Mr. Bak on Thursday morning Mr. Breuer believes that Mr. Bak accepted his criticism of the curved lines and that he will be able to do the job better. While Mr. Bak should receive every encouragement, it would be better for the time being if the members of the community would not 'advise' him as to how the window should be done. 14.

"Mr. Breuer felt that the introduction of the curved lines into the glass weakened the over-an effect and made an individual hexagon too important: he felt that the over- all effect would be strengthened through the extensive use of more rectangular forms which Mr. Bak has used for the blues and greys." 15.

The minutes of the Church Committee make it clear that that Mr. Breuer's concerns were not that the design was too hesitant; quite the opposite, he was insisting that the design be more muted, less flowing and less colorful. Crestfallen, Bronislaw went back to work, instructed by the committee to make a full size sketch of the center section of the window to be laid out and viewed as a whole.

About this time, a revealing incident occurred, according to one of the craftsmen who worked on the window, "First there appeared at the church building site four or six grey sheets of glass, cut to the shape and size of the hexagon stained glass panels. No one seemed to know where they came from or what they were for, at first. We took a couple down to the cow barn studio and tried them, placing them in front of a completed window, as you would have placed the protective weatherglass. When poor Bruno saw what happened to his carefully thought out colors -how the grey darkened everything and in the worst case, changed a bright yellow into a sick green - he was nearly beside himself."

Luckily, Fr. Florian Murggli O.S.B., the procurator and an key member of the Church Building Committee was called in to observe the ruinous effect of the grey glass. The grey glass idea was called off immediately. Whether Mr. Kacmarcik as advisor to the Church Committee was solely responsible for this outrageous attempt to "cover" the window as some suspected at the time or whether Breuer himself was involved, the fact remains that the artist was not consulted and those who had been, obviously had no knowledge of its effect on stained glass.

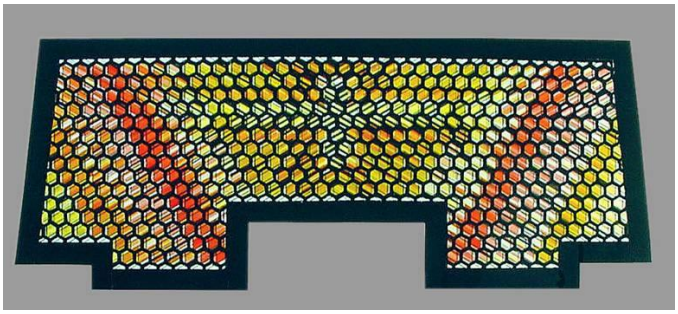
Before the month was out, Bronislaw was informed by the Abbot that Breuer had asked the committee to solicit designs from his personal friend and colleague Josef Albers, and immediately terminate the work on the church's window. Josef Albers, best known for his "Homage to the Square·· series of paintings in the 1950's, was a highly regarded émigré artist, designer and educator with an international reputation who was also part of the Bauhaus movement in Germany before the war. It appeared

certain that the year's work, which Bronislaw had poured life and soul into, was all for naught. How could his design compete with such a well-established artist? Bronislaw continued to plow ahead. According to my mother, Hedi, he began drinking heavily and took va1ium pills to steady his nerves and allow him to sleep at night. Friends consoled him, expecting the worst.

Full scale drawings of 40 hexagons were hung on the side of the dormitory wall one sunny day that Summer, Bronislaw directing and his assistants running up and down the wall with the aid of the community's fire truck ladders. This gave the community a chance to see the central portion of the design a church-length away. The kiln worked reasonably well, although the fumes were quite bad and was a constant source of Headaches. A thoroughly detailed six feet long sketch of the window was done, also at the request of the Committee.

It soon became clear that knowledge about the conflict was widespread and made for good gossip throughout the state. During a break in the Summer, my parents visited a gallery in Minneapolis to see if they would handle some of Bronislaw woodcuts. In the course of the conversation the owner turned to them and asked suddenly, "Has the decision on who designs the window been made?" According to Hedi the gentleman appeared to know more than Bronislaw did about the fate of the window.

At the invitation of the Church Building Committee, Josef Albers came in October 1959 to make a presentation of his design. He spoke at some length on the merit of color, and speculated that the bell tower would reflect light. During the afternoon, Bronislaw and Ted Hoffmeyer, the church project engineer, had retired to a tavern in the nearby town of St. Joseph.



11 Josef Alber's design (Bak Family Archives)

Following his presentation, Mr. Albers looked around to meet Bronislaw. Val Michelson, Breuer's field architect who was with Albers at the time, told my father later that the famous artist was quite disappointed that he missed him. Albers had told Michelson that he could not see why he was asked to do another

design, since he could see nothing wrong with the Bak design. 16.

The two designs hung side by side for a month, for the whole community to see and judge. There was a great deal of interest in the design "competition." Some likened Alber's design, a large horizontal cross, to the old Chevrolet emblem. An indication of the popularity of the window project in the community was its importance to the fundraising campaign that paid for the church's construction. Bronislaw was often called upon to speak to the alumni clubs and other church fundraising events about the window. Many faculty members and students were strong supporters of Bronislaw's design, and the University's lay board of advisors backed the selection of his design unanimously. On November 25, 1959, after much discussion, nearly a year and a half into the project, the Church Building Committee finally voted 7 to 5 to approve my father's design and formally commissioned him to do the work.

But the victory was a hollow one, as Hedahl's research shows. When Breuer was informed of the decision; he wrote a letter demanding that Bronislaw's commission be terminated immediately. He invoked his right as architect, and suggested he could find a way to reimburse the cost of the completed portion of the window; but the majority in the church committee refused to back down.

As the article in Stained Glass Magazine points out, Breuer's displeasure with the final choice of an artist was manifested by an almost total blackout of Bak's name in association with the design of the window. Although the Abbey Church received worldwide recognition in the architectural field, there is virtually no mention of Bak as the window's designer in any publication. This seems a grave omission and surely it is now time to attach Bronislaw Bak's name to the second largest window in the world. 17.

This omission was more than a lack of publicity (all of which the architect's office controlled), on occasion it was a deliberate slight. In October 1961, the distinguished Walker Art Center in Minneapolis organized an exhibit celebrating the completion of the church. The exhibit was announced in the Minneapolis Tribune, with a full-page color photo of a front view of the church, which showed the window. Hedi and Bronislaw attended the opening, where cocktails and dinner were served. There they were taken aback by the presence of twelve full size hexagons in the exhibit

where Bronislaw's design was replaced by as Hedi described it, "bland and boring laminated glass panels in the hexagonal frames and buried next to it a little 5 by 7 inch photo of the actual window." 18. (The design matched the laminated rectangular panels In the skylight over the church's altar, designed by Breuer.) Since daily bus tours to the church were organized from the center to St. John's, a number of people were able to make their own comparison. After a couple of cocktails, Hedi took aside on of the Walker Art Center officials and gave him a brief lecture on ethics. We lived in Minnesota, and Bronislaw continued teaching at St. John's for nearly a year after the window was completed.

The St. John's Church window was not the only important example of my father's work from this period. In 1958 he attended a lecture and presentation by Herbert Burke, professor of English, of an art film entitled, "The Stations of the Cross," which included paintings by Paul Gierard and scenes with live actors. Bronislaw felt the film production was a bit over dramatized, and compared it to sauerkraut and wurst, something you might stomach once in a while.

Challenged by some of the others to prove his point, he came up with the idea of a series of woodcut illustrations of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Pardoner's Tale, which could be photographed as a film or slide show.

Eventually cutting and hand printing 80 woodblocks, and individually water coloring each print, he delighted many with his visual imagery of the medieval story. It is surprising to note that he had not read Chaucer before deciding to illustrate the work, and chose the work because of the religious connotation of the title, never realizing the irreverent and sometimes ribald nature of the classic. He loved the stories, which describe the search of three adventurers for the villain, Death. And as Hedi often says, "When he read something, he saw it in pictures." In 1961, the Public Television Station, KTCA-TV, in Minneapolis featured the film with Dr. Burke as narrator on an hour-long program.

In this time he also did what he considered his best work in glass, a small window directly in front of the baptismal fount in the St. Augustine Church in St. Cloud, Minnesota, where he used the technique of laminating glass over glass. He designed a number of windows for St. Anthony's Church in Fargo, North Dakota, and made a 5 ft. square mosaic of Christ

the King for a church in Jacobs Prairie, Minnesota.

A delegation of Franciscan sisters from Chicago came and asked him to do a window for their chapel. They showed him some ideas they had and asked him to do a window design. He agreed, but prepared two design proposals, one a figurative scene like they had in mind, and a second transparency of his own design, which incorporated a more symbolic motif. The sisters, after not much deliberation, chose his design over their own, and off to work he went. After the window panels were completed, Bronislaw's able assistants Brother Goltz and Brother Stuckenschneider delivered the windows in the monastery's old red Ford truck, after negotiating the big city traffic and at least one curb. The damage was minimal and easily repaired, and the nuns were delighted. Brother Stuckenschneider and Brother Goltz continued working with Bronislaw on the other smaller windows, and a good bit of glass left over from the window was used in later years on other windows, often designed and executed by Brother Stuckenschneider. Once Bronislaw told him that, "working with stained glass is like walking through a cow yard -you get all that stuff on your shoes and you can't get it off."

In 1961, Val Michelson approached Bronislaw about a project. Michelson who had been field architect for Breuer on the St. John's Church construction project had become close friends with my father. Michelson had been commissioned to design the new prep school and dormitory on the campus. He designed the buildings so that they fit the contour of the hillside. Unhappy with the long stretch of blank walls on the outside of the dormitory, he discussed it with Ted Hoffmeyer, also a friend of my father's and the concrete engineer for the Abby Church project. They came up with the idea of asking Bronislaw to design some wall relief sculpture, much like his woodcuts. Working first on an experimental panel, with the help and advice of Hoffmeyer, he selected the various materials to achieve the most desirable surface texture. Wood, burnt Styrofoam, and metal were all incorporated into the molds. Nearly a dozen panels depict different aspects of the school's activities. At the entrance of the school stands the tall form of St. John the Baptist holding a cross. The depth of the relief forms were limited by the thickness of the walls. Hedi, who applied her youthful schooling as a draftswoman to the project, drew the layout of the sketches in three dimensions.

It was the last art commission done by Bronislaw at St. John's. Due to the conflict over the St. John's window, my parents felt uncomfortable there. While most of the monks and lay people of the community sought to heal the wounds, the damage to my father's psyche was deep, and he felt nothing but disillusioned and disappointed about the whole episode. Both Hedi and Bronislaw began to feel isolated at St. Johns, and finally decided to move on. They missed the excitement and vitality of the art world in the big city, even while enjoying the quiet of the country. In 1962 they chose the small city of Racine, Wisconsin, on the shores of Lake Michigan, where Bronislaw had been invited to take a teaching job at a Catholic college just over an hour's drive from their old haunts in Chicago.

In the summer of 1962 we moved ·from Minnesota, never to return. We left with nothing but memories like the wind rippling through the wheat fields, yet Bronislaw Bak's legacy still stands towering over the wooded hills of St. Johns. Inside the church, the pews bask in the light of the mid-day sun draped with color from my father's window. Near the stairs to the balcony a small inscription listing the artist and his assistants can still be seen etched into the glass; for many years the only permanent record that gives credit to those who labored so hard to bring this formidable work of art to life.

12. Photo by Clemens Bak

STUDIO 22

Our move to Racine began a time of intense creative activity for Bronislaw. In addition to a full schedule of teaching classes at Dominican College, located just north of town, he threw himself into a number of projects. Most of the downstairs section of the house had been converted into studio space which included an area for painting, a graphics shop in the sun room, and a stained glass shop. His woodcuts began to grow in size. He engraved an image of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, on a four by five feet panel of plywood covered with plaster and pulled one print before the board cracked. Many other woodcuts were done during the same period.

The big white house with green trim, just a few blocks south of downtown Racine along the lakeshore on College Avenue was to serve as home and studio for the next two years. Above the beach, four blocks over from our house, was a big flat house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Not too far from us was also the famous Johnson Wax Building in Racine, also designed by the noted architect. Both are excellent examples of the architect's use of linear planes.

Hedi took the Chaucer Pardoner's Tale woodblock prints down to Chicago to a number of publishers, to see if it could be reprinted in book form. Editors at Encyclopedia Britannica's film division were interested in the concept for their educational filmstrip library, but wanted a different theme. After several weeks of library research, Hedi presented them with several options. They chose "Old English literature" narrowing it down to six filmstrip stories, illustrated with my father's woodcuts and with the text rewritten for school children. Over the next year, Bronislaw cut, printed and water- colored 180 woodcut illustrations for six classic tales of Medieval literature including, Morte de Arthur; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Beowulf, Everyman, The Second Shepard's Tale, and the Nun's Priest Tale, also by Chaucer.

Meanwhile, this laborious project was undertaken at the same time as several more windows were due to be completed for the church in Fargo, North Dakota. If

that wasn't enough, a Rabbi in St. Paul, Minnesota, having seen my father's wall relief sculpture work at the St. John's prep school, contacted Bronislaw to discuss the possibility of doing an eighteen feet high free-standing concrete and glass sculpture in front of his synagogue. Before long the yard beside the house under the pear tree was dotted with various sized concrete sculpture forms, looking like some avant garde graveyard as one friend of my father's joked. The free standing concrete structures, some as high as six feet, with interspersed pieces of slab glass, were explorations of a three-dimensional approach to color and glass in sculpture. Bronislaw had begun this study with color overlays projected on a wall screen which he photographed while teaching three-dimensional design at St. John's. This study helped him to understand the physiology of contrast and complementary color relationships. He later applied this research to his stained glass window designs and oil paintings, as well as his sculpture work in concrete and glass.

Several of his smaller windows made use of the technique of laminating glass to glass, using clear epoxies, to achieve complementary shading of primary colors. It was only natural that in the course of time, after Bronislaw began to acquire a working knowledge of cement as a sculpture medium, that he would attempt to combine glass and concrete.

Several of the first experiments, including several large pieces, were made in the basement. The limitation of this arrangement soon became apparent. "Hedi, sweetheart, darling, could you give us a hand with this rope?" my father called out from the basement one Saturday morning. That particular sappy sweet charm in his voice, interrupting my mother's morning reverie, set off an alarm. Looking down at the bottom of the stairs, where my father and I were trying to maneuver a 300 pound cast concrete slab up the steps, my mother said, "Just a minute," in an equally sugary sweet voice. She rushed over to the phone and called one of my father's colleagues from the college. "Please come over right away," she pleaded, "Act like you were just passing by, but get over here right away before someone gets hurt!" This was one of those occasions where my mother decided that since my father was too proud and "thickheaded" to ask for help, she had to take matters into her own hands.

By this time, my brother Matthew and I were often employed as well in different projects. We learned to cut the thick paper used as a pattern for the stained glass windows my father worked on. We helped cut the wood for canvas stretchers and frames and we helped mix the cement. All the woodblock prints done at this time were hand pressed, using a

rubbing tool to transfer the ink from the block to the rice paper, a technique we came to know well. Every one of my father's projects became family projects, particularly for Hedi who spent an enormous amount of time on them, often at the expense of her own work.

The second shipment of windows was ready for St. Anthony's in Fargo the next summer, so we packed up the car and U-Haul trailer and headed to North Dakota by way of Minnesota to see our old friends and look after the house which had been rented out for a year. On the way to Collegeville, we were caught in a thunderstorm, and nearly lost everything in a tornado that passed just overhead. Bronislaw went on to Fargo with Brother Stuckenschneider to install the windows. Later that year, my father and I returned to Fargo by train to finish the job. While we were there, a letter came from the film editor at Encyclopedia Britannica who had just gotten the sketches for the Beowulf filmstrip. He acknowledged the receipt of the work, but stated that my father's depiction of the Viking ship and the monster, Grendahl, were not accurate. Hedi wrote back, "If the gentleman would kindly supply a photograph of the legendary beast, Mr. Bak would be glad to reassess his artistic perception." Since photographs of fictitious monsters are rather hard to come by, Hedi expected that my father would be allowed to use his best judgment in his visual interpretation of the 12th century written poem. My parents never heard another word about the matter and the series was published without any changes to the illustrations.

In 1964, Bronislaw was approached by the architectural firm, I. W. Coburn and Associates, Inc. about a church they were designing in Waukegan, Wisconsin, 35 miles south of Racine. The new St. Anastasia Catholic Church in a small city on the northern reaches of the Chicago metropolitan area, was to be a revolutionary design in brick. Each pillar of brick was separated by a curtain wall also of brick. The walls were planned without the conventional windows; instead, natural lighting would be provided by nearly 70,000 brick shaped glass openings equally spaced between the bricks. Mr. Colburn had seen my father's colorful windows at Hubbard Woods and knew of his reputation. Bronislaw quickly agreed to design the color scheme, as well as two large mosaics to be placed behind the side altars.

My mother was pressed into service again, cutting out thousands of small holes in a black cardboard model of the church, while my father using a palette full of translucent inks, began applying the colors. Starting from the entrance to the church, with blues and purples, the design warmed on the way up through

reds, oranges and yellows around the altar. Throughout the design, contrasting colors were interspersed to achieve balance and harmony.
The Venetian mosaic tile background to the side altars carries the mosaic effect of the glass and brick of the church as a whole, but uses a special tile in a figurative design to accomplish this. The designs of the two six feet tall mural- like mosaics are suggestive of Byzantine or Russian Icons. The format was appropriate to a church named after the Russian patron saint, St. Anastasia. The stylized figures, Madonna and Child and Virgin Mary and Joseph, their heads surrounded by gold haloes, are used in the church to create the same aura that more conventionally designed churches achieve with stained glass figures. The city of Venice, Italy, was the origin of the rich colorful tile used in the mosaics. Several years later, while vacationing with my grandparents in Italy, I visited Venice and saw the islands in the city where the glass tile is made. Over a hundred and fifty different hues were incorporated into the design. For weeks my brother and I worked with my father in the big two- car garage, following his directions in applying the stone to the quick-drying epoxy glue base.

It was during this year, 1963 to 64, that my father began painting a number of oil canvases that were abstract and non-objective in theme, using contrasting color and shade and line to create the composition. This period in his work came out of his color studies in glass and light. In the Spring of 1964, the Findlay Gallery, at 320 S. Michigan, one of Chicago's most prominent galleries located along the "Magnificent Mile," organized a one-man show of my father's work hanging eleven of these canvases, along with several woodcuts and several works in stained glass and concrete sculpture. All three of Chicago's daily papers carried positive reviews of the exhibit, noting my father's return to the Chicago area. The articles explained his background and achievements in stained glass and graphics. He was becoming known as an extremely versatile artist who could work very well in a number of mediums.

Joseph Haas, in the Chicago Daily News offered this quote from Bronislaw: "It is the challenge of form, how to solve problems in the best way, that interests me more than artistic techniques. I will use any materials, any media that suits me, that seems to direct itself to the challenge." Haas asks the obvious question, "What is the purpose of Bak's efforts in so many media?" Bronislaw answers in the article, "I am trying to make myself understand that art ought to be a part of our environment, that it should be organic with the needs of society. We are coming to an age where the stress will be on personal cultural

needs. Increasing leisure and such aspects of our new life will give a different color to our existence and different needs."

"I see a time when our streets will not be just gray, but will have color, when our houses will not be just boxes. It will be a challenge, facing these new demands, because it is a search, a molding of one's self to new stimuli." 1.

Bronislaw had begun to articulate what was to an important part of his view of the future and the future of the arts. He believed that artists must be concerned with the aesthetics of life in the service of the entire community. Art is not for museums alone, but must be used to enhance the quality of everyday life for everyone. He felt that houses, schools, public buildings and even entire communities need to be designed, integrating aesthetics as well as functionality from the first stages. Art is not something to be just tacked on the wall, or a line item on a budget, but part of the totality of the design. As a designer, Bronislaw was deeply influenced by the French architect, painter and philosopher, Le Corbusier. His revolutionary thoughts on community life and the design of living space dovetailed with my father's own interest. 2.

At the Dominican College, Bronislaw was asked to design a new chapel for the priests of the order, who held regular prayer sessions in the rectory. Every aspect of the interior of the small chapel was designed by Bronislaw, from the pews to the altar and candle holders. He designed and constructed a stained glass window to go beside the altar, in the downstairs studio at our home in Racine.

Hedi sculpted a bronze crucifix which was hung from the wall behind the altar. Molding the work of art in bees wax, the three feet long Christ image was encapsulated in plaster, and a local foundry poured the molten bronze though a hole at the base. This method is known as the "lost wax" sculpting technique. Hedi, also at this time, illustrated a series of children's books based on stories from the Old Testament, which were published by Fides Publishers of Notre Dame, Indiana, in paperback in 1965. The illustrations were made of paper cutouts and film to achieve a multicolor effect with the economy of using only two color inks. Hedi worked closely with the print shop and learned a great deal which she was to apply in her later work in graphic.

While Racine had been a welcome change from St. John's and the memory of the heartbreak of the window, it was still too much of a small town. What my parents needed was the company of other artists- a community of artists. By January of 1965, we were ready to move again, this time back to Chicago. In 1965 the Wustum

art museum in Racine held a one-man exhibit of its most celebrated artist resident. Hanging eighteen of my father's latest paintings, a number of woodcuts and a selection of his stained glass and concrete sculpture work, the show was favorably reviewed in the Racine Sunday Bulletin where it was announced that Bronislaw Bak would personally conduct a gallery tour for opening day visitors. The reviewer noted that, "Throughout Bak's style, whether it be woodcuts, painting, or glass, runs the binding thread of geometry." She goes on to write that, "His love for the medium of glass influences his work in other media and the angular lines of shaped glass readily identify him in those media. 3.

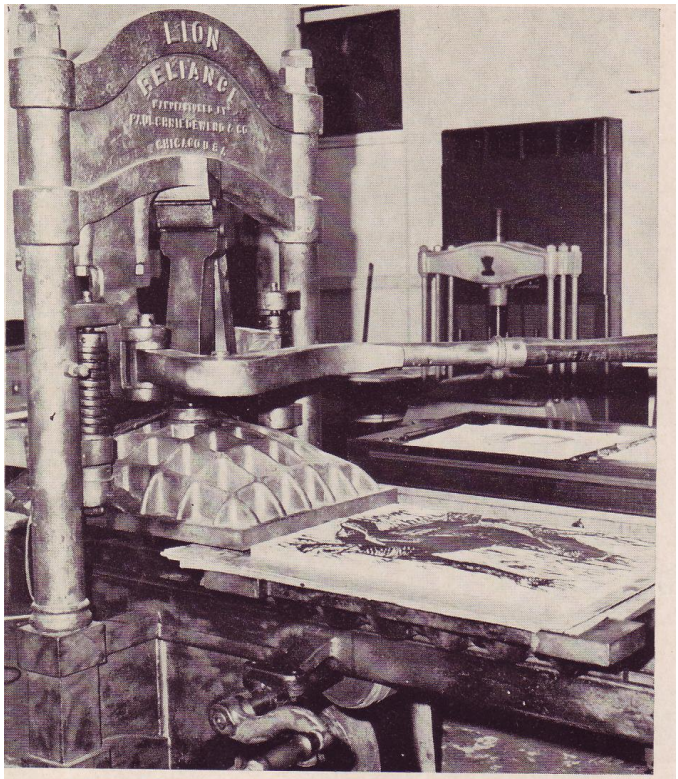
Following the exhibit, Bronislaw donated several of the concrete and glass experiments to the Wustum museum. Our move found us back in Chicago's Near North Side in an apartment near our old house on Fullerton Avenue. We moved right next door to Joseph and Mary Diggles, old friends from Hull House. Joe Diggles was a retired railroad worker of Irish stock and an amateur philosopher, who had endeared himself to all the little immigrant children at the playground at Hull House and he was a great comfort to many of the adults as well. Soon the word was out that we were back, and a steady stream of other old friends made their way to our door.

Studio space was an immediate problem. While Bronislaw continued to teach for the rest of the year in Racine, commuting two times a week, there were many projects underway and many more ideas and dreams. He quickly found a place to work on the top floor of the Contemporary Arts Workshop a few blocks away, but found it too dark and claustrophobic. The old dairy, where the Workshop was located, was better suited for a weld shop then a painting studio and glass shop. I noticed that in my frequent visits to my father's studio, many of the other artist's studios were usually locked. Bronislaw, who worked long hours late into the night, couldn't understand how some artists could only dabble, coming in on weekends or whenever the creative urge hit them. He expected everyone to share his 24 hours a day personal drive.

Fortunately, an opportunity to open up a storefront studio on the 2200 block of Lincoln Avenue became available, through our landlord who lived downstairs. He had recently purchased a big old three- story building with two built-in storefronts on a rundown stretch of Lincoln Avenue, and one storefront was vacant.

A short time later, just by chance, my parents found an old Washington newspaper press for sale cheap, in good condition. The only thing that I remember had to be replaced on the press were the old leather belts that worked off a hand crank, used to pull the bed of the press up and down the ways. The solution to getting the Pardoner's Tale published finally presented itself. Plans were made, ink and paper bought on credit, and the project began. A friend of a friend came along who had worked in the printing trades in Chicago for years and knew an old warehouse filled with out of date printing materials and equipment.
There Hedi found several cases of Old English letterpress type font which suited the Chaucer Book magnificently. Overnight my mother became an expert typesetter, sorting out the fonts and setting up the pages. This was difficult to do in a normal situation, considering that one has to view the type backwards, but it was immensely challenging when done with old English type. The tenants in the building began to change, as one, two then four and five apartments were rented out to artists attracted to the area, including Barbara Aubin and the photographer, Ed Sturr as well as several teachers from the Art Institute.

The other storefront was rented out to a group of immigrant Polish architects, all friends of Bronislaw, but the business fell through pretty quickly. As Slawek Glinski joked to my father later, "no one could



The print shop looks like the most modern — for the 19th century, that is!

figure out who was the boss."

We moved into the building, into two apartments in the back, and expanded the studio into the other storefront as well. The frosting on the storefront windows was stripped back, and works were put on display in the windows. People started dropping in, artwork began to be sold, and Studio 22 was born. The name came from the building's address and the fact that it seemed like my father and mother had set up and closed down twenty-one studios since moving to this country. Things were going quite well, and the whole block began to change.

Henry Gampson, a sculptor who brazed biblical figures with welding rods, moved his shop out of the Contemporary Arts Workshop and opened up a studio across the street. Bob Pieron and Charlotte Newfeld, jewelry designers and metal smiths, opened up a studio and show window up the street calling it Studio 23, displaying their fine gold and silver jewelry. The Chicago Society of Artists, Chicago's oldest artist's organization, opened up a gallery on the block. An apartment upstairs became vacant, and the idea was broached to open up an artist's co-operative gallery, much like the one my parents helped to establish in 1956. All the artists in the building and a fair number of others joined in (a total of 19 artists).

Soon the Mid-North Artists Co-operative Gallery came into being. The landlord

agreed to knock out the walls, track lighting was installed, and shows were organized for each month. Knowledge about Studio 22 spread by word of mouth. Through the Continuing Education Program of the Arch-Diocese of Chicago, several evening art classes were started in the studio and students were attracted. Classes were held in figure drawing, graphics and painting.

The **"Pardoner's Tale"** was a best seller from the beginning among art collectors and friends; almost all the entire edition of 285 loose bound portfolios were sold out with little or no publicity. The word got out somehow, and requests for the book were phoned in from all over the city and around the country. Thirty-five of the books in the edition were printed on fine rice-paper, each page individually water colored by Bronislaw. The black and white version was sold for fifty dollars apiece, and the water colored version went for one hundred and thirty five dollars. Nearly 15,000 dollars before expenses was pretty good in those days for several months work. The Midwest magazine of the Sunday edition of the Chicago Sun-Times of March 5, 1967, included a seven page feature article on the Chaucer book, complete with a cover photo of Bronislaw peering out, surrounded by pages from his book. 4.

Few local artists had attracted such notice, yet the art establishment, and the most prominent galleries, appeared disinterested in his work. Hedi had long since given up knocking on gallery doors with portfolio in hand, hoping for an exhibit; she was much too busy for that now.

The Chicago city tour buses started stopping at the Studio. Tourists, with cameras in hand, would look at the old letterpress and marvel at the art work. In the evenings friends would drop by and stay late, watching my parents work and engage in all sorts of discussions about art. The radio blared with folksongs, Jazz and the Blues, as Chicago's classical radio station, WFMT, broadcast the, “Midnight Special," a variety show that my father and mother enjoyed, tuning it in like clockwork on Saturday nights.

My parent's studio doors were always open and there was often one or two unannounced guests at the dinner table. Other books were published: including Homo Sum, a bound volume of seven multi-color woodcuts based on the Old Testament Book of Lamentations and Psalms. In late 1967 the Chicago Book was finally ready to be printed. After months of driving around town and stopping at awkward places like busy intersections and the side of a bridge to sketch a scene, the drawings had finally been transferred to wood, and the images cut from the cherry wood blocks. 100 Views of Chicago was finally finished, as Bronislaw ·began to turn his attention to other projects. Hedi set up an appointment with the mayor's office, and presented a copy of the book to "H'z Honor, the Mayor." Mayor Richard Daley, Hedi later found out was in the midst of celebrating his birthday. She remembers he looked at her like she was from another planet, but took the book anyway. There were several other important projects done by Bronislaw Bak during this period of time. A second church, similar in design to St. Anastasia, was being built in Michigan. This time it was an Episcopalian Cathedral in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Here too, a color scheme was needed to complete the composition of glass and brick. He did some smaller stained glass windows and created a sculpture garden in the back of the house.
At the end of the block, a Hungarian immigrant chef, Louis Szetmary, opened a small exclusive restaurant. "The Bakery" soon established a reputation for serving some of Chicago's finest culinary delights. The entire staff of waiters, waitresses and cooks had been trained in Hungary or Austria, and most were living above the restaurant. In 1967, the annual meeting of the Illinois and Midwestern Craftsman's Council was held at Studio 22.

A reception was held for the participants, which the owner of "The Bakery" agreed to cater free of charge. That evening a procession of five cooks dressed in white and adorned with the traditional chef's

hat made their way up from the renowned restaurant carrying huge trays of the finest gourmet hors-d'oeuvres that most had ever seen. Chicago in the mid - 1960's was a cauldron of inflamed social passions. Twenty years of rule under "Boss" Richard Daley did little to deflect the deep disparity in the city between rich and poor, white and black, not to speak of the problems of the growing Hispanic communities. The Watts rebellion in Los Angeles in 1966 led to a whole series of immense social upheavals in nearly all the big cities. The clash between the rising expectations coming on the heels of the civil rights victories and the economic disparity of the ghetto had led to what the authorities called, "civil unrest," and Chicago was no exception. Bordering on the Near North Side from the south was the Cabrini Greens housing projects, run by the Chicago Housing Authority, where thousands of poor black families lived in tall vertical slums. The sharp contrast between the "projects" and the wealthy Gold Coast neighborhood that lay between the poverty and the pristine beaches of Lake Michigan made the disparity and the despair all the more obvious.

Bronislaw was acutely aware of the city's social contradictions, and addressed them in his One Hundred Views of Chicago Among my father's black friends; Earl Hooks was a kindred soul, who over the 15 years he had known Bronislaw had developed a deep friendship with my father. It was through Hooks that Bronislaw began to understand the history, passion and anger of the black Community in the U.S. His own encounter with the racism of the Nazi mentality in Germany helped him to see through the injustice of racism in America. He read various anthologies of black writings, and books by James Baldwin and others. He even read the Autobiography of Malcolm X. He had no sympathy for racist or anti-Semitic attitudes. Even though his was a typical Polish-Catholic upbringing in a small town, his experiences as a prisoner helped him to welcome the company of people, no matter what background or race.

In 1967, Martin Luther King came to Chicago to lead a series of open housing marches into the all - white neighborhood of Cicero. Bronislaw was moved by the noble courage of the black marchers and

their white supporters in the face of the angry white mobs. He began a series of woodcuts in black and white that he called the Cyclus Spiritulis which to him depicted the noble images that he saw in Black music. It was a tribute to the spirit of the black movement in this country and a show of solidarity. Typically, as an artist, he refused to be direct or didactic in his work, preferring to show his sympathies through the power of emotions reflected in his art.

In 1977, ten years later, the Van Vechten gallery at Fisk University in Tennessee, a leading black campus in the South, organized a one-man show that focused on this selection of my father's work. Earl Hooks) who had joined the faculty of Fisk helped arrange the exhibit. Artists have struggled throughout history with the effect of the political and social struggles of their times on their work. There have always been those who regarded art as above the issues of the day. It has often been fashionable to argue that art is functionless and detached,--art for art's sake. My father's view challenged this kind of thinking in his college lectures, arguing that art must arise from the conditions and experience of humanity. On the other hand he felt that his contribution to the problems of life should be through his work, and that art must be both personal and universal.

In 1962 he wrote, "Art is, namely, a search for truth - - a quality rooted in hope and based on moral and ethical elements ... it results from experience and responds to the position the artists takes to any issue in life. With this stimulae, his or her nonconformity takes place and becomes another sign of progression towards an expanded viewpoint. This perspective may be labeled "social" or "ethical" but, however it is called, it is rooted in the love the artist has for humanity, and not in a questionable, abstract formula."

"Love, then, must be the energy which forces the artist towards an evaluation of life. It is love that forces him or her to honesty in expressing an idea in such a way that it is a personal message, rooted in universality." 5.

Ever since Studio 22 was established, my parents had talked about setting up an arts and crafts center in the area, patterned after similar colonies in Europe. Already many artists had moved their studios and workshops to the 4 block area, and joint gallery tours were being organized. The buildings on the block were for the most part decaying commercial structures. The city had for some time been condemning property in the neighborhood and razing the old homes, taverns and grocery stores just south of the block, under the guise of "Urban Renewal." The idea was evidently to drive out poverty via the bulldozer, and

then build new, "middle-class" housing. The August 30, 1967, edition of the Lincoln-Belmont Booster reported on a proposal based on my parents concept, for the 2200 block of Lincoln Avenue. Chicago attorney, Stephen C. Shamberg, laid out the plan by explaining, "In Europe, past and present, craftsmen and artists have been able to satisfy their creative needs and at the same time provide income sufficient to support their families and apprentices."

"In the Chicago area, certain artists have become sufficiently well-established so that they could produce additional creative works on a full-time basis as a means of livelihood." The plan included a cooperative retail sales gallery, a theater that would be used for dramatic productions, motion pictures and general assembly purposes, a large cooperative kiln, facilities for printing works of graphic arts to be used on a cooperative basis, and a small convenience grocery store. Existing commercial buildings on the block would be renovated and converted for economical housing and studio facilities:· 6_

Unfortunately, funding and political backing for the project fell far short for what was needed. The city planners were hung up on the need to approve a several million dollar feasibility study for a grant that would have cost the city half that amount to actually implement the project. In the end nothing ever came of the project, although the area continued to change culturally and economically as more private development moved into the area. Soon our landlord was forced to sell the property, and Studio 22 had to move.

The momentum that made Studio 22 become such an active center for artists and patrons of the arts, helped the transition to the new location of the studio/workshop just north of the "Loop" (so-called because of the overhead rapid transit trains which ringed the heart of downtown Chicago.) Studio 22 on 63 W. Ontario was more than a change in location. The big three-story building,

formerly a boarding house and then renovated for a film studio, was perfectly suited for a school, gallery, studio and graphics arts workshop. At one time, Carl Sandburg lived in one of the rooms. Not only did artists, friends and patrons follow the move to downtown, but the studio itself was transformed from a neighborhood arts center, to a truly citywide institution, providing a unique service to the arts in Chicago. The expanded not-for-profit Printmakers Workshop now boasted six presses, including an Etching press, a Litho press from Germany, an offset proof press, an old Chandler book press and a Price platen press, in addition to our priceless Washington hand press.

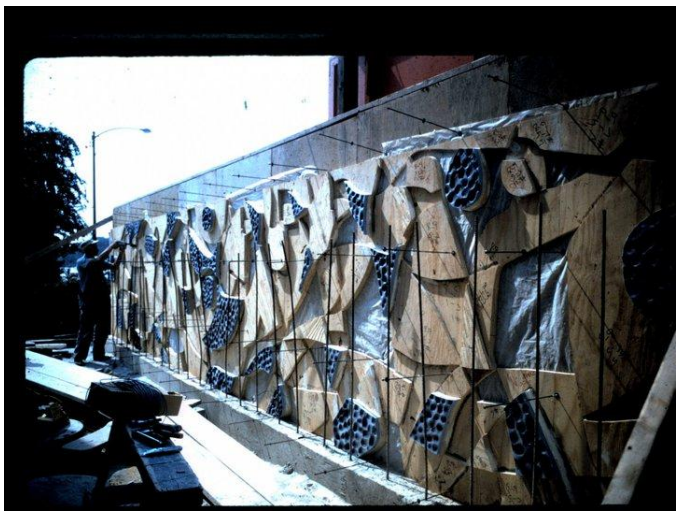
Classes were taught by my parents and several associate artists in printmaking, design and color theory and life drawing. Several full time apprentices worked in the studio, including a student from Dominican College in Racine. Bronislaw had resigned his teaching position with the college, but remained an advisor to the Art Department. George Baer, director of fine binding at Cuneo Press set up a hand bindery on the third floor and taught a class in the art of hand bookbinding. In addition to running the rapidly expanding business end of the workshop, Hedi organized the etching department on the third floor, where classes and individual instruction in zinc and copper plate etching took place. It was in this time that Hedi strengthened her own style, escaping the somewhat overbearing presence of Bronislaw, who generally avoided etchings. She became an expert in a unique form of etching. Color viscosity, which involved the application of several colors on one plate, was created by working with different depths and different means of applying the color.

The new Studio 22 opened with a great deal of fanfare and publicity. Arrangements had been worked out with the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, West

Germany, the home of Johannes Gutenberg, the 15th-century inventor of movable type, to set up an exhibit in the gallery entitled, "Homage to Gutenberg." Bronislaw did a woodcut, which was reproduced as a poster, and a grand opening was planned, hosted by Jockl Fuchs, Lord Mayor of the City of Mainz. Since my grandfather was a Mainzer and old friends with the mayor, the work of my mother and father was known to the mayor. The exhibit was staged to commemorate the 500th year anniversary of the death of Johannes Gutenberg and much was made of the collection of antique presses and techniques applied in the fine art graphic workshop in the newspaper articles. It was a big send-off to the new studio and it looked like things could only get better and better.

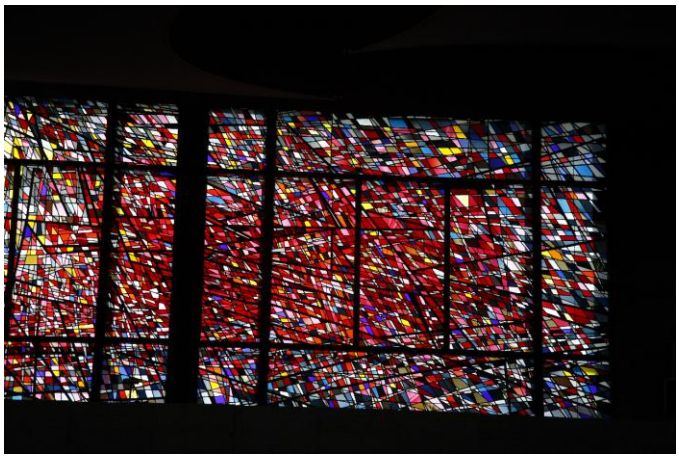
Studio 22 was always a busy place. In addition to the students and classes and walk- in gallery traffic, artists rented time on the presses, particularly the Litho press. Bronislaw set up his studio on the second floor, making full use of the facilities to do a good deal of graphic work. Stealing a page from the- book-a-month club, a print collector's club was set up. Graphics 200 was where members who joined would receive a monthly lithograph, woodcut or etching from a commissioned well-known Chicago artist and printed on a studio press for 5.00 dollars. The Club was limited to 200, which was the size of the special editions run and memberships came in from all over the country and even a few from Europe and Australia. With the new popularity of graphics as a more economical means of decorating home and office, and the potential investment possibilities, the timing for this program could not have been better. And it paid the rent.

There were two major projects that Bronislaw accomplished in 1969: a concrete wall sculpture for the City of Chicago and a stained Glass window for a Jewish Synagogue on Chicago's North Shore. The design for the wall, a poured concrete slab seven feet high by thirty feet long, depicts fire fighters battling a blaze. The technique, a repeat of the method used on the panel walls of the St. John's prep school, runs along the front of the then new fire station at Lehigh and Devine Street in Northwest Chicago.



The job came about through one of the

architects who lived up the street from the first Studio 22 on Lincoln Avenue. He was one of many folks who just dropped in to talk and look around. Seeing photographs of the St. John's wall, he remembered them later when he and a colleague were wrestling with a design problem in the drawings for the new firehouse on Lehigh. Concrete was my father's material of choice, because of the wide range of texture it produced as well as it's versatility. (The fact that it could also be applied in monumental proportions may also have had something to do with it.)



Conflagration was also on my father's mind in a different sense, when he was asked to design a window for the Temple Emmanuel on North Lakeshore Drive. Mrs. Mecklenberger, a wealthy Chicago philanthropist, had been looking for an artist to design a window for the new synagogue.

The theme of the donated 300 square feet window was to be a commemoration to the victims of the Holocaust. Her first choice was a well known Jewish artist from New York, but she was dissatisfied with his approach. An artist friend of hers from the Contemporary Arts Workshop, suggested asking Bronislaw.

He met Mrs. Mecklenberger and other people from the congregation at the Temple and listened to their ideas for the large window space. The backdrop to the window was the sky over the vast open space of Lake Michigan. It was a perfect setting for pure color. Going back to the workshop, Bronislaw worked the concept of the window over and over in his mind. In his studio, he drew up the sketch for the window's design in less than an hour. The design was made up of thousands of straight lines of lead emanating from a central blue-white-yellow vortex. Slashes of fire red dominated the window, fading into cold blue glass. The searing explosion of color and line like an intensely burning fire was a fitting impression of the Holocaust theme. The design proposal was accepted immediately and he went right to work on the detailed sketches. He was ready to do the window himself, but this time Hedi put her foot down. On nearly every project commission, my parents had lost money or barely broken even. Underestimating the cost of the materials or the time involved in doing the work, Bronislaw was a poor businessman to put it lightly.

Learning of the project, a sales representative of the Loire studio in Paris stopped by the studio and made an offer to execute the window's design. Gabriel Loire was the foremost stained glass artist in France and had a worldwide reputation. Since I was living in Germany at the time, my father used the opportunity to visit me. Both of us went to Paris, where he met with Monsieur Loire. The French artist agreed to do a sample model for the window, but said that he wouldn't dare attempt to do the actual design. He told Bronislaw, "I can't do this design, it is too complex. You are a master!" My father ended up doing the window in the basement of Studio 22, with the assistance of a professional artisan from one of the stained glass workshops in Chicago.

After the window was finished and installed, an evening reception was held celebrating the window's completion. Bronislaw was deeply honored to be praised for his work by the congregation. His own experience at the hands of the Nazis was referred to, reflecting the personal inspiration of the artist in creating a memorial to the millions who died in the genocidal campaign. He would long remember this night.

A book by Hedi Bak was also similarly honored. Working in wood, she produced a series of thirty woodcuts, entitled "Song of Songs" in a loose bound portfolio. Several of the Studio 22 regulars as well as Bronislaw pitched in to get it printed in a limited edition. The verses from the old Testament, dealing with the subject of love, were cut into the wood and the text incorporated into the page design in two and three color woodblocks. Bronislaw working on my mother's project was quite a switch for him, after all the years and time Hedi devoted to his career. For the second time, my parents attended an event hosted by a Jewish Congregation, this time to honor my mother's work. At a reception for the opening of the exhibit of the book at the Anshe Emett Synagogue in Chicago, my parents were especially moved by the Cantor, who sang the verses in Hebrew.

In those days, politically, Bronislaw considered himself a conservative.

As my mother would describe him, "He wasn't a flag waver, but he would wrap himself around the flag, in the face of any criticism of his adopted homeland." While he thought little of Mayor Daly and the

Democratic party machine in Chicago he generally defended the "system," particularly American foreign policy. After all, he had firsthand experience with other "systems," including the tyranny of Stalinism. His mother and what was left of his immediate family still lived in Poland, under very difficult conditions. The war that changed his life in 1939, was a war launched on two fronts, with the Nazi blitzkrieg on one side, and the Russian invasion of Poland on the other. The sins of Stalin, including the massacre of thousands of Polish soldiers at Katyn Woods, was well known to him, as it was for most Poles for many years before it was officially acknowledged.

America was always right, and by extension, the U.S. government. He desperately wanted to believe the politicians, and took what they said for good coin in those days, despite the growing opposition to the escalation of the war in Vietnam and other troubles. War was abhorrent to him and he hated guns. But he also held deep suspicion for the mass rallies and demonstrations that began to mobilize thousands of people against the war. One day while driving in the car and listening to the news about a rally against the war in downtown Chicago, my father told my mother that seeing the crowd chanting anti - war slogans and waving the "V" peace symbol with their hands reminded him of the crowds in Germany, with their arms outstretched, shouting, "Seig Heil!"

In 1968 he did several lithographs, with the crowd as a theme. Most showed figures scrambling for the top, or falling from the sides. Endless figures without expression, identity, or individuality was his response to what he feared was the tyranny of the crowd. The City Architect's office commissioned him to design the interior for the Democratic Party Convention to be held in Chicago in 1968. His toned down bunting decorations for the occasion were lost in the fracas and melee that occurred during that famous convention in August.

It was the brutal attacks of the baton swinging police and the pomposity of Daley and other authorities that began to plant seeds of doubt in his mind. It took some time before those questions became reflected in his imagery. By 1970 his lithographs began to question as well, through symbolism and the interjection of the photographs of commonplace objects and figures in a collage- like effect. War, weapons and the impression of war mingled with politicians at play, scenes of domestic tranquility and voluptuous nudes. In the next several years his work would grow to be more critical of the failings and hypocrisy of authority figures.

It was in this frame of mind that he reached a critical turning point in his life. March 1970, while driving down a highway, Bronislaw had what the doctors called an "episode." Feeling dizzy he pulled over to the side of the road and momentarily lost consciousness. Admitted to the emergency ward at
Grant Hospital, the physicians couldn't find anything wrong. Dr. Feador Banuchi, my father's friend a nd the chief of the Emergency ward at Grant
Hospital, finally spotted the problem, a severe blockage of the arteries to his brain. Ninety- four percent of his cerotic artery blocked on one side, ninety percent on the other, it was clear he was headed for a stroke. He was suffering from arterial sclerosis, and eleven years later he was to die from the disease. Dr. Banuchi arranged to operate immediately on one side of his neck to prevent a stroke, and then allow him to recuperate for several weeks before tackling the other artery. In the meantime, the doctors told my parents that Bronislaw had almost died. They would have to change their lifestyle to one less stressful and move to a different climate if Bronislaw would have any hope of living much longer. They had no choice but to make another abrupt change in their lives.

RETURN TO EUROPE

It was a time of heavy decisions. My mother and I and a solemn group of close friends and advisors gathered together one evening in March of 1970 in the conference room of Studio 22. I sat quietly with them in the room, thinking about my father, who had just undergone surgery. We were acutely aware that if any particle of calcium embedded in the artery in his neck had broken loose and gone into his brain, it would have killed him or at the very least, caused a stroke that could have disabled him. Hedi explained the financial status of Studio 22 to the meeting. While the workshop had not been able to get tax exemption, it had been run as a not-for-profit business. Unable to get grant money, the business had borrowed heavily against the future, banking on an even better year to come. But the productivity of Studio 22 was based primarily on the work done by my parents and they could no longer stay with it. And although they had sold more work then they had ever sold before (earning more than many other professional artists in Chicago from their work), every dime they earned was plowed back into the workshop. All agreed, since there was no one else to keep it going, the Studio had to close. While Bronislaw recovered at home from his first surgery, efforts were made to sell the equipment and find someone willing to finish out the five-year lease on the building. At first it seemed that Columbia College would buy the presses, but that eventually fell through. In April, Alan Frumkin, owner of the Frumkin Gallery on Michigan Avenue, contacted Hedi. He had a printer, Jack Lemon, a graduate of Tamerind Press in California. The first quality stone lithography shop in the U.S., financed by a grant from the Ford foundation) who wanted to set up a fine arts lithograph workshop in Chicago. Frumkin was willing to finance Lemon's workshop, so that he could commission artists to print quality limited edition lithographs. Since this was exactly what Studio 22 was set up to do and had done for two years, Frumkin was willing to make an offer. The buyout fell far short of the real value of the shop, but it did include taking over the lease and, furthermore, it was the only choice my parents had. More money was needed both to pay for the hospital expenses and to enable my parents to live somewhere in a warmer and Jess stressful climate for a time to allow Bronislaw to recuperate from his surgery. A massive closeout sale was planned for a weekend in April, and letters were sent out to the entire 500 plus mailing list.

The response was tremendous; as several hundred prints, a number of paintings and a small stained glass window were

sold to the many friends and patrons who showed up. One person, Dr. Hans Peter Buehler, a gallery owner from Stuttgart, Germany, found out about the sale while visiting friends in town. While he and his wife were buying several prints, he talked to Hedi about where my parents could go after the second round of surgery set for June. Learning that my parents hadn't come to any decision yet, he offered a suggestion. He had a friend in Southern France, a Madame Moravec, who had a studio near where Dr. Buehler and his wife often stayed, in Gigondas, in the Department Vaucluse. Her husband was a Czech painter who had died a number of years ago he explained to Hedi, and the studio would be perfect, the climate warm, and the landscape picturesque. He urged her to write Madame Moravec and ask if my parents could stay with her. In a short time arrangements were made and plans set to go to sunny Southern France for rest and recuperation. In May, my parents and my younger brother, Pieter, drove down to Savannah, Georgia, to spend a week in a motel on the beach. They visited artist and longtime family friend, Jean Diehl. The relaxation and repose of the short vacation was shattered, when on returning to Chicago they heard over the radio about the shooting of the students at Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State in Mississippi. The actions of the National Guard and response of the government was frightening to Hedi who had grown up during Hitler's rise to power.

Anxious to get out of the country, she expected an even greater government backlash. For Bronislaw, the spectacle produced bitter disbelief in the actions of the government of his adopted homeland. The veil of innocence was ripped wide open, and he was weary and ready for a change. In June, he underwent surgery again, while Hedi with the help of family friends moved the family belongings to an apartment on the south side of Chicago where I was to stay. Studio 22 now became, Landfall Press.

Jack Lemon was to begin a very successful fine arts graphics print shop and has today established a national reputation as a fine arts printer. A number of my parent's students and associates set up a cooperative gallery and print workshop on the north side of Chicago, continuing in a small way the tradition my parents had started. That summer, my parents arrived in Gigondas, at the home of Madame Moravec. Some things obviously got lost in the translation. There was a studio, a very fine studio. However, the studio was now a shrine to the Madame's late husband- everything was as he had left it years earlier down to the undisturbed cigarette butts and ashes in the ashtray. My parents had to be content with living and working next door in a small house. Pieter was sent to live with our

Grandmother in Germany and went to school in a German Elementary School.

My parent's experiences in Gigondas were remembered in a typical Bak fashion; they produced a series of comical and whimsical letters written by Hedi, and illustrated with two and three color woodcut prints by Bronislaw, entitled, "Letters to Sally". Several editions of the story were printed in Germany the next year. That Fall they visited the Palace d' Pope in Avignon to see an exhibit of works by Picasso. The collection, which included some 350 sketches, prints and paintings, was of work done during the late artist's last year and was very impressive. Hedi remembers that Bronislaw was particularly impressed with the fact that the master painter drew his sketches on anything. It didn't matter what to Picasso, he painted on whatever was available, and all the work was of high caliber.

My parents always thought a great deal of Picasso's work. Southern France had a particular draw to both Hedi and Bronislaw; it was the stomping grounds of many of the great French artists, including Picasso. One day they stumbled onto the Ochre Mountains while driving through the countryside. Intrigued by the variety of colors in the sand, Bronislaw filled several bags each with a different color, took them home and mixed them with paint. He did several sand paintings that were left in Germany. While visiting a museum in Paris, they saw a painting and found out that the famous French painter, George Braque, had the same idea some 40 years earlier, using the rich colors of the sand from the Ochre mountain range.

Carl Phillip Schmidt, owner of a large printing company in Kaiserslautern, commissioned Bronislaw to do a special edition lithograph. Each year Schmidt commissioned a local artist to produce a print edition, which he would purchase and give to his best customers as Christmas gifts. Familiar with my father's work from earlier exhibits at the Pfalzgalerie in Kaiserslautern, he was excited to be able to include my father's work in this collection. Arrangements were made with a fine arts printer in Paris, Jacque Des Jobert to print the lithographic drawing.

The title of the print was Atlas Hustet (Atlas coughed) depicting a large figure with arms outstretched and smaller figures dangling precariously from Atlas's arms and hands. Bronislaw's concerns with the environment, pollution and the quality of life was becoming more often a theme in his work. While working on the lithograph at Des Jobert's shop, Salvatore Dali swept through greeting everyone like royalty, shaking hands. The internationally prominent surreal artist was much less the showman in real life than the tabloids made him out to be. The

well-known American graphic artist, Harold Altman, was also working at Des Jobert's at the time and met Bronislaw.

Along the route between Gigondas and the Pfalz region of Germany, 50 kilometers South-west of Strassburg, lies the small town of Natzweiler in the Vogese Mountains. Along the top of a high hill, a stark white memorial sculpture rises high above the barbed wires and rows of barracks and graves carefully maintained by the Comité National Du Struthof of France. Natzweiller-Struthof was a Nazi death camp, set up in 1941. Three kilometers below nothing remains of the Shirmeck Concentration camp near the train depot and rock quarry, where Bronislaw and hundreds of others labored from late 1943 to the end of the war. Returning to visit the site of so many buried memories was for Bronislaw a cleansing of the soul. The others found it very depressing. The rain and the gloom of fog seemed to reinforce the specter of death that hung over the camp. The tour guide seemed to babble matter-of-factly, as if he were a guide at some palace or grand estate. But my father was silent, remembering.

It was a day like that dayin 1943, cold and foggy, when he first arrived at the camp in a transport from Mulhouse/ Alsace. Arrested for attempting to escape to Switzerland from a Polish POW work detail, along with four others, he and his companions had the bad luck to be captured by an SS unit. He had been taken to a SD(Sicherheits-Deinst) prison in Mulhouse.

While being beaten viciously with a whip by a Nazi officer, he remembered looking at his torturer through tears streaming down his face and wondering, “Does this man have teenage children?" Breaking down for the first time, he cried, hoping it would stop. He was thrown into a solitary confinement cell for three months and then placed in a larger prison cell with others. He tried to injure himself or make himself sick so he would be placed in the hospital ward, where escape seemed more possible, but eventually he was sent with a group to the Schirmeck Labor Camp, where there was no chance of escape.

The slogan "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work makes one Free), hung from a sign above the entrance gate to the camp surrounded by barbed wire, SS guards and attack dogs. A yellow diamond patch with a capital P was sewn to his prison garb, and he was assigned to a barrack with a number of other Polish prisoners. The camp had a number of Frenchmen} including the Mayor of Strassburg, some German intellectuals and a mix of other nationalities, an American among them. The prisoners worked unloading trains and breaking up rocks in the quarry. Bronislaw was the youngest, and when he

started falling behind, wanting to give up, his companions grabbed him and carried him along. The only way to stay alive was to keep working; those who fell were carted up to the gas chambers in Struthof. When winter came and with it cold and dampness, more and more fell ill, dying in the night. From his upper bunk, he could see death stalking all around him.

But he survived, and as a survivor his return to the memorial gave him strength, reminding him that those who tried to break him were themselves broken and vanquished, and he had lived. After the visit to Struthof, my mother remembers my father was not melancholy, and although, over dinner with relatives he was able to laugh, the visit to Strutthof had changed him. He had faced his past and was finally able to come to terms with it. As always it was in his art that the change in him became most apparent. For the next several years, he began to express his anger at human failings, and in much of his drawings, prints and paintings, he pulled no punches. He lashed out at conceit, greed, foolishness and fakery. For years he had created beauty and treated his human subject with kindness, sympathy and empathy. Now he was critical in his imagery, ridiculing through the use of painstakingly precise grotesque figures that resemble the twisted images of Dutch 15th century artist, Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Delights. His subjects were often nude politicians with laurels, a fat merchant with ticker tape draped from the shoulders, a woman nude drinking wine with litter and garbage under her chair, a German landed baron, staring out through a monocle his vineyards behind him, a pompous nude photographer walking through a field littered with bottles, crushed cigarette packages and other trash.

The subjects of his anger and disdain were the social conventions that masked the decadence of immorality. No doubt much of his anger arose from the memories of war and imprisonment. The cruel twist of fate that led to his surgery and the closing of Studio 22 was the catalyst that opened the floodgates of his scornful imagery. As a survivor, this work can certainly be considered in the genre of “Concentration Camp” art.

Over time his art began to become more symbolic and surreal. Inspired by some work of artists in the Pfalz, he began to adopt the approach of fragmenting the human images he drew. This was a deliberate statement about the frailty and incompleteness of humanity. These were comments on contemporary social conventions and caricatures that drew on the horror of his rememberances.

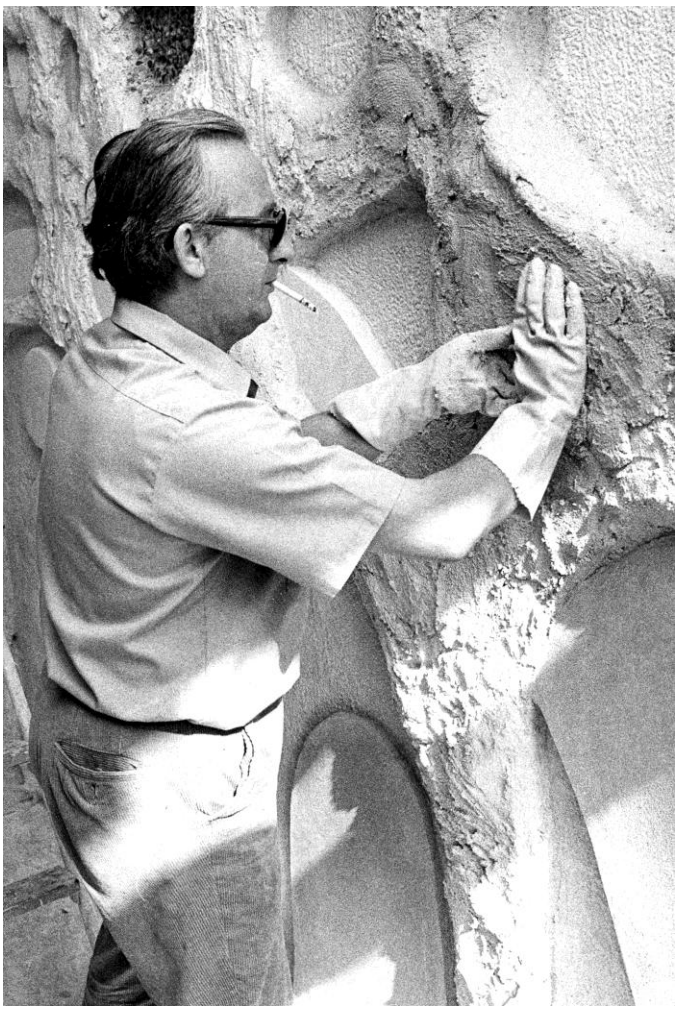
In Lettres Francaises, published in Paris in 1945, Picasso writing to Simone Tery articulated the attitude reflected in

Bronislaw Bak's art during this period, "What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only his eyes if he's a painter, or ears if he's a musician, or a lyre at every level of his heart if he's a poet, or even if he's a boxer, just his muscles? On the contrary, he's at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heartrending fiery or happy events, to which he responds in every way.

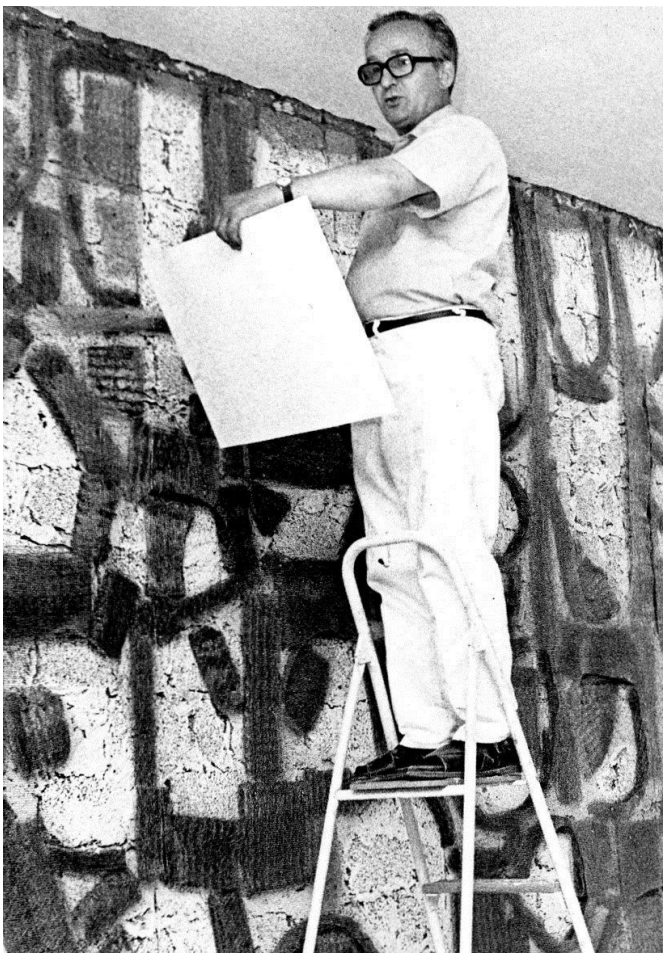
How would it be possible to feel no interest in other people and by virtue of an ivory indifference to detach yourself from the life which they so copiously bring you? No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy." 1.

In my father's hands, the weapons were ridicule and scorn through the use of fantastic and bizarre imagery. His favorite target was the pompous gentry, "Der Anherr." These are harsh images, and not easily witnessed.

There has only been one exhibit of this work, in 1973, at the Van Straaten Gallery, which for the most part went unnoticed. In the Fall of 1971 my parents moved to Kaiserslautern. After a year in Gigondas, my parents had decided it was time to move to Germany. A joint exhibit of their work had been planned at the Pfalz Gallerie in Kaiserslautern, and Bronislaw wanted to print some new work. There was also the possibility of Hedi working again, since the money, sparingly spent, was about to run out. Packing up everything they owned, they drove to the home of my mother's aunt in Kaiserslautern. On the Glocken Strasse, facing the train station, an old printer offered my parents room to set up a print shop. They purchased an old litho press and several sandstone blocks from Switzerland. and began to work until the money ran out. Luckily my mother was able to find work at the Department of City Planning for the City of Mainz as a draftswoman, so they moved again, this time to Essenheim, a suburb of Mainz. That summer, however, Bronislaw was awarded an important commission by the City of Kaiserslautern, that delayed their move till the Fall. Renovations were underway in the Pfalztheatre, the center for performing arts in downtown Kaiserslautern. The architect in charge wanted to liven up the interior of the reception foyer which was pervaded by the art- deco type styling that dominated the whole theatre building. Bronislaw designed



a 15 feet high by 30 feet long concrete relief wall that was an abstract representation of the forest that surrounded the city. His original plan was to use wood and Styrofoam molding to cast the concrete; however the fully contained nature of the wall inside of the room made this impossible.



He ended up making a steel frame, with wire mesh, in which he hand- molded the concrete like clay. Using different types of concrete, he attained different shadings. In some areas, he imbedded colorful pebbles.

Both of my brothers, who were in Germany at the time, as well as my mother worked with my father on this project. Hedi remembers their hands were sore and covered with ulcers from the lime. Bronislaw became quite popular with the workmen doing the renovations, sharing their lunch breaks, joking and telling stories. At one point, difficulties

getting the smooth texture between the branches of the treelike abstractions led to some frustration for my father. Observing this, a group of brick masons gathered their trowels and ladders and gave Bronislaw a lesson in the fine art of masonry, much to his delight. The wall was completed, and today, nearly twenty years later, it still looks as fresh as it did the day it was finished.

My parents were the guests of honor at a gala reception thrown by the Mayor and the City administration. Receiving the invitation, Bronislaw pressed his best summer suit, and Hedi picked out a nice comfortable dress. My mother's aunt was highly embarrassed when my parents showed up, not knowing that evening gowns and tails were standard dress for occasions like this.

In 1970, the Gutenburg museum in Mainz had an exhibit of Hedi and father's work. The museum, located in the center of the city, specializes in the study of the history of printmaking and early printing, as well as the promotion of contemporary fine art printmaking and typography.

Exhibits, held regularly, include many artifacts from the museum's permanent archives, as well as interesting work from other institutions. One such exhibit of a group of 15th century woodblocks came to the museum from the storage vaults of the Jagellonian University in Krakow, Poland. Dr. Helmut Presser, director of the Gutenburg museum, made the exciting discovery that the blocks were from the original Martin Luther Bible, printed in 1520. In an agreement with the Jagellonian University, the museum planned to ink the ancient blocks and print 100 copies from each one. They ran into a problem when they attempted to apply pressure to the blocks in one of the antique presses. The blocks were so warped that they threatened to crack. Stopping the work before any were destroyed, Dr. Elizabeth Gech, curator of the museum's collection, remembered that my parents were in the area, called my mother and asked if she could print the blocks. Hedi agreed} after looking at the blocks, to do the printing. Carefully handling the ancient carvings} Hedi with the help of Matthew, my brother hand printed 100 prints from each of the 100 blocks without any problem. For the next several months} Hedi worked full time in the museum archives.

Bronislaw was languishing at home at the time unable to find a job.
Working in a makeshift studio in the apartment, he was doing as series of fine detailed drawings with colored pencils borrowed from my mother's job at the department of city planning. The exhibit at the Pfalzgallerie came and went} and gallery exhibits took place in Stuttgart and Karlsruhe} Germany. Some work was sold} and there was a couple of articles

about his work. They felt out of place in Europe and began to talk about returning to the States. After 20 years, they came to the realization that America was the only place they could call home.

The decision was made to try to find a teaching position for Bronislaw at a college or university in the Southern United States, where the climate would be less harsh than the winters in Chicago. A letter arrived one Summer day from a university in North Carolina, that said that they had seen his resume and were considering him for an opening on the faculty of the art department. Anxious to return, they closed up the apartment, se1ling, storing and packing their two years of accumulated stock of art work and took their belongings back to Kaiserslautern. Staying for a few weeks to print several more editions on the lithograph press, they left in the summer of 1972.

Flying back to Chicago, they arrived only to find out that the teaching position that brought them home had been denied him. A committee decided against hiring him and instead hired a younger artist. Friends took them in for a few months while they applied for jobs all over the country.

It was through a former Chicago artist on the faculty of Georgia Southern College, who heard through friends that Bronislaw was looking for a teaching position, that Bronislaw was finally hired there. Jean Diehl made contact and arranged for them to make the move to Statesboro.

It was to be a substantial change, but a necessary one for them. They had been to Savannah, Georgia several times, and knew and liked the warm climate. In 1973 Bronislaw made what was to be his final move, to a small Southern college town 90 miles north of Savannah and the coast of Georgia.

GEORGIA

One early Spring morning before dawn in 1974, a young patrolman noticed a door cracked open In a storefront down the street from the old courthouse in the small college town of Statesboro, Georgia. He had seen Mr. Bak, the art professor at Georgia Southern College, often working there in his workshop and driving around town, a short graying gentleman with thick glasses, a strong foreign accent and a friendly smile to all Bruno, (as he was known to friends and neighbors) and his wife, Hedi, newcomers to Statesboro, had already begun to win new friends among both the college community and townsfolk. Much like the neighborhood barbershop, the doors of the studio were always open for friends to drop in and "stay awhile." The studio was often lit up in the evenings, the artist working late at night, on a new painting or print edition.

Carefully easing the door open, the patrolman shined his light on the walls, and nearly fell off the stoop in sheer panic. Life- size fragmented people, with fishes swimming through their vital organs beckoned to him from a sea of coral, beer cans and crumbled cigarette packages. Bronislaw Bak was at that point at the height of his surreal stage, hard at work on several canvases where brilliant human forms seemed to splinter into arboreal stumps surrounded by huge plants. Small wonder that the scene, reminiscent in the dim light of a Hollywood set from the "Night of the Living Dead," should cause such fright.

Similar to his work in Germany, the figures retained the fragmented form that marked this whole period of work; however the imagery had become softer, less biting. The expressions and poses of the human figures had become gentler and more comical than the wraiths that they appeared like at first glance. Yet for a city cop in a small sleeping Southern town, it was quite a shock.

Sarah Lansdell, critic for the Louisville, Kentucky, COURIER JOURNAL, came close to the artist's own thoughts at that time in her review of a 1977 exhibit of Bronislaw and Hedi's works at the Younger's Gallery in Louisville. "There is social comment in Bak's work, but it is far from bitter. He needles but does not ax. When his wit bites as sharply as sulphuric acid, it is used in small drops." And further, "The message is optimistic: Mankind is having a hard time, but it is surviving and can prevail. .. his irony is delicious, his wit tantalizing." Referring to some of the fragmented figures, she writes, "True, some of his figures look tormented and doomed. Bak paints in a surrealistic manner in which dominant figures are partly eroded, dissolved into landscape or water. This stems from Bak's feeling that in his sphere of painting everything exists

as a part of everything else, that spirit and matter are the same." 1.

No longer working out anger, his work had again changed. His interest now was in provoking thought via an examination of the interdependence of humanity and the natural world in his paintings. His alarm at the destruction of nature and the growth of pollution, and the need for us to understand that we are a part of nature, was central theme of a number of paintings done during the years from 1973 to 1976. Large oil canvases with titles like, "Alice wondering in Wonderland," or "Ogeechee Adam" and "Ogeechee Eve" (named after the shady tree-lined river that flowed through South Georgia), showed wistful giant figures fused to the green fauna around them. One particularly humorous painting is titled, "Recycling Spa," shows four female figures in two piece bathing suits, gracefully floating up to their necks in a coral sea filled with fish and littered with garbage. It is through the gaping holes in the figures, through which fish appear to be calmly swimming, that my father's irony is revealed with full force. The changing sea, mother of all life, is the repository of our own neglect, and we are what we make of the world.

Bronislaw's work as an artist, and his ideas as a designer and educator, was inseparable. Many of his lectures and classroom notes have been lost over the years, and like most artists who become teachers, their primary legacy is in their work and the ideas they passed on to their students, not in the scholarly publication of books. "It is my commitment as an ·artist'- a designer- that makes me a teacher. It is the intensity to this commitment as much as to design which I try to preach to everyone. With more or less success," he told Sharon Fell in an interview published in 1980. A student told Fell in the same article that, "Mr. Bak gets his students motivated - it's just exciting to see him so involved in his work. Everybody likes him; all students who have had his class will be life-long fans." 2.

Although he was a gifted teacher, who was extremely popular with his students, the role of educator did not come easy to him. Writing and lecturing in his adopted tongue, his style often revealed the literary origins of his language. He read extensively, quoting frequently from various texts. Hedi and Bronislaw always had a library, with books on art history, philosophy, color theories and techniques. It was one of the few possessions that made the long trip across the ocean in 1952. Often as a child and growing up, I would browse through many of the titles, absorbing bits and pieces. As a teenager, I had read Arnold Houser's four volume" Social History of Art," and was familiar with more works of artists, past and present, then most of my

friends ever heard of. By the time Hedi and Bronislaw moved to Statesboro, the volumes of shelves filled an entire room, and could easily compete with many college library's art book section. Bronislaw Bak felt strongly that art should be an important part of people's lives. He explained in Fell's interview that," I am trying to make myself understand that art ought to be part of the environment, that it should be organic with the needs of society. We are coming to an age where the stress will be on personal cultural needs. Increasing leisure and such aspects of our new life will give a different color to our existence and different needs.

Today more than ever we need to reevaluate our relationship with art and environment, which not only molds people but is part and parcel of our living., We must arouse people's concerns about space, to be aware of space."

Art has an essential meaning in our own existence. We cannot live without it. Depriving people of that experience has caused many problems, specifically behavior problems. A cluttered environment gives cluttered impressions. Art is seeking order in a cluttered society, and somewhat ahead of other endeavors." 2.

In his introductory lecture to his course on environmental design, he charged his design students with the goal of becoming fully aware of human conditions so as to be able to educate and help meet social needs. Understanding the elements of composition, line, shape, color and form was only one aspect, a basic one at that, of being a good designer. A designer must be …guided by concern.'' 2.

He was an environmentalist in the broadest sense. His love for animals and nature, the giant oaks and sycamore trees of the South, all played a role in his imagery. He was not an opponent of industry, but saw the development of technology in the service of humanity, as a way to create greater opportunities for the fulfillment of life …He lectured on his vision of the future: "We will adopt a responsive and responsible path to the future based on reason ... The growth of the machine did not and will not produce atamans. Leisure will be expanded, life much richer, transportation easier. We will live, as certain studies already indicate, and practice is showing, in centers more conducive to communal living, sparing the tremendous natural resources, and achieving ecological balances.
The energy derived from sources other than those in use today will give us better air to breathe. Concrete highways will be plowed under and cultivated or become park lands. Transportation studies indicate that tunnels of long distances could be bunt underground without

disturbing the surface. The expanding superfluous dwellings of the suburbs will be reminiscent of the past century."
He saw that this kind of a future would not come automatically, "It will take a high-moral society with a commitment to a future environment, in which the personal satisfaction and group and society enjoyment could be fulfilled. Let us then begin in our classrooms; the program should be expanded to include the future. Give our students vision. We are standing on the threshold of a new century, let us enter it without recourse, prepared to face its expectations. The future leaders will be thankful for this. We must become a planning society, not a planned society." 2
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In 1975, Hedi and Bronislaw moved into a home, a block away from the campus, and began immediately building a large studio behind the house. Hedi, who had been teaching at Savannah State College and commuting several times a week the 120 mile round trip drive to Savannah, quit to work full time in her studio in the front of the house. A two story high workshop was built out back, which had a vaulted ceiling with a large skylight view of the sun shining through the branches of a poplar tree. Plate glass windows and sliding doors ringed both sides of the shop, with a small patio and green house separating the house and studio. It was an ideal place to paint, and Bronislaw returned to the canvas on a grand scale.

Discovering new oil paint that allowed him to develop the translucency of his glass windows, he began to work with color compositions again, first with a small paint sprayer then with brush and turpentine. He stretched several canvases at a time and worked on them simultaneously.

In 1977 he was given a commission to do a large painting for a new country home being built by Statesboro architect, Edwin Akin. The theme of the painting was to be of the trees that surrounded the home.
Since moving to Georgia, both Hedi and Bronislaw had fallen in love with the green landscape of the Old South. The great oaks covered with Spanish moss that lined the riverbanks of the Savannah River were particular favorites of my father. Working with the new translucent values in his oil paintings, he began to study the effect of light on leaves. He began a large six by nine feet canvas, with the intention of capturing the effect of sun light on kudzu (a very fast growing vine which has blanketed thousands of acres in the south since its introduction to the area in the 1930's from the Far East).

Working with the color, he began to drop the naturalistic leaf pattern, and began to substitute pure overlapping circles of color, in greens, reds and blue-greens, inspired by the after image of the scintillating poplar leaves dancing 1n the sunlight through the skylight above the

studio. Excited with the results, he began to work in other color combinations.

A gallery owner from Atlanta stopped by to see his work. He offered to represent Bronislaw and Hedi, and organize a one-man show of his latest work in the fall of 1981 in his gallery in the Peachtree Center in Atlanta.

Bronislaw agreed, and began an ambitious effort to turn out over twenty paintings, including three 6 by 9 feet canvases and one five panel painting 6 by 15 feet long, all involving different variations on the same theme of color modulation, using overlaying circles and squares of different colors.

In 1980, after Bronislaw began feeling ill, Hedi and Bronislaw returned to Chicago to see his old friend and Physician, Dr. Banuchi. After a thorough examination it became apparent that the arterial sclerosis had returned in full force, despite my father's diet and exercise regime. This time attacking the heart, surgery was his only choice, if he expected to live much longer. Undergoing quadruple heart bypass surgery, he returned to Georgia in an even weaker state in March 1980.

Determined to continue teaching and finish the paintings in time for the opening of his exhibit in Atlanta, he pressed on. Finishing all but one of the smaller paintings, he died suddenly in September of 1981, his heart finally giving out just two weeks before the opening of what was to be one of his most important exhibits. Several hundred people came to his funeral, many from the town as well as colleagues, students and friends from the school. Letters of condolences came pouring in from allover the country, as friends found out about his death.

The show in Atlanta opened as scheduled, with several carloads of friends and family driving up together. The paintings looked brilliant against the black background of the gallery. In a review in the January-February 1982, Art Papers magazine, Tom Lyman, professor of art history at Emory University, described the work with enthusiasm,

"Relatively large canvases, one measuring 14 x 7 feet, manifest the exuberance of a master in command of rediscovered resources. Using a relatively narrow vocabulary of rectangular and circular patches, built dense, seemingly regular patterns of overlaid tonal plains that oscillate with illusory transparency, suggesting a spatial continuum of ironic opacity. Impenetrability vies with limpidity, warm tones with cool, in varying degrees from one work to another."

"Rhythmic patterns expand, sometimes flaccidly, often with fierce energy, but always boundlessly, beyond the edges of each canvas. Seemingly systematic signals dissimulate an intuitive skein of discrete pictorial decisions, recalling in a way early poons without the punch card cues. Primary hues convey a pulsating detachment, tertiaries wax organic and conflicting fields of color energy ignite in pyrrhic pyrotechnics.

The range of moods is as broad as the spectrum he diligently reclassified to suit each chromatic essay. There is an obsessive finality about the rigor with which the thematic lyricism he'd once expressed was transformed into shifting fields of color energy, like some post-Bauhaus Van Gogh assaulted not by crows in a wheat field but by the kaleidoscopic recollection of all his earthly existence atomized sur le champs" 3.

The passion of his work was as keenly felt in his color studies as it was in his figurative work, as it was translated into the enthusiasm he brought to his hundreds of students over the year. Although death was occasionally a theme in his work, his own death was not something he dwelt upon. Asked by Sharon Fell in her interview in 1980, how he wanted to be remembered he laughed and replied, "I am still quite young to think of that! But he answered anyway, "I would love to be remembered for the totality of my work, my graphics which are all over the world… and as a man who put ideas into people's heads."

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