ARTHUR JAFFE

"A life well-lived is like a book well-read..."
Unknown

by Jan Engoren

At his final commencement speech at Antioch College in 1859, Horace Mann, the college's first president, recited what became the school's motto: "Be ashamed to die until you win some victory for humanity." It is these words that Arthur Jaffe lives by.

Jaffe, an energetic and sprightly 87-year-old who looks and acts much younger than his chronological age, is the founder of the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Collection: Books as Aesthetic Objects at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) in Boca Raton, Fla, and a lifelong collector of artists' books.

Jaffe, a former US Army intelligence officer who worked for the Mossad during Israel's formative years, never set out to be a collector. "I don't think of myself as a collector," explains Jaffe. "A collector needs goals and focus. I'm a lover of artists' books and simply bought books I loved. Like seeing a beautiful woman again and again, I enjoy seeing my books."

Artists' books are, by their nature, art expressed through the medium of a book, designed to appeal to the senses and imagination. (A separate but related genre is livres d'artiste, or illustrated books, that were popular during the 1890s.) Angela Lorenz, book artist and author, in her attempt to define the category says, "They [artists' books] are usually supposed to be touched and interacted with, often with a specific predetermined sequence. All of their physical attributes are not visible at once. In the process of manipulating them, their multi-layered approaches attempt to manipulate you, just as the sequence of a film or even an obstacle course."

Book of Common Prayer, Miriam Schaefer, Covers are glove driers painted in gold and maroon paint, the hole in front reveals the image of Christ, has unusual rope binding, the clamshell box in maroon silk was starched and manipulated to give a folded effect, then glazed in umber and edged in silver.

Usually of mixed-media, the artists' books manifest a particular artistic vision and voice. Often a secondary narrative is realized through the artistic story of design, image and color. True to the thematic expression of this genre, the reader experiences enjoyment on different sensory levels, not only through the story, but kinesthetically as well. In an artist's book, the artist controls every facet of the production from making the paper, and often, the ink, calligraphy, printing and illustrating, setting the type, printing, running the press, binding, die-cutting, and sometimes creating the installation.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, the church, the upper-class and royalty commissioned biblical texts with embellished bindings of jewels and precious metals. Calligraphers experimented with colorful, ornate lettering and gold leaf borders. The text on the inside of the books grew more and more elaborate in proportion to the opulent bindings and covers.

Experts agree there is no one fixed set of defining criteria for artists' books and the genre is open to interpretation. Some experts, including Arthur Jaffe, consider the "Book of Kells" (c. 800), a 736 page New Testament codex transcribed by Celtic monks in homage to the Church, as one of the first known artists' books. This masterpiece of calligraphy and illustration, in which no two pages are alike, is referred to as "the most beautiful book in history."

In the mid-fourteenth century, a Passover Hagaddah was spirited out of Spain into Italy during the Inquisition. It later surfaced in Yugoslavia, where it survived the Second World War. It now resides in the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Sarajevo Haggadah, or book detailing the traditional service used during the Jewish holiday of Passover, is considered one of the most beautiful and priceless illustrated Jewish manuscripts in existence, containing handwritten text with detailed copper leaf and gold leaf images on bleached calf skin.

With the advent of Guttenberg's printing press and mass production of books, artists' books fell out of favor until the early eighteenth century when they made a resurgence with Lawrence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy" (1759), a comic novel about the life and times of protagonist Tristram Shandy, and William Blake's "No Natural Religion" (1788), considered by other schools of thought as the first true artists' book. Both artists exerted what was for the time unusual control over their work. Sterne chose the paper, type and layout of his multivolume book, and then interwove verbal and visual images while making liberal and whimsical use of hyphens, dashes, asterisks, and crosses. Blank pages, black pages and marbled pages are symbolic and left to the reader's imagination.

During the 20th century, artists' books came into their own as a pure art form. Johanna Drucker,
"A Book is like a Garden in the Pocket," stained glass window, by Suzanne Moore

professor, art critic and a book artist herself, says in "The Century of Artists' Books," "The artists' book is the quintessential 20th century art form. Artists' books appear in every major movement in art and literature and have provided a unique means of realizing works within all the many avant-garde experimental and independent groups whose contributions have defined the shape of 20th century artistic activity."

The Jaffe collection of artists' books is extensive and broad-based with an academic mission. Before it moved to its new home in 4,800 sq. ft. specially designed wing in the FAU library, Jaffe had more than 2,800 books in his house. His dining room table became a rotating exhibition showcasing his favorite books and latest acquisitions.

If collectors can be characterized into four distinct categories, there would be the inquisitive collector who views his or her collection from a purely financial perspective – (think J.P. Morgan and his collection of fine art, jewelry and books); the hobbyist who collects for pure enjoyment (i.e., china figurines); the expressive collector, such as Thomas Jefferson, whose library collection of classics and contemporary philosophers becomes an extension of self; and the passionate collector, embodied in Arthur Jaffe and his lifelong devotion and love of artists' books. Emotional and single-minded, when a new object is acquired the passionate collector feels a sense of personal satisfaction. It is this sense of satisfaction that permeates Jaffe's raison d'etre.

Since the original gift collection to FAU in 1998 and the opening of the Jaffe Center for Book Arts (JCBA) in 2007, the collection has grown to more than 10,000 items. Included are many one-of-a-kind artists' books and 6,000 pieces of related ephemera. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is greeted with a large stained glass plaque done by calligrapher Suzanne Moore which is inscribed with the Chinese proverb, "Books are like a garden in your pocket." A large, cast paper sculptural image of an open hand, resembling the hands, or hand of god, symbolizing creativity and 'hand-made,' was donated by Jaffe's daughter, Leanne Jaffe. It is a souvenir from opera scenery at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia where she is professor of Fine Arts: Painting, Printmaking and Sculpture.

Jaffe's office in the Jaffe Center is large and bright, decorated with pictures of him and his wife Mada, who died in 2001, childhood pictures, and original artwork. A handmade quilt fashioned from remnants of Mata's clothing and designed to resemble a bookshelf hangs on the wall behind his desk. In the quilted bookcase are books of memorabilia of his travels to Israel, China, Nepal, and Thailand, and some personal mementos, including the insignia from his Israeli army uniform of 1948.

Windows rim the exterior of the building, which is used exclusively for offices. The interior of the center was designed without windows to protect the books. Sprinklers are intentionally set in the center of the room, while the bookshelves align the perimeter of the gallery. The temperature in the gallery is kept at 68-73° F, as paper requires a constant temperature. In addition to housing the collection, the Jaffe Center offers workshops in bookbinding, handmade papermaking, box making, and classes for quilters interested in creating quilted artists' books. The Center possesses four antique printing presses used to teach classes in letterpress printing. John Cutrone, M.F.A. and programs coordinator at the center, says, "I get excited by the whole process. I love printing. One of our main goals in opening the center was to emphasize book arts instruction and share our enthusiasm for this art form. When artists take books into the realm of the unexpected, it leaves a deep impression on the viewer."

"Recently, we've had two travelling exhibitions of Iraqi books, 'Mutanabbi Street Starts Here,' featured books rescued from the bombing in March 2007 of Al-Mutanabbi Street in Iraq, formerly the center of Iraqi booksellers and literary life. It was the second and most important exhibition we've installed to date. We also had 'Dafatir. Contemporary Iraqi Book Arts.' which consisted of 40 books handmade by 17 contemporary Iraqi artists. These books detail years of tyranny under the Baath regime, the unprovoked invasion of their country and the subsequent looting of museums and libraries," stated Cutrone. One of those books resembles a bold, graphic Russian-style political propaganda poster of a yellow-eyed Saddam, whose teeth are the bars of a jail with images of political prisoners locked behind the bars.

The Jaffe Center collects books from all continents and books created from all types of materials, including metal, dirt, and potato sacks, some emitting the pungent scent of curry, and still others complete with their own jazz CD. The longest book in the collection is 33' long, the tallest is 3' tall x 2' wide. The smallest miniature books are 1" square.

"The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," by William Shakespeare issued in 1930 by the Cranach Press and illustrated by Edward Gordon Craig, is one of Jaffe's favorite artists' books. The book is an authentic version of Hamlet, illustrated with stage settings and elaborately printed with a glossary and commentary.

Another of Jaffe's favorites is the "Colours of Persia," by English artist Susan Alix. Alix crafted a handmade box encasing a text recounting famous travelers' journeys to Persia. She made the paper and ink herself; then bound the book in silk. Jaffe enthused, "The artistry of illustration, the variety of hand-made paper and the luxurious and beautiful cover and binding makes this book truly remarkable."

The diversity of artists' books is limited only by the artists' imaginations. There are tunnel books, which expand horizontally in the manner of an old-fashioned bellows view camera, anamorphic books, miniature books, and "pop-up" books designed by paper engineers (now called moveable books). There are flip books, such as the pocket-sized one illustrating the ejection of the Eiffel Tower that Jaffe purchased for $1.00 in Paris; private language books, such as Zaum, the invented language of the Dadaist Ilya Zdanovich; and square word calligraphy books where the English-word letters are designed to resemble Chinese characters.

One of the most original limited edition books is the string book, where the shadows and patterns from the string construction and the rustle of the thread through each sheet of paper create images and sound as the pages are turned (the Jaffe Center owns one of 50). Other types include altered books, where the artist first creates the book and then alters it in some way: sculptural books, such as books as a useable chess set; accordion books; books as jewelry; and books designed to look more like a wasp's nest than a book. For the price of four quarters, one can even purchase a miniature book encased in a plastic egg from a gumball machine in the gallery.

Jaffe goes to work every day at the Center and is actively involved in its mission and day-to-day activities. He states, "I don't want people to remember me particularly. I want them to remember the collection and say, 'That's a hell of a collection.' If I've left something behind that other people can enjoy, I've been successful and I'm very satisfied with that."

Indeed, Arthur Jaffe and the Jaffe Center for Book Arts have created an enduring legacy and a 'victory for humanity' that would make Horace Mann proud.◆