

# Transcendent Craftsmanship

Since its establishment in 1985, Alcuin design award winner Michael Torosian's Lumiere Press has laid claim to a publishing niche that combines traditional letterpress printing with books of and about photography. His most recent publication, *An American Gallery*, is a collaboration with the New York-based Howard Greenberg Gallery, celebrating its silver anniversary. The book reproduces what Greenberg considers 25 of the most significant photographs from his extensive private collection, accompanied by his commentaries. As Torosian discusses below, he considers *An American Gallery* to be his most ambitious project to date, in terms of its size, technical challenges and the approach he took to publishing it. The book (quarto, 98 pp.) combines text set in Kennerley Old Style and printed letterpress with tipped-in reproductions of the photographs printed by 10-micron stochastic four-colour offset lithography. The book has been cased in quarter cloth with patterned paper sides designed by Torosian. The edition is 250 copies, of which only 50 are available for sale directly from Lumiere Press (\$1,000).

*You're based in Toronto, and Howard Greenberg is in New York. How did the idea for An American Gallery develop?*

I got to know Howard back in 1988 when he hosted the launch of one of my books. Over the years we got to know each other and worked together on various projects. One day in 2005 I dropped by for a social visit and I mentioned to Howard that I'd just been by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see a show at the Costume Institute. I told him I was particularly mesmerized by a gown that had been created for Jacqueline Kennedy for a White House event. The gown was exquisite, and what struck me was that it represented an opportunity for the couturier to work on something where cost and time were irrelevant, the only thing that mattered was that the final result be a work of transcendent craftsmanship. I said that would be my dream project as a publisher and Howard said, "Let's do that book!"

Once our imaginations were fired up with the idea of something rather grand, Howard focused on the idea of a book to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his gallery. I proposed the art writer Lyle Rexer as author of the introductory essay,

and Howard said that he wanted the core of the book to be a selection of works from his private collection accompanied by his reflections, anecdotes and analyses on each picture.

Howard sent me a printout of his collection, which was considerable. He'd marked up the prime candidates based exclusively on what he had to say about them. This gave us a selection of probably 35 to work with. Howard then flew up to Toronto, where we spent some very long days talking about the pictures. I transcribed the recordings, edited them into commentaries, and together we made the final selection of images.

*What are some of the highlights of his collection? What will people see in An American Gallery that perhaps are not iconic?*

There is no question that pictures like Lewis Hine's *Powerhouse Mechanic* and Ruth Orkin's *American Girl in Italy* are enshrined in the canon of American photographic heritage. Additionally, the book presents the work of Walker Evans, Edward Steichen and W. Eugene Smith, all of whom had a decisive and lasting influence on the artistic consciousness of photogra-



phy. Among the lesser known works there are masterpieces by Consuelo Kanaga (a treasure that everyone has responded to), Weegee, Leon Levinstein, Sid Grossman and Roy DeCarava, to name a few.

*In his collecting, is there a particular period that Greenberg considers most interesting or creative?*

The pictures in the book range from the late 19th century, with a picture by Julia Margaret Cameron, to a Les Krims from 1969. The period that Howard

articulated as being the most important and exhilarating for him is the moment, as he characterizes it, “when Pictorialism morphs into Modernism.” The idea being that exceptional avant-garde photographers in the '20s and '30s who had extraordinary technique, particularly in printmaking, were applying this virtuosity to a new vision, a more constructivist, modernist sensibility. This can be seen in the book in the work of Struss and Steichen and Lauschmann, among others.

This fixation on the nexus of Pictorialism and Modernism was a key element in the graphic conceptualization of the book. When I'd first thought about the project, I thought this was the chance to do something in the style of the great *livres d'artist*. I visited a number of art libraries so I could see the great books by Picasso and Braque and Matisse first-hand. As a matter of fact, one of the early prototypes for the book used Matisse-like elements for the cover. But I soon felt I was going down the wrong road.

One evening while I was crossing Central Park in New York, Howard's words about the intersection of Pictorialism and Modernism came back to me and all of a sudden I could see the book in my mind. I was able to obtain the Intertype mats for a font of Goudy's Kennerley, which had been specifically designed in 1911 for a book on photography by Alvin Langdon Coburn. I paired this with Parsons for display and created a geometry for the pages which in the use of rules and boxes I felt would give a Wiener Werkstätte modernist architecture to



“Young Girl in Profile, 1948” by Consuelo Kanaga.

the book. The palette of the inks and paper were selected to enhance this “nexus,” as was the design of the cover—a pattern I created by excising elements from Frantisek Drtikol's picture *Thorns*.

*Lumiere Press has focused on publishing books about or involving photography. What is the connection between photography and letterpress printing for you—why letterpress?*

I think this is one of those form and function issues, what is termed in photographic print-

making the “syntax” of the print. That is, the image speaks to us in a certain way because of the craft and methodology of the printmaking. This is all applicable to books.

I started with the conviction that the most beautiful way to get words on paper is letterpress. What I've tried to do with Lumiere Press is use the best of early-20th-century letterpress technology and the best of early-21st-century offset technology together to make books unlike anything else in the marketplace. In the final analysis, this conjunction of technologies has been a lucky bonus. I'd make the books by casting lead type, pushing the sheets through the Vandercook and hand binding the books anyway, because it is my inclination and pleasure to do it this way.

*Michael Torosian is currently working on a book on the early photography of Paul Caponigro. That will be followed up with a book to celebrate the opening of Ryerson University's new museum of photography, specifically the history of their collection from the famed photo agency Black Star. Beyond that he is preparing a book of his own photography, and he suspects he and Howard Greenberg “will be talking about more projects in the future.”*

*The Lumiere Press Web site ([www.lumierepress.com](http://www.lumierepress.com)) includes a detailed prospectus for An American Gallery as well as a short video following Torosian through the process of setting, printing and binding a book. The Howard Greenberg Gallery site can be found at [www.howardgreenberg.com](http://www.howardgreenberg.com).*