

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Publisher Mel Hurtig recalls publishing George Kuthan's erotic wordless novel Aphrodite's Cup. By Rollin Milroy

Long-time *Amphora* readers know our fondness for the art of George Kuthan. But how many appreciate just how closely tied the magazine is to the artist, and specifically to his most infamous work, which went on to become perhaps the most unlikely candidate for a trade edition facsimile in Canadian publishing history?

Born in Czechoslovakia in 1916, Kuthan studied art in Paris and came to Canada in the early 1950s. At that time abstraction and modernism ruled the Vancouver fine art scene, and Kuthan was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was primarily a printmaker, who did much of his work in multi-colour linocuts. Most of his work that remains with us today consists of illustrations and graphic art commissions, including many collaborations with Robert Reid during the heyday of his design work in Vancouver. It was this work that led to what may be Kuthan's most personal, and widely seen, series of prints, collected in the 1964 limited edition *Aphrodite's Cup*.

The book is a wordless novel telling of the erotic and explicit encounter between two dreamy lovers through a series of 25 two-colour linocuts based in style and form on ancient Greek *amphorae*. (Get it? Amphora? *Amphora*?) The book was printed from the original blocks by Ib Kristensen in an edition of 250 signed copies and published by Kuthan himself under the imprint Honeysuckle Press. Perhaps the most intriguing detail about this book is not its explicit nature, but the fact that it was reprinted in a trade edition 12 years later, by Edmonton-based bookseller and publisher Mel Hurtig. Kuthan's original edition is now uncommon and quite expensive (\$300 to \$500), and it is Hurtig's edition people are most likely to encounter these days.

"We had published quite a few Canadian books that were out of print, and we decided to do this one, in a very limited edition," Hurtig says when asked to recall his first en-

counter with *Aphrodite's Cup* (after Kuthan's death in 1966). "I saw the book originally in my friend Bill Duthie's store in Vancouver. I thought it was interesting and very well done. I had never published anything remotely close to being erotic, and I thought it would be kind of fun to do."

Hurtig's edition was printed offset and is an excellent facsimile, faithful in size, format and paper stock to the original. It too was a limited edition, of 1,000 machine-numbered copies. With its explicit sexual representations, *Aphrodite's Cup* seems a courageous choice for a trade publisher in Canada in 1976.

"We were apprehensive. Every copy was shrink-wrapped, and every copy had a warning label on the exterior of the shrink wrap saying that the book was not suitable for children," Hurtig says. But the biggest obstacle posed by the book loomed even before publication, with the printers.

"The normal printers that we dealt with at that time were apprehensive. I forget who we ended up having it printed by, but it was the first time we printed a book where our normal printers were reluctant to print it.

"It didn't sell terrifically well, but it didn't sell poorly either. It sold moderately, and if I recall correctly it was quite pricey [\$35], and so I remember there was some price resistance. But I also remember that the people who bought it were really enthusiastic about it," Hurtig says.

Hurtig sold his publishing business to McClelland & Stewart in 1991 and has focused on writing since. *The Truth About Canada*, his most recent book, was published this year. Perhaps one thing for Canadians to know, and to ponder about themselves, is that Hurtig considers this extended examination of Canadian socio-economic conditions compared to those of other countries, not the explicitly sexual *Aphrodite's Cup*, his most controversial book to date.

