

# Printmaker Mauricio Lasansky focuses on his art



By John Kenyon  
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**I**OWA CITY — When Mauricio Lasansky retired from the University of Iowa in 1985, he says he did so because he wanted his 70s to be “for me.”

Lucky for art lovers, a good portion of his 80s has been for him as well. The world-renowned printmaker, now 85, continues to work almost daily in his studio in downtown Iowa City.

“The day I became 70 years old, I said that’s enough,” he said. “I said the 70s are for me. I work more than ever now. I’m working on lots of things. I always work.”

Lasansky retired because he couldn’t devote his full energies to creating his own work while he was teaching; instead, he spent much of his time with his students.

He has used the time to its fullest. He has completed about 300 prints in his career, a full third of those in the time since his retirement.

“You have to be generous with your time when you’re teaching,” he said. “It takes a hell of a lot of time. I needed to catch up.”

His teaching and art were awarded in October when he was given the Iowa Award, presented by Gov. Tom Vilsack in recognition of Lasansky’s work. It is the highest award granted to Iowans. Lasansky is the 14th recipient since the award’s beginning in 1948.

Lasansky said he sees teaching as one of his three jobs: “Poppa, teacher, artist,” he said, listing them.

The artist and his wife, Emilia, have six grown children. All, he said, are involved in the arts in some way, a point he makes with obvious pride.

Lasansky was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1914. He came to the United States in 1943 on a Guggenheim Fellowship to study in New York.

He came to the UI two years later to start a print department in the school of art and art history.

“I wanted to pass what I’d learned on,” he said. “You should help anyone

who needs help in what you know.”

Lasansky sketches his pieces on large sheets of paper. When he is comfortable with the result, he transfers the piece to one or more copper plates, engraving the object onto the metal to create texture and depth.

The piece then is printed out. That finished result often is a collage of sorts, because pieces of plates used years ago may show up in new prints.

As an example, his son Phillip, who oversees Lasansky’s business interests, showed a print of himself as a young boy standing next to a burro.

In a more recent print using parts of that earlier work, the burro remains, but Phillip is gone. He has been replaced by his two children, who are now sitting on top of the burro.

A visit to his office last week found Lasansky working with familiar themes, including the image of a young woman that has appeared frequently in his work.

His pieces are alternately vibrant with color or deep and dark. Sometimes both are present in the same print.

Lasansky may be best known for the Nazi Drawings, a collection of 30 individual pieces and one triptych that depict the atrocities carried out in Nazi Germany.

The powerful drawings, completed between 1961 and 1966, have traveled all over the world, but can usually be found in the Lasansky Room at the UI Museum of Art.

A celebration of Lasansky and his Nazi Drawings will be held April 9 at the UI Foundation. It will include original music and the airing of a new documentary about the drawings.

Other Lasansky works are housed in a permanent collection at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, including 84 finished prints.

The artist continues to use his art to comment on the news of the day.

“The way I work is deeply related to what is happening in the world,” he said. “I need to do it in my own way.

It’s very spiritual. I’m always searching.”

During the interview he speaks often, for example, about the student shootings in Littleton, Colo., earlier this year. While art isn’t a solution to such problems, he said that it helps people to better keep their lives in perspective.

“Art gives you wings, if only for an hour or so,” he said. “You need to get away from the desk.”

He many have been making prints for more than 60 years, but Lasansky continues to look for new and better ways to do things.

“You have experiences of frustration and failure,” he said. “Art is magic. It’s an evolution.”

He’s also tempted to tinker with his pieces, always looking to improve them, to find out what they should be.

“They’re only finished when I put them in a frame,” he said. “I put them in a frame so I quit monkeying with them.”

Behind the darkened glass front of the Lasansky Corporation headquarters, 216 E. Washington St., lies a huge space that includes a ground-floor gallery space, a second-floor art studio and a third-floor apartment.

Lasansky has an extensive collection of African and post-Columbian art just off his studio. The stairs from the third-floor apartment come out in this room, and the artist said he spends about an hour each morning looking at the pieces before moving into the studio to work.

Looking at the collection last week, he marveled at the way the art of two tribes less than 15 miles away can be so different, and praised the way no two pieces were alike.

His own art can and should evolve in a similar fashion, he said.

“I want it to change without losing who I am,” he said.

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Mauricio Lasansky retired from the University of Iowa in 1985 so he could devote more time to his printmaking. He has completed one-third of his body of work in the intervening years.