

## Foreword

To introduce the work of Lucie Lambert in this issue of *Ellipse*, let me drop the editorial "we" to speak largely of my own involvement in one of Lucie Lambert's projects, for I am an ingénue when it comes to the world of art books.

There, I should probably have said *livres d'artiste*, even in English. According to Jean-Marcel Duciaume, the *livre d'artiste* is not to be confused with the *livre d'art* or the *livre-objet* (e.g. poems on coasters packaged in a can), the album, the coffee-table book, or the deluxe edition. Even the poems of Mallarmé illustrated by Henri Matisse or Homer's *Iliad* illustrated by Leonard Baskin may not count if they are mass produced using photographic reproductions. Ideally, not only should the art work come directly from the author's hand but the paper should be hand made, the type hand set, the book bound by hand. Except for the plexiglas case, Lambert's *A Thousand Hooded Eyes* is a pure example of the *livre d'artiste*.

Obviously such books are rare in an age of mass production, rare in Canada, if less so in Québec, where it may be one of the distinctive features of Québécois culture. Duciaume's "Le Livre d'artiste au Québec (*Études françaises*, 18, 2) does note Charles Pachter and

Margaret Atwood's special edition of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. And unexpectedly, he remarks that the first *livre d'artiste* published in Québec was Catherine Parr Traill's *Studies of Plant Life in Canada* (1885), with hand-coloured illustrations by Agnes Fitzgibbon, Mrs. Traill's aunt, née Moodie. A curious looping.

Some may regard Duciaume's definition as too exclusive, even as a kind of artisanal sentimentality. René Payant does not say that, but his "L'émancipation du livre d'artiste (*Études françaises*, 18, 3) accepts the idea that the photograph itself may be art and that the artist may employ mass production technology in realizing her conception of the *livre d'artiste*. One of the books that occasions his discussion is a Montréal/Haifa production by Pnina Gagnon called *Jukim and various insects* (1972). (A *juk*, he explains, is Slavic for beasties like the cockroach.)

Personally, I never expected to find myself in a *livre d'artiste* any more than in a movie. Indeed, having agreed to participate in Lambert's project for a book on more or less scaly creatures, I was struck by the fact that such a production is not unlike making a film. Lucie Lambert is director, producer, actor -- producing the overall concept, carving the wood blocks for the engravings, designing the medallion for the cover; then the writer produces a text; others produce the paper; the Elsteds the typographical design and the printed sheets; Harry Sarber casts the silver medallion, Pierre

Ouvrard does the binding. It involves a coordinated effort by people in Vancouver and in Mission, B.C., in North Hatley and in Île-aux-Noix, Québec. The binding was delayed when Ouvrard had to order more frog skin from Belgium.

Frog skin! Like emerald frog skin! Yes. And I envision protests, angry letters from animal rights group. No, no. I'll worry about that when no one eats frogs' legs.

But then I hear voices condemning "elitism," condemning the book as fetish." But finally I say, "Bunkum!" Let the poet who sells less than a hundred copies of his democratic paperback complain of "enforced elitism." Let those who spend millions to publish images of Madonna and her views on sex tell me about the book as fetish. Lambert's is really a more modest, more intimate and honest enterprise -- producing something exceptional, but not to make an exceptional profit. What impresses me about Lucie Lambert's imaginative projects is above all their broadly "creative" character, as they reach out to stimulate such a variety of artists, craftsmen, writers to undertake their own creative adventures.

Take the writers only. Would Robert Bringhurst have entertained conversations with a toad, would Jacques Brault have given his intimate attention to clouds, would I, I ask myself, have given a thought to the lateral line by which a fish navigates through a fluid

environment, if not for the fact that each of us had been engaged to produce poems that could plausibly accompany certain images. The texts one reads in this selection from her projects would not have existed without Lambert's provocation, without her imagination. At some level she might fairly be said to have authored them all, authored us, our days and hours, for a time.

So part of one spring and summer I became inscribed in some kind of unfinished adventure story. Given a list of creatures, I realized I had to produce at least six poems to go with the beasties. Told that the plates would be approximately 4" x 4", I decided that twelve-line poems could provide a graphic balance of text and plates. And in my mood at the time I said, not too heavy, something "readable," close to the speaking voice, fast, and perhaps fun.

So far, so good, but what will the matter be? Well, whatever you can find or think of, what else? I read an old Time/Life book I'd long ago bought for my children, and an actual children's book, both on reptiles. Certain phrases on the crocodile were "found." I went to the Granby Zoo and looked at creatures I'd skipped over on a previous visit. (African vipers made a distinct impression.) My key chain unlocked the memory of a tour down the Loire Valley -- of the ubiquitous salamander in the architectural designs of Chenonceau, my favourite castle. I read a passage about a legendary Chinese artist and sandwiched it in with the words and images of the TV coverage

of the *fête nationale* in Montreal -- so the dragon had roots, a least two. And the turtle was a kind of *bricolage* -- something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. My "I's" were coming together, getting married in a poem, a suite of poems. Some aborted, some were a bit "crude". Lambert made the final selection, perhaps revealing an overarching theme: that evolution, the adventure of matter, is not unlike that of the *livre d'artiste*.

I assume the experience of the other poets, Brault and Bringham, François Ricard and Réjean Beaudoin, bears some analogy to mine.

This issue goes a little way toward the democratization of the work, especially, of course, the writing, which can be faithfully reproduced as text if not as texture. But, even if *Ellipse* cannot "translate" the book, or even reproduce the engravings in colour, perhaps the reader can glimpse something of the enriched dimensions of the *livre d'artiste*.

-- D.G. Jones, *Ellipse* #48 (1992)

