

a lax life

Robert Lax was born in Olean, New York on November 30, 1915. The family moved between Olean and Long Island. The environs of New York City were as much home to the young Robert Lax as was the small town of Olean in upstate New York. Lax attended Columbia University in the 1930's, studying under the likes of Mark Van Doren. At Columbia Lax became fast friends with Thomas Merton, Ad Reinhardt and Ed Rice.

After college Lax worked in a variety of jobs, as a tutor, writing advertising copy, teaching college English and as an editor and writer. He worked on the editorial staff of *The New Yorker*, was a reviewer for *Time*, a freelancer for *Parade*, and even worked in the script department of Samuel Goldwyn Studio in Hollywood. Later he was an editor for the short-lived Parisian literary journal *New Story*, a co-founder and editor of the Catholic culture magazine *Jubilee*, and the founder/publisher of the poetry broadside *Pax*.

Although Lax had published many poems in various magazines and journals it was not until he met the graphic artist Emil Antonucci in the 1950's that his publishing career began to take shape. Antonucci began to publish materials by Lax in small press editions under the imprint of the Hand Press and later Journeyman Books. The most important of these early publications was *Circus of the Sun* (1959), a cycle of poems about Lax's travels with the Cristiani Family Circus through western Canada in 1949. Another milestone was the publication of *New Poems* (1962) which became somewhat of a manifesto of Lax's simplified, pared down poetic line. Other important publications of this time were "Sea & Sky" (1965) and "Black & White" (1966) both appearing in *Lugano Review*. In the mid-1960's Lax had gone to live on the Greek island of Kalymnos & later Patmos where he was to remain for 35 years.

Because of the visual nature of his poetry Lax came to be published more and more in small press editions by graphic artists. In the 1970's he met the Swiss photographer Bernhard Moosbrugger. Moosbrugger founded Pendo Verlag in Zurich for the purpose of publishing Lax's writing. These Pendo volumes were issued in English with a German translation on the facing page, opening Lax's work up to a whole new audience.

A major retrospective of Lax materials was mounted at the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart in 1985. In 1987 Lax began an archive at St. Bonaventure University. In 1990 he became the University's first Reginald A. Lenna Visiting Professor, and during a special convocation was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University. Lax next returned to the United States in the fall of 2000. He died on September 26 in his family home in Olean.

The bibliography of Lax's published writings, and works based on his writings, runs to well over 500 items ranging from single poems, to pamphlets, to books, and includes graphic art, film, video, photography and performance art. He was as well known in art circles as he was in literary ones, and perhaps at times better known in Europe than he was in America. Recent U.S. publications include *33 Poems* (New Directions 1988), *Love Had a Compass* (Grove 1996), *A Thing That Is* (Overlook 1997) and *Circus Days & Nights* (Overlook 2000).

Lax was brought up Jewish but was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church as a young man. Lax saw no great disparity between these traditions, but embraced each of them in their turn. Thomas Merton wrote early on of his friend, "The secret of his constant solidity I think has always been a kind of natural instinctive spirituality, a kind of inborn direction to the living God."

pjs
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