

A Work of Joy: Ilse Buchert Nesbitt and the Third & Elm Press

Late on a warm June afternoon, I stop by 29 Elm Street to visit with Ilse Buchert Nesbitt at the Third & Elm Press. Bearing a tray of tea and biscuits, she invites me into her garden, where a treasure trove of perennials—heaths, heathers, a Mugo pine, a box-wood topiary, blueberry bushes, a rose bush, among others—basks in the filtered light. In this beautiful green space, I feel instantly refreshed. Newport's summer bustle recedes. The Point's calm gathers me in.

One of the Point's resident artists, Ilse has lived here for almost forty years. "This is a real neighborhood, one of the few left in the country," she comments. To her, what makes the Point so special is its size, its historic character, and, of course, the neighbors and friends who stop by to visit with her. As she works on the current year's selection of note-cards featuring Point and Newport scenes or plants and flowers found in her garden, she always makes time to answer questions about her work and the Press itself.

Ilse and her late husband, Alexander Nesbitt, founded the Third & Elm Press in 1965. From the beginning, they published limited edition books, as well as pamphlets, stationery, menus, and posters. Now, Ilse's note cards and unusual woodcut prints constitute an important part of the Press's annual output. Much of the work is on display in the street-level shop and in the recently opened second-floor gallery. In the shop, just inside the door, visitors can admire the Third & Elm's work-horses—an 1830 Acorn Press, the hand press whose distinctive shape is captured in the Press logo, and an 1897 Golding platen press.

In the last ten years, two retrospectives honored the Third & Elm

Press. The first took place at the Redwood Library in 1991; the second, at Brown University in 1996. Shows of Ilse's woodcut prints have also been organized at galleries and libraries in the United States (Douglass College, New Brunswick, New Jersey; Mount Wachusett Community College, Gardner, Massachusetts; Deblois Gallery, Newport, Rhode Island) and in Germany (Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg; Galerie Mare Balticum, Kiel; Galerie L9, Oberursel). Thanks in large measure to Alex and Ilse's shared vision and to their painstaking commitment to each step of the printing process, the Third & Elm Press today occupies a place of distinction among the ranks of small independent presses.

On June 2 this year in the Third & Elm gallery, with her sons and a group of friends, Ilse celebrated the publication of the Third & Elm Press's most recent limited edition book, *Steigendes, Neigendes Leben* (Rising and Ebbing Life). Drawing upon her love of poetry, her skills as a printer, and her artistic gifts, Ilse began to work on the book in 1997, although she had been "stewing over it" for years. In concept and execution, it epitomizes her development as an artist and printer, representing both an astonishing technical achievement and a breathtaking artistic accomplishment. How *Steigendes, Neigendes Leben* came to be is a story that begins with Ilse's discovery of woodcut and book design in 1955.



Ilse at work on one of the presses in her shop

Born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1932, Ilse Buchert lived in Japan until 1947, when her family returned to Germany and settled once again in Frankfurt. At the university in 1953, she started out as an art history and archeology major, but soon decided that she preferred making

art to talking about it. By chance, once she enrolled in art school in Hamburg, she discovered woodblock printmaking, for which she felt an immediate affinity.

Not long after, she read an article about illustrator Gerhard Marcks and printer Richard von Sichowsky, collaborators in the production of a book illustrated in woodcuts. "Book design and illustration, that was exactly what I wanted," Ilse says today. To pursue this interest, she persuaded von Sichowsky to let her study with him and, over the next several years, mastered printing techniques, book design, and woodblock printing.

In 1960, calligrapher, typographer, and book designer Alexander Nesbitt was teaching typography and graphic arts at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Seeking an assistant, he contacted von Sichowsky, who recommended his star, Ilse Buchert. Although her first year at RISD was intended to be the first stage of a trip around the world, she stayed on as Alex's assistant, working with him for the next five years.

Having decided to start their own press, Ilse and Alex found and purchased the Gideon Spooner house at 29 Elm Street in the summer of 1965. There they set up shop and, thanks to an 1830 Acorn Press, a hand press provided by Fisher Benson, produced their first book, *The Fig Tree*, by American poet S. Foster Damon. Married in 1966, the Nesbitts collaborated over the next few years on a series of limited edition projects. For each of these, Ilse created monoprint woodcuts. Then, in the early 70's she began to experiment with color and inking techniques in her woodcuts. In time, she perfected a way to create shading and backlighting, effects more commonly associated with watercolor than with woodcut. Thanks to this process, she began to produce multicolor woodblock prints, which she sold in the shop and in 1988 produced a delightful book on her garden. With its colored woodcut illustrations, *My Garden* is a precursor to *Steigendes, Neigendes Leben*.

Steigendes, Neigendes Leben comprises twelve poems by twelve 19th and 20th century German po-



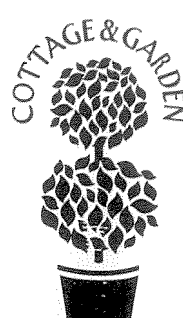
A page from *Steigendes, Neigendes Leben*

ets, including Goethe, Eichendorff, and Hölderlin. Organized around the theme of seasonal change, the texts offer compelling commentary on the passage of time, on the ebb and flow of life. The German text of each poem was written out in informal Gothic script, then cut with its illustration into a single block of maple, and printed onto paper. Some of the woodcuts pick up a central image from the poems they illustrate. Others represent land- or skiescapes. All interpret in color and line the poet's vision of a world in transition. For the non-German speaker, Ilse has provided facing-page English translations of each poem.

One hundred copies of the 32-page book were produced on the Press's 1897 Golding platen press and hand-bound with a cover of paper, also made by Ilse. A portfolio of the woodcuts, printed on paper made by the artist, is also available in an edition of twenty numbered and signed copies. Each woodcut is also available as a matted print, numbered and signed. More information about the book, print-, and papermaking processes at the Third & Elm Press is available at the Press's web site, www.thirdandelm.com.

As the light fades from her garden, Ilse points out the sparrows nesting in one of her two birdhouses. "That's another thing about the Point today," she says with a smile. "There are new families moving in, many of them with young children. This is nice to see."

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