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The Promethean: Spring 2019

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Caitlyn Koch is a senior in the Honors College. She is completing a double major in English and Finance with a minor in Political Science and will graduate in Spring 2019.

Caitlyn is a major contributing force in the Honors College. She has been a part of the Honors Club since her first year, and moved from member to Secretary to co-President this past year. Caitlyn has been a writer for The Promethean for the past two years, and has been essential to its recent reboot. You can read her writing in this very issue!

With the Honors Club, Caitlyn has volunteered for the community and participated in planning and executing the annual Scholars Day Soiree. During her junior year, Caitlyn was instrumental in the Time Capsule Project, which highlighted the history of the Honors College as it migrated from Holmes Hall to the Brown Building. Aside from Honors Club, Caitlyn has served in a leadership position in the Brockport Swing Dance Club and is currently President of the Circle K Club.

All of Caitlyn’s experience in service and volunteering helped her decide upon her next step after graduation. She did not know what she wanted from her degrees originally until she discovered that many English majors become lawyers. Caitlyn will be attending the University of Virginia’s law program this coming fall. This program is highly ranked among law programs in the country and is located two hours outside of Washington, D.C. Caitlyn is excited about living so close to internship and job opportunities while she is at school.

She plans on going into corporate law because of her finance degree, and wants to promote good corporate citizenship. With her service background, Caitlyn has also thought about the ways she can help citizens understand and use the legal system for themselves. She may complete a dual-degree, an MBA and JD, and eventually wants to become a firm partner.

In the Spring of her junior year, Caitlyn completed an internship at the District Attorney’s Office in Monroe County. She was tasked with assisting on special cases as well as major felonies. She was able to attend trials and see cases through from beginning to end. This gave her a glance at what her future may look like, as she hopes to work in a larger firm. This internship was an incredibly positive experience that strongly influenced her decision to attend law school.

As an Honors student, Caitlyn is in the process of finalizing her undergraduate thesis. She is researching “The Impact of the Gospel of Matthew on the Treatment of Violence and Self-Defense in the Medieval English and Modern American Legal Systems,” combining her English major and her interest in law. Her thesis director is Dr. Austin Busch, an English professor and the Associate Director of the Honors College. His knowledge of biblical studies assisted Caitlyn in her analysis of and commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. Caitlyn’s interest lies in the implementation of religion in law systems, and its lineage into modern law.

Caitlyn’s contributions to the Honors College over the past four year cannot be overstated. She will be missed as a leader in the community and the college, and as a writer for The Promethean. She is an exemplary student and soon-to-be alumna of the Honors College.

~ Catherine Esposito
Robert Ernst Marx

If you tour the new Honors College suite of offices in the Albert W. Brown building, you will see drawings and prints of one artist in particular prominently displayed—Robert Ernst Marx. The Honors College features Marx’s work throughout the new space not only because it is provocative and compelling, but also because this important contemporary artist has deep connections to The College at Brockport in general, and to the Honors College especially. Marx taught in Brockport’s Art Department from 1970 until his retirement twenty years later, and a sculpture he designed is given to each graduating Honors student in the form of the Promethean Medal.

Marx was born in Germany, but moved to the U.S. as an infant. As a child, he wanted to be a pilot, and so he joined the Air Force upon graduating from high school, when he was seventeen years old. Marx never had the opportunity to fly a plane, for WWII ended soon after he enlisted. Instead of pursuing a career in the military, he followed in the footsteps of his father (a landscape architect) and pursued an architecture degree at the University of Illinois on the GI Bill. Marx found he was not very proficient at math, and taking the advice of a drawing teacher began to study art. He left Illinois for a year in Germany, where he spent time with his grandparents, and during this time also studied art history at Heidelberg University. He ultimately finished his undergraduate degree in art from the University of Illinois in 1951 and earned a Master’s Degree there in 1953. He taught at several colleges before coming to Brockport in 1970. Even as a professor here, though, he never really thought of himself as a teacher. Rather, he was a practicing artist. In his studio classes he often worked on his own pieces alongside his students, in order to demonstrate for them how artists confront and solve particular technical problems. His classes were known as apprenticeships for students, and some of them have gone on to become professional artists and art instructors themselves.

Since his “retirement,” Marx has remained active. In fact, he still works every day in his studio for four to six hours. The Promethean editors had the opportunity to visit Marx at his home in Rochester, New York and to see that studio, which his basement houses during the winter months, and his garage for the warmer part of the year. His studio of course features many untitled pieces in process, which are depicted throughout this feature story. Marx states that he usually has 20-25 paintings going at a time. As a rule, he starts a painting, lets it dry, and then sands down the canvas, roughing and distorting the image he had painted. He will then leave the work until he forgets what he was thinking about when he originally worked on it, only to return to it

(Continued)
Marx determines a work is complete when it “makes eye contact.”

Marx mostly paints depictions of faces and bodies at ninety-degree angles or confronting the viewer straight on. He prefers flatness to depth and says his style is influenced by medieval icons, including in his use of gold leafing and mosaic techniques. Most of his work is done in neutral colors, and during our time with him he said that he would be happy to paint with mud. However, the faces he paints now are typically in black, white, and shades of gray, rather than tones closer to the colors of actual flesh. Marx cites the election of President Donald Trump as the moment when he “lost his color,” but he stresses that this was not a choice. It was just something he began to do after our current president’s election—a stylistic alteration of which he only became conscious retrospectively.

When asked what inspires the haunting faces he paints, Marx points to everyday encounters. He simply observes the people around him, looking at the shapes of their nose, ears, eyes, and other features. However, Marx stresses that “the challenge with painting faces is not merely to reproduce them, but also to create them so as to communicate, along with the painting’s design..., the message I am trying to convey.”
experiences provide inspiration for other features of his work. For instance, he explained that when he and his wife purchased a Christmas tree he closely observed the netting used to wrap the tree tightly, which finds a reflection in the scores of tiny tangentially-connected circles his paintings frequently feature. He sees these circles as at once decorative and restrictive and generally wants to make his paintings as ambiguous, and therefore as timeless, as possible. Marx also points to Native American influences, especially Hopi art and culture.

In addition to painting them, Marx also sculpts faces, using a petroleum-based wax to make the mold. He still drives to Canada to deliver his molds to a foundry for casting. One of his molds lies behind the Honors College Promethean Medal depicted on the first page of this story.

While the Promethean Medal is probably Marx’s most-often reproduced work, his work has been featured in galleries continuously for decades, including local galleries and some on the two coasts, especially in Seattle and Atlanta. Marx in fact had a long-term relationship with a gallery in Atlanta, but he was compelled to sue it in 1995 over a violation of the 1990 Visual Artists Rights Act. Now Marx’s name is closely associated with that law, as his was the first successful lawsuit that drew on it, establishing an important precedent for future artists to use to protect their own works.

Marx observes the people around him to find inspiration for the haunting faces he depicts, looking at the shapes of their nose, ears, eyes, and other features.
In 1965, Marx was sent by the State Department to be the U.S. representative at an international print show in the former Czechoslovakia. The State Department wanted to send artists to represent democratic values, especially freedom of expression, in Eastern European communist countries. During his time there, Marx was eventually able to meet artists who worked independently of the government (though it was not easy to make such connections) and he visited the rare book room in the national library in Prague (the Klementinum), which inspired his production and printing of artists books.

Because of Marx’s connection with Soviet controlled Eastern Europe and his design of the Prometheus Medal, we asked whether his sculpture had been influenced by the monumental Prometheus sculpture of Georgian-Russian artist Zurab Tsereteli that stands outside of the Allen Building on campus. (Tsereteli is also responsible for the iconic Brockport fountain commemorating the Special Olympics, which was erected at the same time.) Marx said his design was not influenced by Tsereteli’s sculpture, despite rumors to the contrary. He acknowledged that Tsereteli was “phenomenally skilled technically,” but said he had significant reservations about Brockport’s willingness to accept Tsereteli’s sculptures in the 1970s and recalls that the Art Department faculty for the most part were unenthusiastic about Brockport’s decision to welcome Tsereteli’s work. In fact, other municipalities and organizations have pointedly rejected his offers of statuary—for instance, Columbus, New York, Boston, Cleveland, and Miami all rejected his giant Christopher Columbus statue, which is now located in the large town of Arecibo, Puerto Rico. According to Marx, the art faculty did not feel his work brought anything aesthetically valuable to the campus and believed it basically served propagandistic purposes. Tsereteli’s reputation as a propagandist has only grown since the fall of the Soviet Union. He is currently the head of the Russian Academy of Arts and has since gone on to create pieces ideologically aligned with Putin’s nationalistic vision of Russia, including a larger than life sculpture of Joseph Stalin, whose contemporary rehabilitation in Russia is well-documented, and even a heroic sculpture of Putin himself! Look for more on Tsereteli’s Brockport statues in a future issue of The Promethean.

If anyone is interested in seeing more of Robert Marx’s works, visit https://roberternstmarx.com or stroll through the Honors College offices, where several are on display!

~ Caitlyn Koch


Our thesis spotlights focus on exemplary student projects. From artwork to research papers, these theses show the best of our Honors students’ hard work. In highlighting impressive final products, though, it can be easy to overlook just how challenging and difficult the research process can be before it culminates in the rewarding final steps. For this issue, we are shining the spotlight on Peter Brand, a student who really knows what it means to develop a quality thesis.

For Peter, a junior psychology major in the Honors College, this process began with a personal interest in social psychology. He decided to focus on the interactions between stereotypes, prejudice, and perceived group size. At the beginning of his research Peter had identified a research question based on evidence from previous literature showing that prejudice against atheists (who are stereotyped as posing a moral/cultural threat) decreases as the group is perceived as being more prevalent, whereas prejudice against some other social groups may increase as they are perceived as being more prevalent. Under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Ratcliff—a social psychologist and professor in the Department of Psychology—he set out to design and conduct a comparative study gathering preliminary data that would allow him to understand this inconsistent correlation between prevalence and prejudice, with respect to atheists and other social groups.

What happened next, however, presented an unexpected challenge. At the end of the preliminary data analysis, Peter began to see that his research was not producing statistically significant results. In response to this setback, Peter is now essentially restarting his research process. “At this point, I’m kind of back at the drawing board.”

Perhaps the most admirable thing about Peter’s process is his perseverance. He has used the experience of being “back at the drawing board” to seek new avenues for and new ways to focus his research. With the support of his advisor, and more independent research, he has found new possibilities for improved experiments and is working toward an even better thesis. Throughout this whole experience, Peter has maintained his positivity and perspective. “It does have its struggles,” he said, “[but] it’s pushed me academically more than any other thing I’ve had to do.”

Ultimately, the goal of the Honors thesis is to encourage students to embrace new academic experiences and to teach them how to face the challenges that will inevitably arise. Peter has shown patience and perseverance in the difficult process of academic research, and for that reason, his thesis can already be called exemplary.

~ April Quattlebaum

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April Quattlebaum
April Quattlebaum is a third year student in the Honors College. April is an English major with a dual concentration in Literature and Adolescent Education and a minor in Music. She is writing her Honors thesis on Jane Austen.

Catherine Esposito
Catherine Esposito is an English and Dance (BFA) double major, and is a third year student in the Honors College. She is excited to be writing for The Promethean and enjoys sharing all the Honors College has to offer.

Caitlyn Koch
Caitlyn Koch is a senior in the Honors College. For more about her, read the student spotlight inside!

The Promethean was designed by Makenzie Grube, an Art major with a concentration in Graphic Design, during the 2017-18 school year. She graduated in May 2018, but her work continues to live on in current and future issues of The Promethean.