

# An Appreciation of Caxtonian Muriel Underwood

Compiled by Michael Gorman

Muriel Underwood, a member of the Caxton Club for more than thirty years, has died at the age of one hundred. She was based in Chicago and was a book designer for seventy years. She was born in 1923 in Chillicothe, Illinois. After working for General Mills in Chicago, she joined the Marine Corps in 1943 and worked as a mimeograph machine operator. During her military service, she attended the San Diego School of Art. After she was discharged in 1946, Underwood attended the Art Institute of Chicago. She worked as a book designer for Scott Foresman and Company, and later Follett publishing company. In the late 1960s, she left Follett and began her own company, Miscellaneous Graphics, in order to do freelance book design work. Underwood was a board member, officer, and fellow of the Society of Typographic Arts (STA), later the American Center for Design and now the STA again,

and designed many of their programs and publications. She also was an early user of the STA Type Workshop (founded by Gordon and Jessie Martin), where she printed and bound miniature books for many years. The workshop was first located in the basement of the Newberry Library, moved to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), and then was at Columbia College's Center for Book and Paper Arts. When the letterpress equipment from the workshop returned to SAIC in 2008, Muriel found it difficult to come downtown to print, and, though she made infrequent trips, mostly to talk to students about "the good old days of metal type," she eventually switched to making her miniature books on her computer.

Muriel was a member of the Miniature Book Society, the Stephen A. Douglas Society, and the Civil War Round Table of Chicago. She also worked on the Newberry annual book sale. Muriel maintained ties in the veteran community, writing and editing

a newsletter for and about women who have served in the Marine Corps, and was an honored member of the Women's Marines Association IL-2.

Jack Weiss, Director Emeritus of the Chicago Design Archive writes: My contact with Muriel began in 1967 when I returned to Chicago from graduate school at Yale and was working with Hayward Blake. Muriel was named an STA Fellow (for extraordinary service) in 1972. She was a close friend of illustrator Ralph Creasman. When I organized the "Remembering Ralph Creasman" event for the STA in April 2001, Muriel generously contributed significant pieces from her collection to the exhibition. In 2001, I appointed Muriel to the advisory committee to plan for the STAs seventy-fifth anniversary celebration in 2002. Other longtime members Bruce Beck, Susan Keig, and Bob Vogele joined her. She also lent items from her collection to one of the anniversary exhibitions.



Muriel Underwood (photo by John Dunlevy)



Left: *Incident of the Book in the Night-time*, Right: *Sugar and Gold*. Both were written by Dan Crawford, and designed, printed, illustrated, and bound by Muriel Underwood.

Below: Muriel remained involved in our club and arranged to donate this needlework for sale at our 2023 Holiday Revelries.



Over the years, many of the members of the Twenty-seven Chicago Designers became professional friends with Muriel. On learning of her death, I forwarded the Caxton Club notice to some of the former Twenty-seven members. Rick Valicenti wrote: "She was such a sweet woman, and I remember just sitting and conversing with Muriel and Ralph Creasman at various design events. To me Muriel was a lovely soft presence." Jim Lienhart wrote: "Just saying her name brought back such a flood of great memories about Chicago, STA, and everything I remember about being a designer ... she was special."

Finally, I remember fondly her charming little books that she printed and bound – starting in the STA's type workshop at the Newberry Library. Then, in the 2000s, on the same presses and with the same type, at Columbia College's Center for Book & Paper Arts.

Dan Crawford writes: The golden age of the Newberry Library Book Fair saw a dream team of Caxtonians supervising the collectibles tables: Evelyn J. Lampe, founder of the feast; Helen A. Sclair, who handled Chicago questions and supervised book security; and Muriel E. Underwood, who knew printing, was not flustered by rare books, understood our cus-

tomer base, ... and brought candy.

I do not recall how it came that Muriel suggested (or was urged to suggest by Helen and/or Evelyn) that she look at one of my unpublished stories as a possibility for a miniature book. I joined the line-up of her *Miscellaneous Graphics* miniatures, from *Oh, You Beautiful* (1998) through *Flora's Gift for 2012* (2011).

My only responsibility after writing was to look over the demos and trial runs as Muriel designed, printed, illustrated, and bound the result. The hardest part of my contribution was devising new expressions of amazement at the details that never would have occurred to me – a ginkgo leaf just small enough to fit the cover of each copy of one text, a mock clasp pretending to hold a mock ancient book shut, the materials and colors she experimented with for the covers. The second hardest was responding to the way she would apologize for what she saw as shortcomings, as when some cover had to be scrapped because there was not enough material of the chosen design to cover the whole edition, or when she switched from letterpress to computer composition. Always on the lookout for anything that would improve these miniatures, she reduced their dimensions after one show when it was

pointed out to her that her books were fractions of an inch too tall and too wide.

Of the volumes that resulted, some dealt with books – *X-Lib* (2002), *A Light Snack* (2009) – or writers – *Authorella* (2003), *The Christmas Squirrel and the Thanksgiving Penguin* (2006) – and one even took place at a Caxton Club exhibition – *Just as Leaf* (2004). All of them were turned into, in one author's prejudiced judgment, gems of the bookmaking art.

Another benefit of my privileged position was being exposed to Muriel's other productions, the books by other authors, and (too rarely) texts she had written herself. All these books are a great deal of fun, but only a fraction of the fun it was to be part of the process.

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The Muriel Underwood Papers (1935-1997) are held in the Special Collections of the Richard J. Daley Library at the University of Illinois, Chicago. They relate to her art and design process and work with STA, including prototypes, final versions of book design work, exhibition catalogs, reference materials, books about design, sketchbooks, and graphic design organization publications. ([researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/collection/data/879859215](https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/collection/data/879859215))