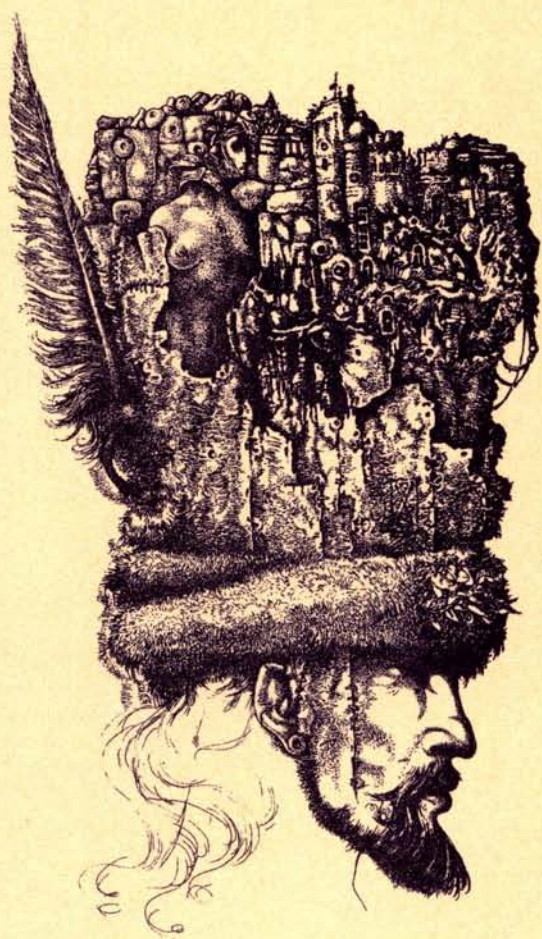


# VIRGIL BURNETT

ILLUSTRATOR



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**Virgil Burnett is an artist, author, teacher and founder of the Padeloup Press, Stratford, Ontario. Drawn from a generous donation to the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, this exhibition surveys nearly five decades of his work as an illustrator.**

Burnett received his undergraduate education at Columbia University, New York, where he majored in painting. After military service during the Korean War, he took a Master's Degree in Art History at the University of California, Berkeley. He was a Fulbright Scholar in Art History at the University of Paris in 1956-57, and remained in Europe until 1961, drawing, painting, and travelling. Since 1973 he has lived in Stratford, Ontario and continues to return to Europe each year.

In Paris, Burnett worked with Maurice Darantiere, a distinguished master printer and publisher of fine books, whose wide acquaintance included Gertrude Stein, Paul Valéry, Saint-John Perse, Jean Cocteau, James Joyce, and Sylvia Beach. Darantiere exhibited Burnett's early drawings at the Hôtel de Mansard Sagonne, an old building in the Marais, where he had his home and studio. He encouraged the young artist to take his vocation as a *dessinateur* seriously, and Burnett was soon working for many publishers. Commissions such as cover illustrations for Penguin paperbacks in the 1960s provided meagre compensation but broad exposure for Burnett's drawings.

In the late 1950s, while Burnett was living on a vintage power yacht, the *Inge*, the Canadian painter Joe Plaskett brought the poet Daryl Hine on board for a glass of wine. Burnett and Hine worked together often in the years that followed. Their first collaboration, *Heroics* (1961), is hand-printed in a limited edition, illustrated with Burnett's fine burin engravings.

Pasdeloup Press, named after a fictional bandit in an unfinished story by Burnett, appeared in the 1960s. *Le roi s'amuse* (1966) heralds the beginning of more than forty years' of publications bearing the Pasdeloup imprint. The grim romance and finely detailed illustrations that evoke a time long past anticipate future work, especially the episode "King Folly," a companion piece to "Queen Death," in *Towers at the Edge of a World* (1980).

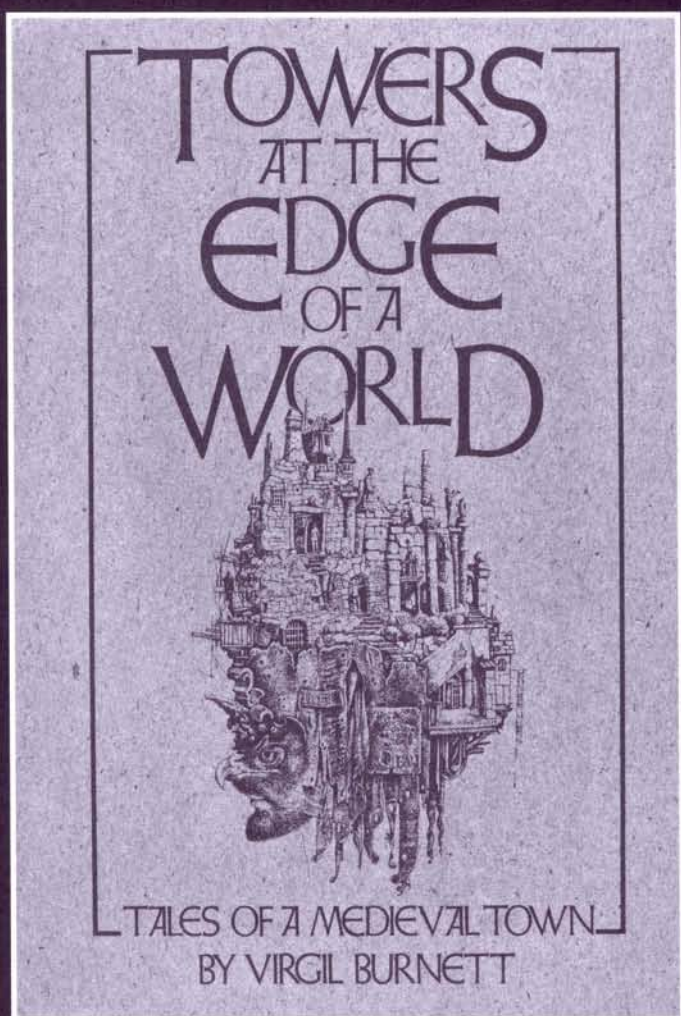
*Bluebeard's Wife* (1975, © 1968) was a collaborative effort among friends, with text by Daryl Hine, illustrations by Virgil Burnett, and calligraphy by Robert Williams. The signed, limited edition of 1975, which was printed at Coach House Press, Toronto and bound at Porcupine's Quill, Erin, Ontario, marked the beginning of a long-time publishing association with Porcupine's Quill.

In the 1970s Pasdeloup published works by several poets, including A.D. Hope, (*The Damnation of Byron*, 1973), Maurice English, (*A Savaging of Roots*, 1974), and Rienzi Crusz, (*Flesh and Thorn*, 1974), all illustrated with Burnett's drawings. Burnett also contributed drawings to other small presses. The cover illustration for Robin Magowan's *Persian Notes* (1972) is an early rendition of a mythical village rising from the landscape, an image that the artist would continue to study.

Always an occasional author, Burnett began to write seriously in the 1970s. *Skiamachia* (1977) is a fantasy based on his reading of Ovid. A pivotal work, it presents Burnett as author, illustrator and publisher. The first edition, limited to 111 signed copies and bound in sheepskin, was issued by Pasdeloup Press and printed by Porcupine's Quill. A trade edition followed in 1982, also published by Porcupine's Quill. Selected illustrations from these and other titles were published in France as the collection, *Virgil Burnett: 33 dessins* (1977).

During this time Burnett was not only teaching and writing, but also creating large suites of illustrations for publishers such as the Limited Editions Club (*Jurgen*, 1976). He had the opportunity to produce different interpretations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the University of Chicago Press (1974), and the Folio Society (1983). He also published broadsides, contributed to the *Chicago Review* and produced drawings for Porcupine's Quill and other small presses.

The first edition of *Towers at the Edge of a World: Tales of a Medieval Town* (1980) was published in New York by St. Martin's Press and in Canada by Nelson. Following critical acclaim in North America and Europe, a paperbound edition was issued by Porcupine's Quill in



COVER: Cover, *Virgil Burnett: 33 dessins*, 1977. Illustrations by Virgil Burnett.  
ABOVE: Cover, *Towers at the Edge of a World: Tales of a Medieval Town*, 1980.  
Text and illustrations by Virgil Burnett.

1983 and a German translation, *Der Fluch von Montarnis: Chronik einer Stadt am Rande der Welt*, appeared in 1988. Written and illustrated by Burnett, the book brings together images and ideas that he had explored over many years. Its setting is a village in Burgundy, seen first in the Dark Ages and subsequently in Medieval times, the Renaissance, and the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Montarnis is portrayed on the cover of the book as an ancient world of history, legend and fantasy.

*Towers at the Edge of a World* was followed by Porcupine's Quill editions of Burnett's novella, *A Comedy of Eros* (1984) and an illustrated collection of his short stories, *Farewell Tour* (1986). Porcupine's Quill also published *Thrand of Gotu* (1994, 2002 printing), two early Icelandic sagas translated by Canadian poet George Johnston and illustrated by Burnett with finely rendered ink drawings that evoke its northern setting in the distant past.

Since his retirement from teaching, Burnett has continued to work at writing, drawing and most recently, sculpting in clay. His sculpted figures are displayed on the covers of *Four Last Poems* (1996) by Jerome McGann, *The Caverns of Ely* (1997) by Karen Mulhallen and *Heroïdes* (2003), a presentation of sculpture and related drawings by Burnett. These terracotta figures descend directly from the art of the *dessinateur*, seen in his sketchbooks.

In 1999 Burnett published a suite of illustrated love poems, *Leonora*, under the pseudonym D.S. Dubois, with the Padeloup Press imprint. The poems were translated into French by Andrée Christensen and Jacques Flamand, and published in 2003 by Les Éditions du Vermillon, Ottawa, under the author's own name.

While Burnett has recorded a personal vision of memory and history over the years, he has not worked in isolation. *A Catafalque for David Hill* (1986) and *Edward Melcarth: A Hercynian Memoir* (1995) are tributes to two artist friends who contributed largely to his development.

In 2005 Burnett published a volume of his memoirs, *The Old Met, les Halles and Other Losses*. It is displayed beneath a large lithograph of *Daedalus* (1977), the artist at work.

Jo Nordley Beglo, Bibliographer

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** The Library and Archives of the National Gallery of Canada extends sincere thanks to Virgil Burnett for his generous gift. I am especially grateful for his assistance with this exhibition, which draws upon his handwritten notes, published memoirs, and the generosity of his conversation.

# CHECKLIST

1. *Les dessins de Virgil Burnett*. Paris: Hôtel de Mansard Sagonne, 1959; exhibition invitation accompanied by a letter to the artist from Maurice Darantiere.
2. Penguin book covers illustrated by Virgil Burnett; accompanied by an ink drawing for the book *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, from the same series.
3. *Heroics* / five poems by Daryl Hine and six engravings by Virgil Burnett. Fontainebleau, France: s.n., 1961, (Fontainebleau: Impr. Gosswiller).
4. *Le roi s'amuse* / Virgil Burnett. Chicago: Padeloup Press, 1966; accompanied by ink drawings.
5. *Bluebeard's Wife* / Daryl Hine, illustrations by Virgil Burnett, calligraphy by Robert Williams. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1975, © 1968; accompanied by an ink drawing.
6. *The Damnation of Byron* / A.D. Hope, illustrated by Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1973; accompanied by an ink drawing.
7. Ink drawing for *Jurgen* by James Branch Cabell, illustrated by Virgil Burnett. Westport, Conn.: Limited Editions Club, 1976.
8. *Persian Notes* / Robin Magowan, cover drawing by Virgil Burnett. Chico, Cal.: Futharc Press, 1972.
9. *A Savaging of Roots* / Maurice English, illustrated by Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1974.
10. *Flesh and Thorn* / Rienzi Crusz, illustrated by Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1974.
11. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* / lithographs by Virgil Burnett. London: The Folio Society, 1983.
12. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Comedy for Christmas* / illustrated by Virgil Burnett. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974; accompanied by preparatory sketches.
13. *Skiamachia* / Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1977; accompanied by an ink drawing and preparatory sketches.
14. *Skiamachia: A Fantasy* / Virgil Burnett. 1st trade ed. Erin, Ont.: Porcupine's Quill, 1982.
15. *Virgil Burnett: 33 dessins*. France: Éditions l'Oeil de boeuf, 1977.

16. *Towers at the Edge of a World: Tales of a Medieval Town* / Virgil Burnett. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980; accompanied by ink drawings.
17. *Towers at the Edge of a World* / Virgil Burnett. Erin, Ont.: Porcupine's Quill, 1983.
18. *A Comedy of Eros* / Virgil Burnett. Erin, Ont.: Porcupine's Quill, 1984; accompanied by preparatory sketches.
19. *Farewell Tour* / Virgil Burnett. Erin, Ont.: Porcupine's Quill, 1986; accompanied by an ink drawing.
20. *Thrand of Gotu: Two Icelandic Sagas from the Flat Island Book* / translated by George Johnston, cover art and interior illustrations by Virgil Burnett. Erin, Ont.: Porcupine's Quill, 1994 (2002 printing); accompanied by ink drawings.
21. [Sketchbook] / Virgil Burnett.
22. [Sketchbook] / Virgil Burnett.
23. *Heroïdes: Sculpture by Virgil Burnett*. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 2003.
24. *Four Last Poems* / Jerome McGann, cover illustration by Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1996.
25. *The Caverns of Ely* / Karen Mulhallen, cover illustration by Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1997.
26. [Sketchbook] / Virgil Burnett.
27. *Leonora* / D.S. Dubois, drawings by Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1999.
28. *Leonora* / Virgil Burnett, French trans. by Andrée Christensen and Jacques Flamand. Ottawa: Les Éditions du Vermillon, 2003.
29. *A Catafalque for David Hill* / edited and compiled by Virgil Burnett in collaboration with Anne Pippin Burnett, Robin Magowan, and Joseph Plaskett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1986.
30. *Edward Melcarth: A Hercynian Memoir* / Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 1995.
31. *The Old Met, les Halles and Other Losses: A Memoir of the Post-war Years* / Virgil Burnett. Stratford, Ont.: Padeloup Press, 2005.
32. [Sketchbook] / Virgil Burnett.
33. *Daedalus* / Virgil Burnett. Lithograph, 1977.

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