



Stanley Kaplan's completed woodcut mural installed in the library of the Levittown Memorial High School, Levittown, Long Island

A NEW MURAL TECHNIQUE



The artist completes the preliminary painting of a mural panel using his detailed cartoon, left, as a guide before cutting away certain background areas

Stanley Kaplan spent 2,000 hours in a labor of love, but the result may chart his future as a mural decorator

BY STANLEY KAPLAN
as told to JOAN HESS

THE LIBRARY IN THE LEVITTOWN MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL is a comfortable, well-lighted place where students come to read for pleasure or for class assignments. As an art teacher in this high school, it had occurred to me that the walls of the library lacked character, that the room needed some pictures or wall decoration to serve as a focal point and to add warmth. I evolved the idea of creating an unusual mural to fill the large space—approximately five feet high and thirty feet long—above the wall bookshelves, new in concept and execution, adapted to my particular interest and facility—the woodcut. As far as I knew, nothing in this medium had been exe-



Preliminary cartoon for Tale of Two Cities section of mural in black and white tempera and gold enamel on vellum-like tracing paper

cuted before as a mural. Thus I found myself an innovator, stubbing my toes on unusual problems of materials, construction, installation, proper lighting, and a back-breaking job of transportation.

I presented my mural idea to the principal of the high school and the superintendent of schools. They were enthusiastic, and I agreed to donate the artistic "labor" if the Board of Education would pay for the materials. Since the mural was to grace the wall of the library, we agreed that the theme should be taken from a selection of great literary classics recommended by the high-school English department.

The mural was executed entirely after school hours.

It took ten months to complete; 2,000 precious evening, holiday, and weekend hours! I had to make some adjustments in my pattern of living, for as a father, husband, and home owner, I had to neglect spending time with my two children, social activities, and lawn-mowing chores! However, the satisfaction I derived from watching my mural become a reality more than compensated for the long hours of work. Many reasons prompted my voluntary contribution of the mural. As an artist, I was challenged and excited by the esthetic and practical structural problems it presented. As a teacher, I recognized this project as an opportunity to present a concrete ex-



Kaplan has an interested onlooker as he uses a v-shaped gouge to incise drawn lines into surface of a mural panel



Second stage of cutting was accomplished with u-shaped gouges giving texture and form to the recessed areas

ample of the correlation of two subjects—art and English literature—that the teacher's colleges always talk about. And as a member of a young and growing community, I could give personal expression to my belief that the reaffirmation of the arts and humanities is necessary for a healthy society in the face of today's emphasis on science and technology.

Once I had the approval of the school board, I got down to the practical aspects of creating the mural. My design had to fit within the 4'9"-x-30' space above the vertical and horizontal pattern of the library bookshelves. Four vertical supports join the five large sections of the mural. Each section, in turn, is composed of five horizontal planks of Phillipine mahogany which echo the color of the bookshelves below. I used a flowing, curved movement to unify the separate parts. For richness and warmth, I decided to highlight the carved wooden blocks with 23-karat gold leaf, black and white flat enamel paint, and stained, carved areas. I had to exercise care so that my design did not overpower the wall. To suit the library atmosphere, I had to strive for excitement in the over-all design rather than in individual sections. Since my purpose was to stimulate the observer's desire to explore the classics in literature, I decided to execute the mural panels in a simple, flat style so that their meaning could be easily understood.

For the most part, my project was a lonely journey. I spent long hours doing research and preliminary planning, and the majority of the time was consumed by the actual carving, coloration, and highlighting of

the panels. As each section was completed, I took it home to live with and study at leisure. My task could not have been completed without the aid and advice of many people. Their enthusiasm, interest, and commendation helped to sustain my efforts over the long period of work. I must especially thank Daniel Woskoff, art director of Remington Rand, for his constructive criticism, encouraging advice, and for most of the photographs used in this article.

Now for my actual procedure. Although I was anxious to get to work, I spent many weeks reading over the works suggested by the English department of the high school with notebook and pencil in hand. I took extensive notes, making personal observations and comments and finally decided on the subjects for the five panels of the mural. Section one has as its theme *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon epic. I have shown conquering Beowulf astride the arm of the monster Grendel. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are illustrated in the second panel. Only five of the travelers on that well-known pilgrimage are delineated: The Knight, the youthful Squire, the earthy Wyf of Bath, the Clerk, and the gentle Nun. Section three of the mural illustrates Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Macbeth and his wife share the panel with the three weird sisters. Charles Dickens novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, is illustrated in the fourth panel. The characters are presented against a background that symbolizes the social upheaval of the days of the French Revolution. Two classics of American literature are presented in the fifth and final panel: *The Raven* of Poe's poem

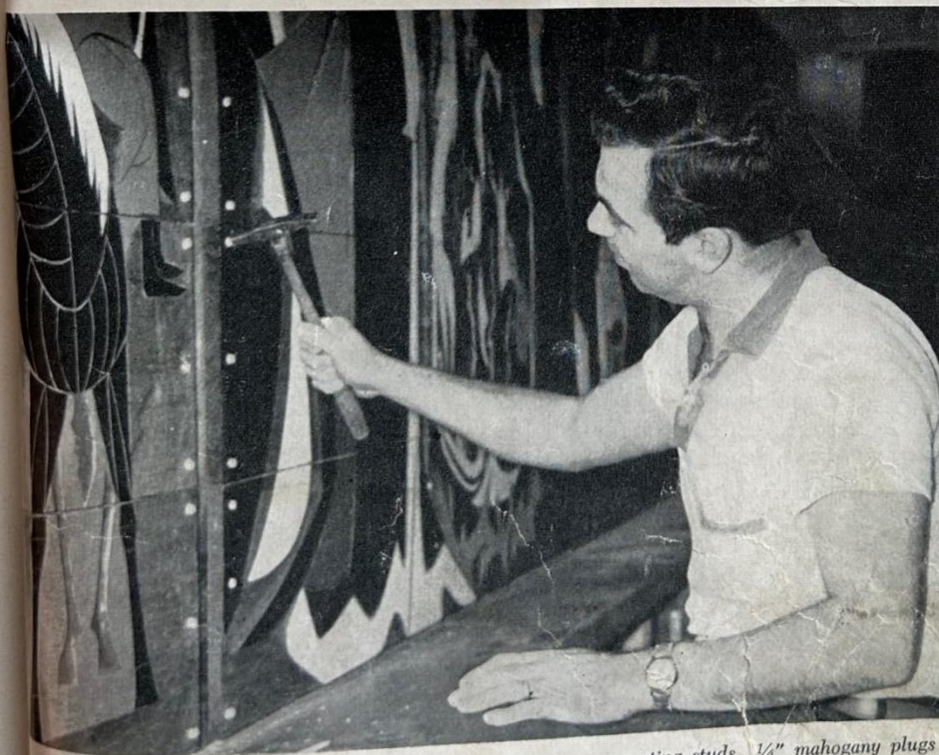
looks down on Hester Prynne and Rev. Dimmesdale from Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*.

After doing some costume research, I made my preliminary sketches and a scaled painting comprehensive. I drew single figures on a vellum-like tracing paper with black and white tempera paint and gold enamel. The preliminary sketches were then redrawn on brown wrapping paper one-quarter the size of the mural in order to compose individual balanced sections as well as to fit into the curved movement of the total design. The flat and deep space (positive and negative shapes) had to function together esthetically. I had to recognize the associational aspects of the abstract shapes and use them to heighten the general mood and theme of each section. Then I reorganized the black, white, gold, plain, and gouged and stained areas for the total effect.

In my search for the proper wood to use for the mural, I cut small sample designs on knotty pine,



Deep carving of large areas called for the use of hollow chisels and a sculptor's mallet



The mural is held in place by 200 wooden screws attached to supporting studs. 1/4" mahogany plugs mask the screw heads. These were glued and tapped into place (see above), trimmed to plank surface



Close-ups of the five completed panels of the woodcut mural. Left: panel one, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; below, left to right: panel two, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; panel three, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; panel four, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*; panel five, classics of American literature, *The Raven* by Poe and *The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne



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Honduras and Philippine mahogany, and veneer plywood. As a result of this experiment, I realized that a different visual experience could be developed from a woodcut mural, taking into consideration the sculptural problem presented by the allotted space. Planks of Philippine mahogany were chosen for the final mural because of their grain and medium hardness. The completed mural, 4'9" x 30', is comprised of five thematic sections: a shorter first section and four additional sections, each 6'3" long. Each section, in turn, is composed of five one-foot-square planks of mahogany, placed together with the grain running horizontally, and varnished on all sides to prevent warping. Pine strips, 1" x 3", were screwed perpendicularly to the backs of these assembled horizontal planks every

two feet to hold them together and prevent warping.

Each of the five sections of the painted comprehensive was photographed on 35mm color slides. A slide projector was placed about thirty feet from the standing, assembled sections of the mural, and the images were projected on their surfaces. I then sketched them in with charcoal and painted rough outlines in flat white, black, and gold enamel paint. Then I redrew and refined lines and shapes with charcoal and soft pencil. I used a T-square to get more accurate verticals.

When I was ready to do the actual cutting, I placed each wooden section on a large table and clamped it down to prevent sliding. I inscribed the drawn lines into the wood's surface with a small v-

shaped gouge. Then the same black, white, and gold enamel was carefully applied to the incised areas to give a richer tone to the primary coat.

With small and large v-shaped gouges, I cut deeper into the wood. To give texture and form to the recessed areas, I used small and then larger u-shaped gouges. I chipped out small amounts of wood using the palm of my hand or a sculptor's mallet. It was necessary to keep the tools sharp on a fine carborundum stone to prevent splitting and splintering of the fibrous wood. I used a small flat chisel on the side edges of each plank.

The type of lighting for the installed mural had to be decided upon in advance in order to determine how deep to cut and what kind of shadows and high-

lights would result. Unfortunately, alteration of the existing lighting in the school library and the installation of new flood-light fixtures was not accomplished until the mural had been completed. Ideally, this should have been done before cutting started to allow for periodic testing under the permanent lighting conditions.

Several grades of sandpaper, from fine to coarse, were used to clean areas that remained in the flat, uncut, unpainted natural wood. I used gold enamel paint not only to identify some areas and forms on the blocks, but also to serve as a filler on the porous wood. I brushed quick-drying gold size onto the gold-painted areas and allowed it dry at least one

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hour. Gold leaf (23 karat) comes in a small booklet of twenty-five 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " pages. The leaf slides off the pages easily. I tapped the leaf down gently with clean, dry fingers into incised areas and tore off the excess. Burnt umber oil paint mixed with turpentine was used to stain some of the gouged areas where deeper shadows and stronger contrast seemed necessary.

After sanding areas that were stained too dark and touching up other painted shapes that became soiled while I was working, only the final touches had to be made. Clear marine varnish thinned with turpentine was applied over the entire surface. (White areas were carefully avoided because varnish would have made them slightly yellow.) With the application of the varnish, the unpainted wood areas become darker and richer in color.

As each of the five sections of the mural was completed, it was transported from the studio to the high school tied to car-top carriers. For the lack of other storage space, the sections were leaned against the wall of the library. This afforded an opportunity to study the work where it was to be ultimately installed.

The actual installation of the mural sections was somewhat tedious. Eleven 4'9", 2-x-6 studs of Phillipine mahogany were nailed into the cinder-block wall vertically and leveled. Four studs, arranged in line with the vertical bookshelf dividers, serve as mural section dividers. (One third of the studs remains exposed.) With a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch bit, countersunk holes were drilled through the plank surface of the mural into the stud to accommodate a 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ " flat-headed wood screw. Each plank is held by eight screws: three on each end and two in the center. Two hundred screws were used for the entire mural. Phillipine mahogany plugs ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch) were inserted into each countersunk hole with a little

wood glue. Each plug was then trimmed to the plane surface with a flat chisel. Then they were touched up with paint or stain and varnished.

When the mural was finally installed and illuminated, only a few final adjustments had to be made. Where the varnished surface caused a glare, pumice powder and oil was rubbed on with a rag. Where deeper shadows were desired, more stain was applied. The nine 150W flood lights installed in the ceiling had to be adjusted to illuminate the entire surface, cast the proper shadows and give as little glare as possible. It was in these final hours that my studio work merged with the library setting.

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Stanley Kaplan was born thirty-four years ago in New York. He is a graduate of The High School of Music and Art and also studied at the Museum of Modern Art, The Cooper Union School of Art, and the Art Students League. He received a B.S. degree from the School of Education of New York University, and has taken graduate courses at Teacher's College, Columbia University, and Hofstra College. For the past twelve years, Mr. Kaplan has exhibited his woodcuts in a number of galleries and museums including The Brooklyn Museum, The Library of Congress, The Print Club of Philadelphia, and The Society of American Graphic Artists. In addition, he has been accorded one-man shows at the A. C. A. Gallery and at Hofstra College.

He is represented in the collections of The Society of American Graphic Artists, Hofstra College, The John Taylor Arms Memorial Collection, owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Warren Mack Memorial Collection of Penn State College.

Mr. Kaplan is currently teaching art in grades seven through twelve in the Levittown, Long Island, school system.—*The Editors.*