

11-1-2006

## Fritz Eichenberg's Saint Francis: Showing Humanity's Duality

Sarina Wyant

*University of Rhode Island, [srw@uri.edu](mailto:srw@uri.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lib\\_ts\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lib_ts_pubs)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Citation/Publisher Attribution

Wyant, Sarina. "Fritz Eichenberg's Saint Francis: Showing Humanity's Duality." , (2006).  
[https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lib\\_ts\\_pubs/16](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lib_ts_pubs/16)

This Article is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Technical Services Department Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons-group@uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons-group@uri.edu). For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

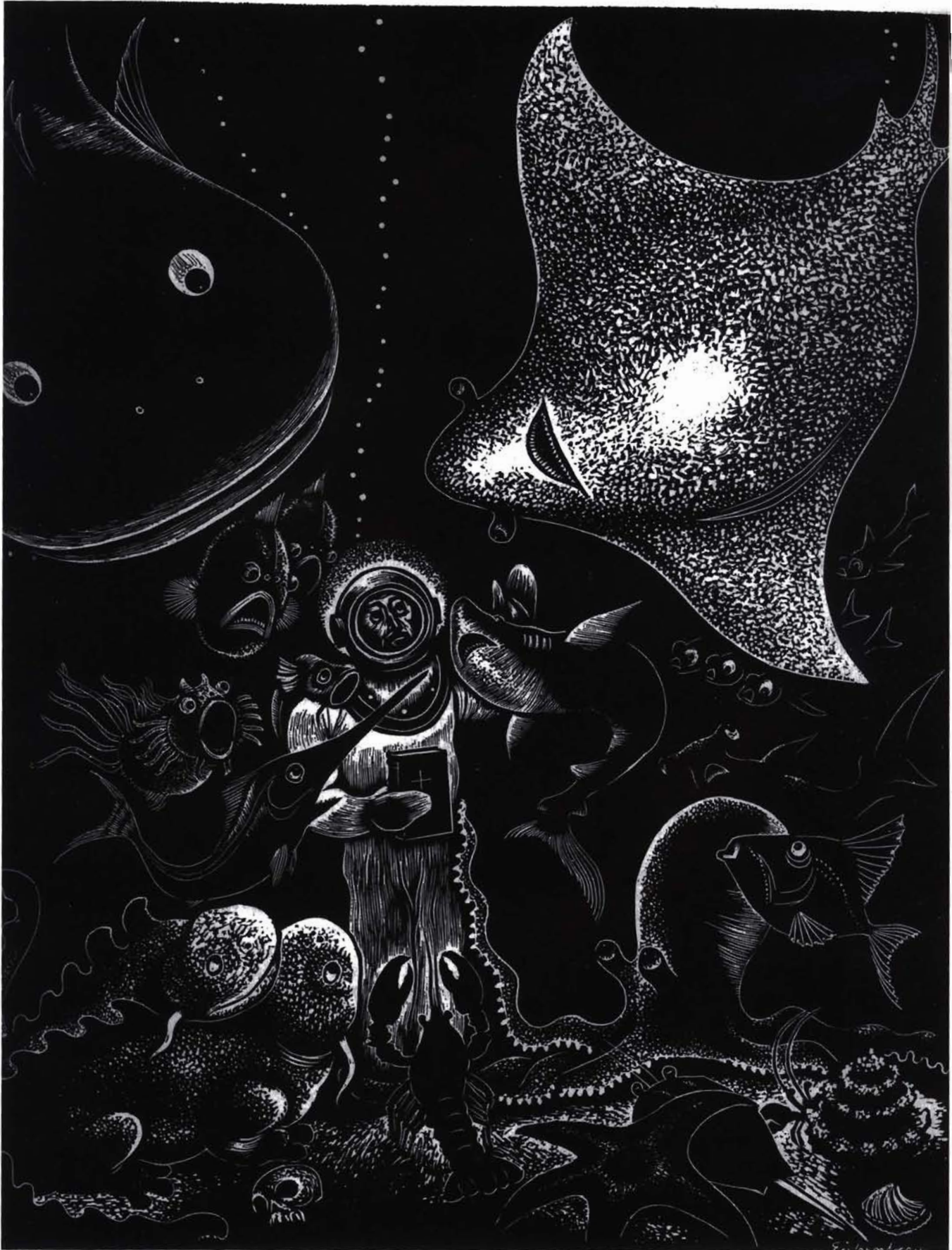


Figure 10. Fritz Eichenberg. *St. Francis and the Fishes*, WPA 1935-36, artist proof. Wood engraving 7 1/4 x 6".

# Fritz Eichenberg's Saint Francis: Showing Humanity's Duality

*"... the artist conjures out of a small square of wood a microcosm of life: an amalgam of joy and of suffering, of good and evil."*

—FRITZ EICHENBERG

**I**n *The Wood and the Graver*, Fritz Eichenberg (1901-1990) relates that the association with wood in his life has been a strong one, almost a fatalistic one, since he discovered the artistic medium of wood engraving as an art student in Leipzig.

Raised in an open minded household, Eichenberg was exposed to Eastern philosophies. He later converted to Quakerism. He was a humanist and a pacifist, influenced early in life by bearing witness to the destruction of his country during World War I. A quiet man, he was passionate and uncompromising in his views which he expressed powerfully through his art. He felt that the strong desire to express himself through wood engraving connected him spiritually to the earth and, ultimately, to God.<sup>2</sup> This passion

BY SARINA RODRIGUES WYANT



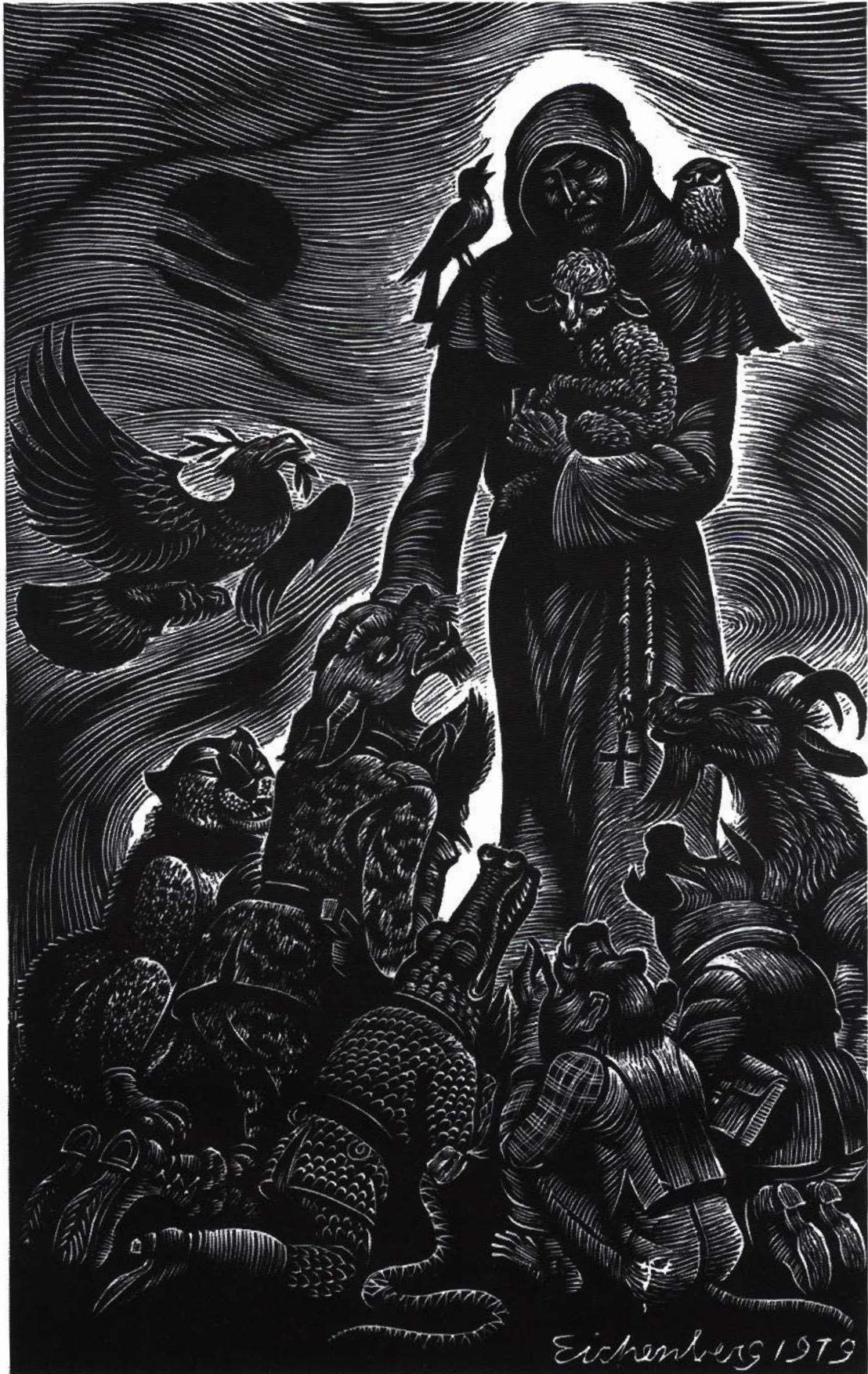


Figure 11. Fritz Eichenberg, *Untitled* from "The Francis Book," p. 137. Wood engraving, 6 1/4" x 10".



shines brilliantly in many of his wood engravings, evidenced by the many books he illustrated throughout his career. Eichenberg's striking illustrations, full of humanistic expression, enhance the power of authors like Emily Bronte, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allen Poe, and others.

In 1933, Eichenberg immigrated to the United States from Germany. Although the United States was in the midst of the Depression, he relished the freedom of thought and artistic expression that life-abounding New York offered. He taught at The New School and had some work published in *The Nation*. It was the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists' program that ultimately provided the needed income for Eichenberg to work and feed his family during that period. Many of his engravings during this time were influenced by his surroundings and his travels. His portrayals of people in everyday life are rich and multifaceted.

And I, a new immigrant raised on the writings of Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, try to interpret their messages on wood in my own way combined with new impressions gained on trips through Latin America with a few of my favorite saints like Saint Francis thrown in for balance—or perhaps good luck!<sup>3</sup>

The image of St. Francis and his associated themes of peace and love became a recurring subject throughout his life. Eichenberg's philosophy might have come directly from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "When you love every creature you will understand the mystery of God in created things." It is not surprising that Eichenberg would identify with St. Francis, *Il Poverello*, the 13th century mystic (1181-1226) whose simple but tenacious message of God's love for all living creatures inspired the religious order of the Franciscans.

In his introduction to *The Wood and the Graver*, Alan Fern, Director of the National Portrait Gallery wrote:

Every print of Eichenberg's delivers its meaning instantly and with great impact at first glance at least

on a very basic level. But in each there is a reserve of hidden meaning, complex detail, composition and a remarkable use of the technique of printmaking that combine to ensure that beyond the immediate response the attentive viewer will be rewarded by longer acquaintance with these prints.<sup>4</sup>

As Eichenberg's book illustration flourished, he treasured the time he used to engrave images that held a special meaning for him. Small print runs from these blocks were pulled and sent to friends for holiday greetings and other special occasions. "Sending out my paper missives into the world...has remained a completely fulfilling almost mystical experience undiminished by the passage of time," wrote Eichenberg.<sup>5</sup>

I have chosen three images of St. Francis to exemplify Eichenberg's expressive "paper missives." I was intrigued by the spiritual affinity that Eichenberg, who was raised in a non religious environment from a German Jewish heritage, had for a Catholic hermit. Most of his engravings of St. Francis are the typical images of the saint preaching to the animals, and assuming a Christ-like pose. The first image, produced for the WPA in 1935-36, is entitled *St. Francis Preaches to the Fishes*.

In this print (**Fig. 10**) St. Francis is shown in a diving suit as he preaches the word of God to a watery congregation. Eichenberg's sense of whimsy and humor is evident and reflects his early career as a cartoonist of political satire in Germany. The congregation of sea creatures appears surprised and amused as they look attentively on the earnest saint. The reverence for his saintly status is evidenced by the halo surrounding his diving helmet. Light and dark contrast in this engraving to deliver the message of St. Francis: "Come into the light of God's love." The fishes move toward St. Francis from the darkness to the light. In the lower left-hand corner, a skull symbolizes the mortality of all living things. The skull is also associated with St. Francis, and other penitent saints. In this print, Eichenberg implies that St. Francis is willing to go and preach his message anywhere. In another print commissioned by the WPA called *Preaching to the Birds*, St. Francis is displayed in a hot air balloon preaching to a flock of birds.

The second print (Fig. 11) exemplifies St. Francis' unconditional love of all creatures, both deserving and undeserving. The anthropomorphized animals in this print are dressed in military clothing and weapons. Through this visual device, St. Francis bestows his unconditional blessing on all God's creatures, including humans who sometimes behave beastly. This type of imagery is used in many of Eichenberg's antiwar prints. The lamb, a symbol of the weak and innocent, is held in St. Francis's arm as he looks down accusingly at the sinister creatures that grovel at his feet. An eagle, a symbol of military power, and not a traditional dove, carries an olive branch. The eagle flies toward St. Francis with a look of eagerness in his offer: "Military might brings peace." The creatures gather around, kneeling in penitence, seeking not just redemption from Francis but his acceptance. The moon is darkened in the sky as St. Francis emerges from the light. His outstretched hand is placed on the head of the wolf. St. Francis looks haggard and sad. An owl, the symbol of wisdom, is perched on his left shoulder. It shares Francis' expression of fatigue and sadness. Seeking wisdom and preaching peace are both hard work. A crow sits on St. Francis' right shoulder. I wonder what he sings in the saint's ear. In this image I see the contrasts of hope and despair, good and evil. This untitled engraving was used to accompany a reprint of an article by journalist Anne O'Hare McCormick, "Fascism Takes Francis as Patron Saint; Ascetic Virtues of Little Poor Man of Assisi Are Highly Revered in Italy," first published in the *New York Times* in September, 1926 and reissued in *The Francis Book*. In her article, McCormick describes Mussolini's fu-

tile attempt to usurp St. Francis as a symbol for his "New Italy."<sup>6</sup>

Although illustrating the evil of another time, Eichenberg's engraving was produced in 1979, a year of tumultuous world events when United States citizens were held hostages in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini who declared the United States "The Great Satan." It was also the year Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

*The Stigmata of St. Francis* (Fig. 12) is one of Eichenberg's more striking prints. It was printed in 1973 in an edition of 50. St. Francis's hands are pierced by flowers, perhaps a play on the title *Fioretti Di Santo Francesco d'Ascesi*, which was a book of stories about St. Francis compiled and written in ca. 1250. A lightning bolt and the sun are in juxtaposition to each other. Lightning represents divine goodness. The sun is a symbol of hope and spirituality.<sup>7</sup> The lightning bolt seems to pierce St. Francis from behind. Flames, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, not only surround him but also emanate from him. The earth at his feet seems scorched, devoid of vegetation even as grass and flowers are in the periphery. It is the facial expression of St. Francis that makes this print so arresting. St. Francis appears in ecstasy even as he bleeds from the wounds of the stigmata. His upturned face gazes up at the sun through the heavy lidded eyes of a man spiritually intoxicated—suffering, yet joyous.

Eichenberg defined life as "an amalgam of joy and of suffering, of good and evil" and wood is a powerful medium "for telling a story in images."<sup>8</sup> Through his visual storytelling in the St. Francis engravings, Eichenberg expresses with grace and power the duality of our humanity.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Eichenberg, *The Wood and the Graver: The Work of Fritz Eichenberg*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1977. p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> See his anthropomorphized "The Peaceable Tree" in which a tree proudly bears the graver's tool like a badge of honor. I ask: do you see a bit of Fritz in the profile of the tree?

<sup>3</sup> Eichenberg, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Eichenberg, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Eichenberg, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Roy M. Gasnick, O.F.M., *The Francis Book*. New York: Collier Books, 1980. p. 136-138.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that both the sun and lightning symbols were usurped by the Nazi regime as a swastika and the symbol for the SS (Schutzstaffel), respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Eichenberg, p. 13.





Figure 12. Fritz Eichenberg. *The Stigmata of St. Francis*, 1973, edition of 50. Wood engraving, 14" x 12"