

For the FDR Memorial, Leonard Baskin created a 30-foot-long bronze relief depicting the former president's cortege: his bier on a caisson pulled by horses with mourners following.

# Capital's FDR memorial is 'wondrous,' sculptor says

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Bulletin Staff

Sculptor Leonard Baskin, who grew up the son of an Orthodox rabbi during the Great Depression, has nothing but glowing memories of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"He was the first president I ever voted for," Baskin said. "He was a paragon, a mighty man with the most wondrous common touch ever perceived. I have overwhelmingly positive feelings about him."

As one of five sculptors commissioned to create figurative images for the long-awaited FDR Memorial — which was dedicated today in Washington, D.C., and is expected to draw 5 million visitors a year — Baskin could not have asked for a more significant vehicle with which to express his fondness for the former president.

"It's a wondrous memorial because it evokes the spirit and times of Franklin Delano Roosevelt," said the artist, who will exhibit bronze reliefs and drawings

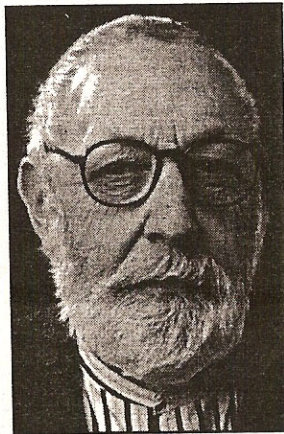
created for the FDR Memorial starting Wednesday, May 7 at San Francisco's Serge Sorokko Gallery.

"To have done it even by half would have been an achievement."

Speaking by telephone from his studio in western Massachusetts, Baskin spoke of his particular contribution to the parklike memorial: a 30-foot-long bronze relief depicting overwrought mourners following Roosevelt's funeral bier. He also spoke of a project on which he is now at work—the sixth in a series of immense woodcuts memorializing the Holocaust.

More than 5 feet long, the latest woodcut depicts a rising skeleton surrounded by crows and owls. A Yiddish proverb composed by the 74-year-old Baskin appears on the work. "The resurrection of the dead; we don't believe in it," the words read. "In any case, the owls and the crows will represent us."

Not until recently, Baskin said, was he able to create Holocaust art that satisfied him. So many stark photographs have been taken of the subject that he believed he



Leonard Baskin

could conceive of nothing that would surpass the pictures' graphic quality.

"I couldn't deal with it," admitted Baskin, whose works can be found in numerous museum collections. "I floundered about and couldn't do anything that was meaningful."

Then Baskin began experiment-

ing with Yiddish, which he speaks fluently, devising phrases that seemed to unleash from his imagination images of torture and suffering.

"Words gave me the means, the modality, with which to create the image," he said.

Baskin, who as a boy attended a "dark, medieval" yeshiva in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn until "I set myself free," now considers himself an atheist. Nonetheless, he has long been drawn to Jewish subject matter, creating works that center not only on the Holocaust and pogroms, but also on "the humor of Jews and their everlasting capacity to survive."

A recent series of large-scale gouaches titled "Angels to the Jews" was inspired by the Gulf War. Among numerous other honors, Baskin was in 1994 awarded the Cultural Achievement in the Arts Award from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Though widely acknowledged as a printmaker, draftsman and book

designer — he founded the Gehenna Press while a student at Yale University in 1942 — Baskin is probably best known as a sculptor committed to the traditional techniques of carving and modeling. He continues to consider the human figure the primary motif for sculpture.

"It's one of the great mediums available," he said of his artistic genre. "To create worlds of art in three dimensions is like being God. Adam was the first sculpture, a very divine work."

Being asked to create a sculpture for the FDR Memorial, the artist said, is about as divine as it gets.

He calls his sculpture of FDR's funeral procession "very significant."

"My life of art was the prelude to my making it."

► "Leonard Baskin: Bronze Reliefs and Drawings for the FDR Memorial" will be on display Wednesday, May 7 to June 30 at the Sorokko Gallery, 231 Grant Ave., S.F. Information: (415) 421-7770.