

Jan Sobota

*Recipient of The GBW Lifetime Achievement Award
2012*

“I was born into an environment of books as a matter of circumstance, for my father was a most passionate collector of literature. He worked constantly with his books – writing notes, keeping records, and I don’t know what else. One of his main interests was children’s literature, so my brother and I frequently received books as gifts, especially at Christmas. Many of these books opened up the world for me, not just to acquaint me with reality but also with fantasies found in children’s dreams. I often felt that I actually became a part of the story in some of the books because I would sketch my own pictures while admiring those already drawn by my favourite illustrators.”



Jan Bohuslav Sobota began his ‘Reflections of a Book Artist’ in the lead article of Designer Bookbinders’ **The New Bookbinder**, Volume 10, 1990 with this recollection. His description of his life’s journey as an artist to book conservation and design bookbinding in the article gives us a view into a world of tradition that was not open to Western Europe and the Americas during the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s. It was in the early 80’s that Jan did not go home one day and traveled as a refugee to Switzerland and found safe haven in Cleveland sponsored by the Rowfant Club in 1984.

In Ohio he began working at the conservation lab of Case Western Reserve University. Years later he was to continue work for the Southern Methodist University long after he decided to return to the Czech Republic. Jan was a gifted artisan, craftsman, artist who understood both conservation and new, original binding.

The Guild of Book Workers’ Nominating Committee for the Lifetime Achievement Award chose Jan as the recipient for 2012 before he died in early May. He has earned this distinction as an outstanding craftsman as well as an exceptional communicator, organizer and instructor.

In the 1970’s while still in Czechoslovakia Jan was organizing exhibitions and writes in his DB article, “In order to break away from the still conservative attitude of many Czechoslovakian bookbinders, I included some of my sculptural bindings in the

exhibition. It is important to note that I invited artists who were not bookbinders to participate.” Known for his sculptural creations and box type books, Jan tells how Philip Smith’s **New Directions in Bookbinding** and “intense correspondence with the author” influenced him and gave him the courage to push the edge and make the books he so wanted to create. Still, throughout Jan continued working as a conservator and once arriving in the USA became as well known for that work as his new bindings. He quickly began presenting at meetings and had new and

valuable methods and skills to introduce to us here.

Jan has participated in hundreds of book arts exhibitions all over the world, many in the USA with GBW and other institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and SMU’s Triennial DeGolyer. He won 30 major prizes for his work from the LudvikBradac’s Prize, Society of Czech Bookbinders, to the Prix Corinne Pagnon Axa Chevreuse, Bienales Mondiales de la Reliure D’Art, France, and even several Distinguished Book Awards from the Miniature Book Society. He has taught many individuals who have gone on to become accomplished binders, conservators and book artists. Over the years Jan gave workshops and presentations at many professional conferences in different countries, as recently as last summer at The Society of Bookbinders’ Conference in Warwick, England.

It was his exceptional ability to share with others who singled him out. He welcomed individuals from every corner of the book arts and made a great effort to link many of us to others we may never have met or even have heard of otherwise.

The donations of bindings to the Museum of Design Bindings in Locket is a fitting tribute to Jan’s generosity that was so happily returned by so many bookbinders from all over the world. This spirit will continue with his wife, Jarmila, and family at the J & J Sobota’s Book Art Studio.

Gabrielle Fox