

An Archive of Influences

A recent exhibition deepens CHESTER GRYSKI's appreciation of the many influences underpinning the work of Michael Torosian.

Michael Torosian's Lumiere Press: Photography Meets Fine Press

THOMAS FISHER RARE BOOK LIBRARY,
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO,
SEPTEMBER 16–DECEMBER 20, 2019

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS that struck me in viewing the exhibition, *The Lumiere Press Archives: Photography and the Fine Press*, was the variety of media that brought the exhibition to life. It was a dynamic and vivid experience that aptly mirrored the ambitious vision of Michael Torosian, the creative driving force of Lumiere Press and co-curator of the exhibition alongside John Shoesmith, the Fisher's outreach librarian.¹

When I first walked into the exhibition space at the Fisher library entrance, I encountered a small but obvious sign inviting me to visit the Fisher's SoundCloud page where I could download the audio guide that accompanied the exhibition (<https://soundcloud.com/fisher-rare-book-library/sets/lumiere-press>). The guide was Michael Torosian talking about his background, Lumiere Press and its origins, aesthetics and archives, as well as the exhibition. This was unlike other audio guides that lead one



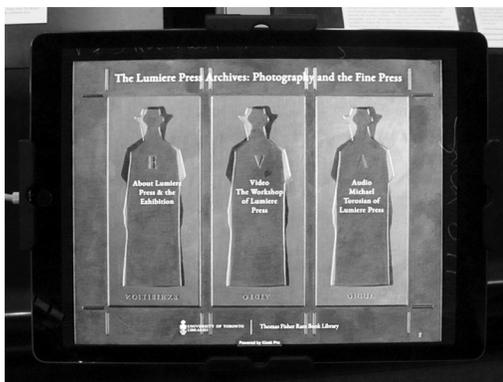
Tablet showing video of Torosian as a bookmaker.

through an exhibition, forcing you to stop at a particular item and listen to a discussion about it. Instead, the SoundCloud audio guide could be listened to before, during, and after visiting the exhibition. However, unlike those other guides, it did not provide a focused discussion of any or all of the individual items on exhibit.

The entrance area also featured a display tablet, the electronic screen offering three choices: a brief written note about the exhibition; a video of Michael Torosian in his workshop going through the steps in the production of one of his books (see <https://youtu.be/P16qF7RsAL4>); and an audio production with Torosian speaking about his work, which was another opportunity to hear what was also provided on the SoundCloud site.

The exhibition took place on two levels of the Fisher library. On the lower level, in the Maclean Hunter Room, there were two more tablets: one showing the video of Torosian as bookmaker, and the other allowing me to scroll electronically through the pages of a forthcoming Lumiere Press book.

In these ways, the Fisher library made excellent use of technology to enhance and expand the experience for visitors. It also extended the life and reach of the exhibition beyond the building



Tablet offering information about the exhibition.

that is the Fisher library, using technology to permit those who were not able to get to the exhibition to experience something of it. Thus, some elements of the exhibition have been expanded both temporally and geographically. Clearly, the next move is to overcome the remaining limitations, such as providing images of the items on display for those not able to attend, although I expect nothing will ever equal visiting the Fisher library and seeing an exhibition in person. There are ideas here that I hope some other libraries, museums and art galleries will consider in enhancing their upcoming exhibitions.

On exhibition was every one of Lumiere Press's titles up to 2019, in chronological order.² This body of work comprises 22 books published over a span of 32 years. Simply displaying each of the press's books is what one comes to take for granted as to how an exhibition looks. But there was more to this exhibition. In 2017, Torosian placed his Lumiere Press archive with the Fisher library. It is substantial because, early on in the life of the press, Torosian decided to maintain the Lumiere Press archive on the principle of keeping every scrap of paper. Some items from the archive pertaining to each of the books have made their way into this Fisher exhibition.

The exhibition brought together each of Lumiere Press's books with a few items from the archive, which form stepping-stones to the book as published. It showed elements of the creation of the text and the coming together of photography and bookmaking—the problem of the reconciling of lineal and spatial elements on a two-dimensional plane which both arts face, and the successful solution to the problem of executing those ideas and elements in the actual making of the book. Torosian was an accomplished photographer before taking on the challenge of bookmaking. This led him to the conclusion that the codex format, and not gallery walls, provided the ideal way to appreciate the exhibition of photographs as fine art. He set out to learn all aspects of bookmaking, a combination of diligent self-teaching, experimentation and guidance from such accomplished bookmakers as Glenn Goluska and Stan Bevington bringing him to a comparable place in bookmaking. This is the foundation of Lumiere Press.

With a few exceptions, everything is the work of Torosian. He prepared and conducted interviews with the photographers, transcribed the recorded interviews and then edited them to arrive at the text as published. He designed each book including selecting type and paper, and he sat at the Intertype keyboard to set the type. He then printed the texts by hand on a Vandercook Universal III proofing press, and he designed and executed the bindings. The exhibition presented all of these steps with the underlying documents.

Each of the books was accompanied by items from the archive, which brought the creative process alive by showing what lay behind the book as sent out into the world. Others might describe Torosian's extensive record-keeping in very uncharitable terms. I applaud it. The exhibition demonstrated that in this archive there is real meat for researchers, whether they are researching Torosian and Lumiere Press, the various photographers who are the subjects of the Lumiere Press books, or even private press books in general. This exhibition demonstrated that there is a realistic possibility that researchers will find in the archives the answers to their questions. For example, the jar of stones from the home of Frederick Sommer in Arizona raised questions in my mind. However, after reading the story told by Torosian in the section on Frederick Sommer in *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant and Other Stories*, I understood its inclusion in the archives and the exhibition.

Let me give you a tour of what a visitor saw beginning with the cases on the entrance level before proceeding to the floor below and the items on display there.

Case 1 set the scene. The curators presented three cameras: a camera belonging to Torosian's father that Torosian used as a teenager, a Canon he bought later when studying photography at Ryerson Polytechnic Institute (now Ryerson University), and his latest camera. Behind these was a book maquette which was his first attempt at making a photobook done in a binding class he took with Emrys Evans, now retired but formerly conservator at the Fisher library. With this was his notebook from the binding classes. Next to these were a tape recorder, transcriber, cassettes, and copy of a transcription of the interview for *Siskind*



Display case featuring cameras used by Torosian, as well as study notes and interviews.

Variations (1990). Beginning with *Extempore* (1980), Torosian conducted extensive interviews with his subjects. Next in the case was a mock-up of *Lunarglyphics* (1981), the first Lumiere Press book, and prior to the photographic publishing program (a discussion of this title is in note 2). We next saw welding gloves that originally belonged to his father but are now used by Torosian when working around hot metal. The last item in this case was a partial type forme with slugs for a part of the text for *The Ballad of Soames Bantry and Other Stories from the Fabled Life and New York Years of Photographer, Painter, and Poet Saul Leiter* (2017). This case provided elements of all the stages of a Lumiere Press book.

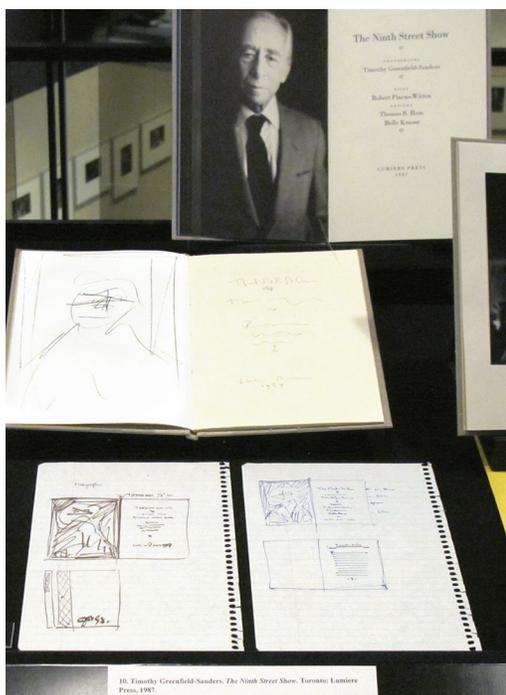
The next seven cases contained the publications and they are all described starting at the left side of the case.

Case 2 started with the first book, *Edward Weston: Dedicated to Simplicity. A reminiscence by Cole Weston* (1986) displaying the frontispiece and title page. The archival items that accompanied this were two notes from Cole Weston which a visitor could read. Next was *Michel Lambeth: Confessions of a Tree Taster* (1987), also showing the frontispiece and title page. Here was also a hand-drawn layout of the title page

and an engraving used for the cover and a print of that engraving. Next was *Aurora* (1987) with the book open at an interior spread—a single photograph on one page. With it was a handwritten page layout plus an original typescript



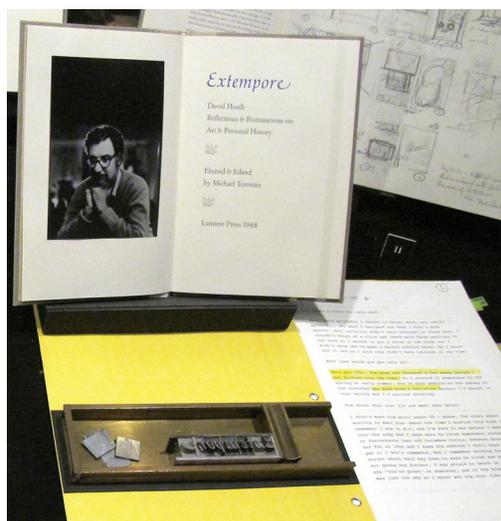
Notes from Cole Weston and a hand-drawn layout of the title page for *The Confessions of a Tree Taster* (1987)



Draft materials from
The Ninth Street Show (1987).

manuscript with corrections. Beside *Aurora* was *The Ninth Street Show: Photographs by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Essay by Robert Pincus-Witten* (1987) open at the frontispiece and title page. Here the curators included from the archive a dummy copy of the book and two hand-written page layouts. The last items in this case were *David Heath: Extempore Reflections & Ruminations on Art and Personal History* (1988) open at the frontispiece and title page, with a second copy showing page 22 with a fold-out sketch displaying a thumbnail layout by photographer David Heath for *Infinity II*. Here was also the transcription of the interview and the actual type used to print “Extempore” on the title page.

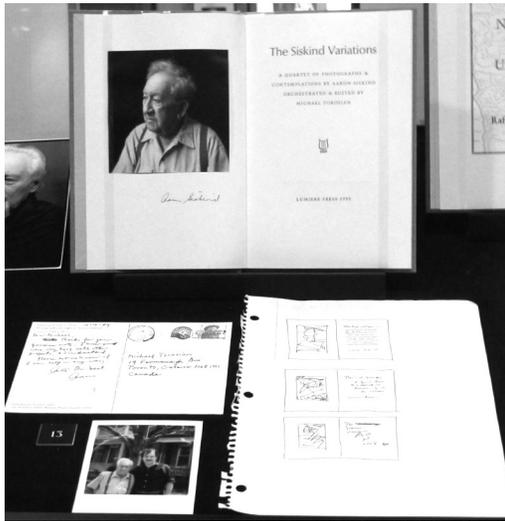
The first book in the third case was *Toronto Suite: Portraits of the Isaacs Gallery Artists by Michael Torosian* (1989) presenting its cover accompanied by a framed portrait of Michael Snow and portraits of Walter Redinger, William Ronald, Udo Kasemets and Joyce Wieland. Beside these was a sheet with the list of artists to be photographed (26 names but the book has only 24 photographs) and hand-drawn page layouts.



Transcription of the interview and the actual type used to print “Extempore” on the title page.

Next was *Aaron Siskind: The Siskind Variations. A Quartet of Photographs & Contemplations by Aaron Siskind Orchestrated & Edited by Michael Torosian* (1990) open at the frontispiece and title page. From the archive was a photograph of Siskind and Torosian, a hand-written postcard and a notebook page with three hand-drawn title page settings. Beside this and without explanation for deviating from the chronological order was *Nostalgia for an Unknown Land: Photographs by Rafael Goldchain. Introduction by Alberto Manguel. Essay by Michael Torosian* (1989) also open at the frontispiece and title page. From the archive was a portion of the manuscript draft of Alberto Manguel’s introduction and the press file sheet with 12 photographs uncut. The last book in this case was *Orgeval, A Remembrance of Paul Strand* (1990) with the frontispiece and title page displayed and accompanied by a postcard from Naomi Rosenblum, the title page letter engravings and a marked-up galley of the text.

Case 4 began with *Frederick Sommer: The Constellations that Surround Us. The Conjunction of General Aesthetics & Poetic Logic in an Artist’s Life Surveyed & Edited by Michael Torosian* (1992) with the book showing the frontispiece and title page. Here was the jar with stones from Sommer’s home in Arizona, Torosian’s journal from his visits, a copper engraving (title page) and a print



The frontispiece and title page from Aaron Siskind: *The Siskind Variations* (1990), a photograph of Siskind and Torosian, a hand-written postcard and a notebook page with three hand-drawn title page settings.

of the engraving with notes. Second was *Anatomy* (1993). Here we saw an interior spread, four photographs by Torosian on the right-hand page, with the left page blank. Below this was a holographic manuscript with corrections, a hand-drawn sketch of the title page and a piece of promotional material, the printed invitation to the launch of the book. The third book was *The Witkin Gallery* 25:

A Celebration of Photography in New York City (1994) with the frontispiece and title page on display. With the book was the original silver-gelatin print by Manuel Álvarez Bravo and the slipcase that accompanied the 25 special copies, plus the cover prototype.

Case 5 contained *Lewis Hine: Ellis Island Memories & Meditations of Walter Rosenblum on the Life and Work of an American Artist* (1995) with its frontispiece and title page plus a letter from Walter Rosenblum, an engraving of the Statue of Liberty and a proof of a possible title page marked up. Next was *Harlem: Gordon Parks. The Artist's Annotations on a City Revisited in Two Classic Photographic Essays* (1997) presenting its frontispiece and title page. There was also a dummy book open to the drawn title page design, and a letter engraving of the title "Harlem." Beside this was *David Heath: Dialogue with Solitude* (2000). The curators had given us here the dust jacket (front), the photogravure plate from the image "Vengeful Sister" with a print housed in a folio, and a photograph print of "Washington Square".

Case 6 began with *Residual Landscapes: Edward Burtynsky. Studies of Industrial Transformation* (2001) with the frontispiece and title page showing and a copy of the print in folio that accompanied the 20 special copies, plus a page from the manuscript, Torosian's hand-written notes of questions and audio



Display featuring Frederick Sommer's *The Constellations that Surround Us* (1992), with the jar of stones from Sommer's home in Arizona (left).

cassettes of the interview. Beside this was *David Heath: Korea* (2004) with the frontispiece and title page on display plus a copy of the print and folio that accompanied the 36 special copies. *An American Gallery: Howard Greenberg 25 Years of Photography* (2007) was placed next. There were two copies exhibited: one opened at the title double-page spread and one copy showing page 66 and the print “Thorns.” With them was the photographic plate of “Thorns.”

The first book in the seventh case was *Paul Caponigro: On Prior Lane: A Firefly’s Light. The Cushing Interviews* (2008). The curators had exhibited two copies, one with the frontispiece and title page visible and the other with the binding visible. The archival items on display were a framed cover binding and paper cut-outs used on the binding. The second book was *Steichen: Eduard et Voulangis. The Early Modernist Period 1915–1923* (2011). One copy showed the frontispiece and title page and the other copy the print, “Three pears and an apple.” With these were title page design drafts, a manuscript draft explaining the pears and apple concept and an annotated copy of Eduard Steichen’s biography.

Case 8 was the last case on the entrance (upper) level which began with *Black Star: The Ryerson University Historical Print Collection*

of the Black Star Publishing Company. Portfolio Selection and Chronicle of a New York Photo Agency (2013) with its frontispiece and title page presented and a maquette of the book opened to the Martin Luther King page, a marked-up galley, and press film. The last book exhibited was *The Ballad of Soames Bantry* (2017). The two copies on display showed the frontispiece and title page and the cover. Torosian and Shoemsmith had presented as archival items to accompany the “little man” paper cut-outs, figures, proofs and an imposition dummy for the title page.

I was so engrossed in looking at the exhibition that I had no sense of time passing as I read the curators’ notes, postcards and other items. The cases displayed each of the published titles of Lumiere Press and surrounded each with items from the archive not necessarily presented in the books themselves, which I found fascinating. The connections were sometimes obvious, at other times puzzling, but enjoyable overall. While the items from the archive did not give a complete picture of the origins of a particular book, collectively they provided insight into the probable contents. The postcards, notes, and especially the stones gave a real sense of the human side of the creation of these books.

The exhibition continued in the Maclean



Two copies of Paul Caponigro’s *On Prior Lane: A Firefly’s Light. The Cushing Interviews* (2008), with one copy opened to show the frontispiece and title page, and the other to show the binding.



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 Figures, proofs and an imposition dummy for the title page of *The Ballad of Soames Bantry* (2017) (centre).

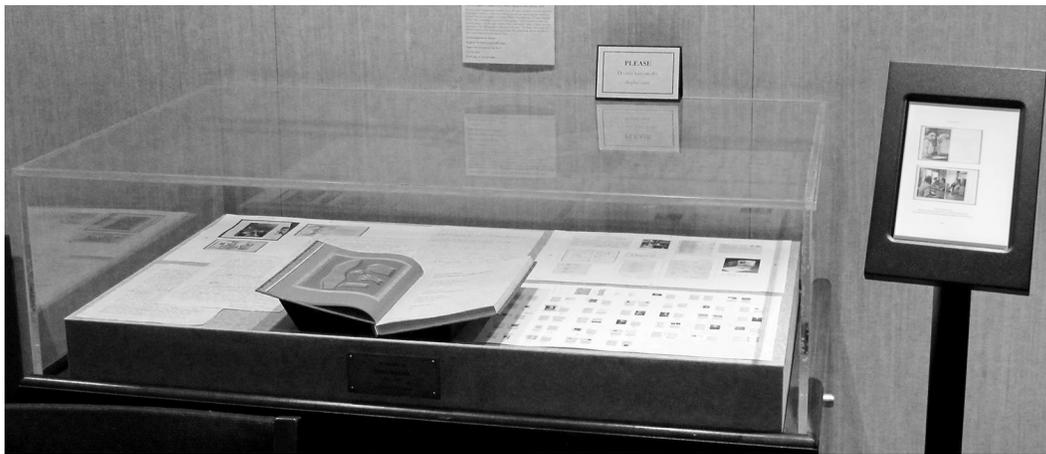
Hunter room on the floor below. Here, along the walls were Torosian's photographs from his first solo show, "Sanctuary," held at the National Film Board Gallery in 1979. These photographs were never incorporated into a book despite Torosian's comments about the codex being the best format for photographs. Some of these were published with an essay by Torosian in *Descant* XXIX (Vol. 11, No. 3, 1980). The walls provided an opportunity to see the photographs in a linear format at eye-level and presumably in the order that Torosian intended in the original exhibition. The 36 photographs demonstrate Torosian's talent as a photographer and provided an obvious explanation for his ability to form a rapport with the photographers he interviewed for his books. There were also three cases in this room: one with Lumiere Press ephemera, another with trade publications using Torosian's interviews, but the third case was the most fascinating.

The third case contained elements of a work in progress, *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant and Other Stories*. This is planned as the next publication from Lumiere Press and appeared to serve as a catalogue for the exhibition. There were typed drafts of the text with a multitude of handwritten changes, layout sheets, page proofs of photographs and a maquette for the book opened at the

title page. There was a tablet beside the case with an electronic version of the book and, because I had the room to myself, I was able to slowly scroll through the copy and read the entire text.

Lumiere Press: Printer Savant and Other Stories lists each Lumiere Press title in order of publication. It begins with an introduction by Torosian setting the stage of how and why he came to the making of books. A six-page illustrated essay by Torosian follows for each book, each one including detailed comments about the creation of the texts, including the photographs. It must be remembered that Torosian immersed himself in the creation of each book—the text as well as the physical book—and here Torosian provides comments about the design issues he encountered in the making of each book, such as how to create uniformity over the series and typeface. Torosian initially took into account the size of book and style of binding and let the typeface suit the subject matter but with a leaning towards the boldness of a Dwiggin design requiring a Linotype face. All this provides a basis for understanding Torosian's overall design philosophy. This is what all press bibliographies produced by the press itself should strive to do. I am looking forward to holding and reading a printed copy.

Although not referenced in the exhibition,



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A display case containing typed drafts, handwritten changes, layout sheets, page proofs, and maquette for Lumiere Press: Printer Savant and Other Stories. On the tablet next to the case is an electronic version of the book.

the Fisher library makes available more information about Lumiere Press. Torosian gave the Leon Katz Memorial Lecture at Fisher on February 17, 2016. The library has made available the audio part of the lecture (see <https://fisher.library.utoronto.ca/photography-and-fine-printing-history-lumiere-press>).

Such an ambitious exhibition cannot do everything, however. This one did not directly place Lumiere Press in the context of Canadian private presses. Is the “Fine Press” referenced in the title of the exhibition warranted? Torosian identifies himself as being part of the fine press–private press confraternity. He uses both terms. I am deliberately avoiding a discussion of whether these two terms mean the same or different things, as his work has been accepted as falling into both these categories. Lyndsay Dobson included Lumiere Press books in her *The Canadian Private Press in Print—Supplement* (Grimsby, Ontario, 1994) and in her catalogues of books for sale. Guy Upjohn and Alan Horne included Lumiere Press in their catalogue *Fine Printing: The Private Press in Canada. A travelling exhibition organized by Alan Horne and Guy Upjohn for the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild, and the Friends of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library* (1995). The quality of the books as observed, the details of the production as found in *Printer Savant and Other Stories*, the

hints derived from archival items suggest that Lumiere Press is rightly placed among both the Canadian and international notable presses.

In the spectrum that is publishing and printing in Canada, Lumiere Press sits solidly among those considered to be private press or fine printers. It is not unusual to see a private press book with a photograph. Lumiere Press, however, is unique worldwide in being a private press devoted to photographers and photography as art.

In support for the inclusion of Lumiere Press in a list of private presses, one can start with the fact that the press is a one-person operation, with Michael Torosian being that single discerning person who prints what he wants rather than what others might pay him to print. His work on *The Gryphons of Paris* (2002) by his friend Ronald Hurwitz only emphasises this fact. Essentially, Torosian designs what he publishes and prints the books letterpress and by hand, then binds them himself. As a fine printer, it can be noted that the papers he prints on (Nideggen mold-made, Hahnemühle Biblio, Somersset paper made at St. Cuthberts Mill, paper from La Papeterie Saint-Armand) are typical of the papers used by the better presses. The various typefaces he uses (Linotype’s Janson, Granjon, Electra, Falcon and others) are also typical of the types used by the best fine press–private press printers. The fact that his illustrations are photographs and not the

wood engravings or linocuts typical of private press work is of no significance. The photographs in the first publications were silver-gelatin prints and, I believe, printed individually by Torosian. All reproductions of photographs are of a high standard equal to the printing of photographs by hand and match in quality letterpress printing.

Torosian's work stands shoulder to shoulder with such Canadian private presses as The Aliquando Press, imprimerie dromadaire, Barbarian Press, Heavenly Monkey, and Greenboathouse Press, among others. The Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada and those from the American Institute of Graphic Arts testify to the fact Lumiere Press produces books of the highest standard.

Michael Torosian and John Shoesmith gave us an exhibition that took advantage of traditional display techniques, coupling them with the possibilities that electronic media gives to an exhibition. As a frequent visitor to library exhibitions, I heartily approve of this. The use of electronic media in conjunction with the traditional display gives the exhibition visitor a better idea of the book being looked at and its context than the book alone showing a double-page spread. Torosian, Shoesmith and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library are to be congratulated.

1. I wrote small pieces about the exhibition for the Alcuin Society's blog; "Book events in Toronto: Michael Torosian and the Lumiere Press at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library and Marie-Louise Gay at the Osborne Collection" (September 24, 2019; <http://alcuinsociety.com/michael-torosian-and-the-lumiere-press-at-the-thomas-fisher-rare-book-library-and-marie-louise-gay-at-the-osborne-collection-toronto/>) and "The Lumiere Press Archives: Photography and the Fine Press" (November 28, 2019; <http://alcuinsociety.com/the-lumiere-press-archives-photography-and-the-fine-press/>).
2. A copy of *Lunarglyphics: The Lost Language* is not included but a mock-up of it. This book, published in 1981, is not connected in any way to photography and predates by five years

Edward Weston: Dedicated to Simplicity (1986), the first of the Lumiere Press photography books. No other books were published by Lumiere Press in the intervening years. Also excluded is *The Gryphons of Paris: A Reliquary and Vignettes* by Ronald Hurwitz (Voin Editions, 2002). This is a book of photographs and reflections by Ronald Hurwitz. The colophon states that the design, composition, presswork and binding of this book was by Michael Torosian. No mention is made of Lumiere Press. This publication sits between Lumiere Press's *Residual Landscapes: Edward Burzynsky. Studies of Industrial Transformation* (2001) and *David Heath: Korea* (2004). This book received first-place honours in the Limited Editions category of the Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada in 2003. It is not referred to in *Lead and Light: The Evolution of The Lumiere Press*, a catalogue of its books Lumiere Press published to accompany an exhibition at the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, Toronto May 1–June 2, 2013, nor in *Printer Savant and Other Stories*. This is the only known book that Michael Torosian did extensive work on that is not a Lumiere Press publication. Ronald Hurwitz is a friend of Michael Torosian.

FURTHER READING

The Lumiere Press Archives: Photography and the Fine Press focused on the creation of the books of the Lumiere Press rather than their subject matter. Those interested in the books' contents are directed to Tom Smart's article, "The Aesthetics of Simplicity" in *Amphora* 173 (Summer 2016), 3–8. Rollin Millroy interviewed Michael Torosian in "Transcendent Craftsmanship" in *Amphora* 148 (February 2008), 10–11.

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 ~ Chester Gyski is a regular contributor to *Amphora* and an ex officio director of the Alcuin Society.