

## *Aida and the Mirror, 1991*

**Selma Bortner b. 1926**

**linoleum print**

**H. 30 inches x W. 36 inches**

**James A. Michener Art Museum**

**Purchased with funds provided by an anonymous donor from the Bucks Biennial I Exhibition**



### **Biography**

Have you ever thought about being an artist? Selma Bortner said, “For me, being an artist was always a question of survival. I could not survive in this world if I could not do something creative. It’s a commitment that I made when I was a child. I knew from the first time I could think about it that I wanted to be an artist.”

Selma Bortner was born in 1926 in Cleveland, Ohio. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a Bachelor of Science degree in Art Education from the Tyler School of Art in 1948. She and her husband, Judge Oscar Bortner, moved to Levittown, Pennsylvania, in 1952. Bortner was a teacher in the art department at Bucks County Community College, where she taught printmaking and design for 23 years. Despite time commitments to teaching and her family, Bortner continues working on her own projects, always seeing herself as a working artist. She has won numerous awards for her work, and her artwork can be found in many collections, including those of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts, and the James A. Michener Art Museum.

Selma Bortner is a printmaker who is familiar with several printing techniques. She prefers to work with surface techniques such as fine cut, wood cut, and collographs. She often combines these techniques and uses nontraditional materials in order to express the message of her work as clearly as possible. She discusses important topics through her artwork, such as diseases like cancer and issues like self-esteem. Bortner also uses her artwork to express her feelings.

### **How did Selma Bortner create this work of art?**

Selma Bortner used linoleum to create this print. In the process of creating the print, the image is first carved into a linoleum plate, and then it is inked with a brayer. Paper is placed on top of the plate, and the plate and paper are passed through a printmaking press, resulting in the image. If more



than one color is used in the print, then the print can take more than one pass in the press. Bortner states that she limits herself to 15 prints of each picture. This artwork is not very big; it's about 2½ tall by 3 feet wide.

**This work can be considered an allegory. What is an allegory?**

An allegory is a story that has a symbolic meaning. The story in this artwork happens to be about a particular time in the artist's life. Bortner is using the animals and the objects as symbols to tell a story. This print is also part of a series of prints. It is the third and final print that she created in response to her struggle with and survival of cancer. The first print was called *Aida and the Serpent* and the second was called *Aida, Queen of the Jungle*. She says that having cancer changed her life and affected her artwork. After she battled cancer, she wanted to create artwork that had a message, rather than concentrating on style. Think about what it might be like to struggle with a life-threatening illness. How would your life be affected? How would you feel? Have you known a friend or a family member with cancer? How did it affect you?

**What animals can you find in this artwork?**

There are a few animals that you can find in this print. They are used as symbols. There is a snake on the right corner of the image, which Bortner uses to represent cancer. The monkey and the wolf are on the left side of the print, and they are used to represent her family members and students. The wolf also represents her fighting spirit to overcome the disease. These animals are her constant companions. The artist says that the jungle that she is in represents a new place or new environment.

**Why is this woman holding a broken mirror?**

Bortner is using the broken mirror as a symbol. She says this mirror represents how she felt after she battled her cancer. She felt wounded and not whole since she had to have surgery to remove her cancer. The animals looking at the woman accept her just the way she is and see her as whole. The artist didn't feel good about herself after the surgery, but everyone else around her still liked her. Bortner uses the broken mirror to symbolize her self-esteem after surgery. But, this broken mirror could also symbolize something more. Think about what other meanings it could have for you.



Think of what a mirror could mean: vanity, self-esteem, confidence, beauty, and how we perceive ourselves. Then, how would the mirror being broken change these meanings?

### **How do you feel when you look in the mirror?**

The woman in this print is dealing with issues including a life-threatening illness, her age, and her self-esteem. These are issues that many people deal with. Think about how you feel about yourself when you look in the mirror. Are you happy with yourself? Are there things that you want to change? Do you think your friends and your family members see you the same way that you see yourself? It is important to feel good about yourself. Of course there are times that you might not be feeling good. If you are feeling down, it's OK to talk about it to friends and family members. Remember—confidence in yourself is a great thing to have! Whenever you feel sad about something or don't feel good about yourself, talk to someone.

### **Learn More**

Respond to this work of art in two activities below: “Look Closer: Your Perceptions,” and “Look Closer: Symbols and Issues.”

### **What is a print?**

A print is a shape, a design or an image that is created on a hard surface, covered with wet paint or ink, and then transferred to paper, cloth, wood, or some other art material. The result is an image that looks like the original shape that was created on the hard surface. There are different types of prints, including woodcuts, linoleum cuts, lithographs, monotypes, and silkscreen prints. Some of them are more complicated than others. After reading how to make each kind, you might want to try one yourself! Learn more about printmaking at the Museum of Modern Art, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).

After World War II, many artists began to experiment more; this often happened in studios where artists worked together and shared ideas. Many new printmaking approaches developed in New York City during this time. They are explained on the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

### **Related Images**

Look at more of Selma Bortner's works at the website of the James A. Michener Art Museum, [www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org).

In this print, Aida is holding a hand mirror. Mirrors did not always look like this. The early mirrors were disks of polished metal. The more elaborate mirrors were decorated on one side and could be hung on walls with the decoration facing out. Many mirrors are on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).



Mirrors became more elaborate and were made from different materials by the middle ages. As in *Aida and the Mirror*, they were often added to the painting for a special reason. *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*, also known as *The Arnolfini Portrait*, by Flemish artist Jan Van Eyck, shows a mirror reflecting two people outside the room. See this beautiful portrait at the National Gallery of Art in Britain, [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk).

In *Las Meninas* by the Spanish artist Velasquez, there is a mirror on the back wall showing the royal couple watching the painting of the picture. During that time in history, it was dangerous to depict the artist working alongside the Royal Family. It could be interpreted to mean that everyone was equal to the royal family. There is an interesting film about this painting on You Tube called *Exploring Art: Las Meninas*. Look it up at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

### Related Links

**There seems to be more than one print with Aida in the name. Is this a mistake?**

*Aida and the Mirror* is part of a series. Sometimes artists that produce a series are showing related ideas. Sometimes they are showing the same subject at different times. Sometimes they use a series to tell the parts of a story, or to communicate an important idea.

The French artist Edgar Degas created a series of ballet dancers. Look at these images at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org), or watch a PBS film about his dancers at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

The French Impressionist Claude Monet created several series, one of which featured haystacks in a field. Monet also created series of poppy fields and poplar trees. You can see all these series on the website dedicated to Claude Monet, [www.intermonet.com](http://www.intermonet.com)

Have you ever created works in a series? It is a fun idea to explore.

**Who is Aida? Why does she appear in a series of prints by Bortner?**

Aida was a mythical Ethiopian princess who was captured and forced into a new life as a slave in Egypt. Her new life is filled with conflicts, but also with a new love. Selma Bortner's battle with cancer took her from her former life into a new one. That battle caused her conflict and struggle. It led her to a new direction in her art that she has continued to explore.

**If Aida represents Bortner's battles with cancer, is the work of art really a self-portrait?**

We could say it was a self-portrait in that it represents Selma Bortner, but it does not look like her. Many artists used self-portraits to explore their styles as the styles changed. Pablo Picasso may have made the most self-portraits, each



showing the changes in his style of painting. Other painters who did several self-portraits included Vincent Van Gogh and Andy Warhol. Other artists like to hide themselves and their friends in their paintings. Masaccio, an early Italian painter, filled crowd scenes with portraits of his friends, and usually included a self-portrait. If you were an artist, would you hide yourself and your friends in paintings? The works of these artists are featured on the following websites:  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, at [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)  
Vincent Van Gogh Gallery at [www.vangoghgallery.com](http://www.vangoghgallery.com)  
The Andy Warhol Museum at [www.warhol.org](http://www.warhol.org)  
The Scholar's Resource at [www.scholarsresource.com](http://www.scholarsresource.com).

**Selma Bortner's biography says she lived in Levittown. It was known as "the most perfectly planned community in America."**

Levittown was one of the first planned communities. It was a very new way of living in the 1950's. Before this time, there were no big developments of houses. People simply bought a vacant lot in a place and had a house built. This was different. The houses all were pretty much the same, and there were regulations regarding the upkeep of the property to keep the neighborhoods looking nice. There were also designated parks, schools, and even a swimming pool. This was a very big experiment! In 2003, the Michener Art Museum hosted an exhibition all about Levittown. Read more at [www.michenermuseum.org](http://www.michenermuseum.org).

