

## *The Journey, 1998*

**Selma Bortner (b.1926)**  
**hand colored linoleum print on paper**  
**H. 24 x W.26 inches**  
**Collection of the Bucks County Intermediate Unit**  
**#22**



### **Biography**

Have you every 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 Sciences 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 all 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 artwork?**

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. After she printed this image, she hand painted it using watercolors.

### **Why is this artwork called “The Journey?”**

Selma Bortner created this print around the time her husband had surgery on his heart. Have you ever had a time where someone close to you was sick? This was a difficult time for her and she worried about her husband and his health.



She created this artwork using symbols to show her experience with her husband's illness and how she had to take care of him. She shows a portrait of herself holding her husband on a boat. They are surrounded by animals and other human like figures.

She compared this experience of caring for her husband during his illness to a "journey". What is a journey? Have you taken an important journey before? How do you think she is showing a journey in her artwork?

**There is a half-man half-zebra in this artwork! There are other animals in this artwork too.**

Selma Bortner uses animals to tell stories in her artwork. They are used as symbols. The animals, such as the snake and the wolf, have been used in her other artworks, including *Aida and the Mirror*, which you can see on the Bucks County Artists Database at [www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org). Selma uses the snake and the wolf to symbolize disease and illness. What do you think the zebra and peacock symbolize?

Look where the animals are placed in the artwork. On the right side of the artwork you can find the wolf and the snake, on the left, you can find the peacock and the zebra man. What else can you find on both of these sides of the artwork? What do you think they might mean?

Other objects in this artwork also are used as symbols, including the boat and the people.

**There are lots of different kinds of lines in this artwork.**

Selma uses her carving tools to create different kinds of lines in her artwork. Some of these lines are straight, curved, jagged, and swirling. These different kinds of lines create different visual textures on the surface of the animals, the water, the boat, and the various objects.

Notice the lines in the foreground compared to the background. How are they different? Look at the lines on the left side of the artwork compared to the right side. How are they different? How does she use the lines to create lightness and darkness in this artwork?

**Why is there a boat in this artwork?**

At first glance, *The Journey* seems to be a narrative work of art about a fantastic legend or myth. The boat is a bold symbol of the journey Selma Bortner and her husband took together while he was battling his heart bypass surgery. "Riding together in a boat, Ms. Bortner holds her spouse, who is depicted with an oversized heart, as the vessel seems to move from the dark of the right side toward the light on the left. This is a personal journey from illness to health, for her husband as well as herself. At the lower right are the artist's 'constant companions': the snake, representing her own bout with cancer, and the wolf, her fighting spirit to overcome the disease." Read more in the *New York Times* at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).



## Learn More

“Explore Selma’s Journey” in the activity below.

### ***The Journey* is a linoleum print that uses watercolor paint as accents. What is linoleum. Where does it come from?**

Linoleum was first made in England in 1863 and produced some ten years later in France. The word was coined using the latin words linum (linen) and oleum (oil). Linoleum is made of a layer of cork dust mixed with linseed oil, gum, and resin, the whole being compressed onto a piece of jute cloth. It is easier to carve than wood, and does not have the grain that wood blocks have. This made the design easier to complete.

### **If linoleum was first made in 1863, what was used before that time?**

The handiest material to use, and one that was everywhere was wood! Wood block printing was used as early as 200 CE in China. The blocks were carved with designs and covered with ink to print. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, entire books (short ones) were printed this way, since it was cheaper than using moveable type. The simplest forms of wood block printing uses only one color. To add more colors, you need to decide which method you are going to use. The first one is called a reduction print .The artist must carve away each section as a new color is added. This means she must make all the copies of the first image that she will want. Then she must carve the second image into the remainder of the same block, apply the second color and print over the impressions of the first step. The artist needs to repeat this process for each color. Another way to make a wood block print is to make a block for each section that has a separate color. You must be careful to match the areas of color just right.

### **I’ve seen prints with numbers on them. What do the numbers mean?**

Numbers on prints can be very tricky. The numbers mean that the print is a limited edition: only a certain number of prints are being made by the artist. There should be two numbers on a limited edition print. The last number is the total number of prints. The first number is the order that the prints were numbered by the artist. Usually artists number prints in the order that they were made. Once in a while, the prints are numbered in the order that the artist thinks are the colors are the best. A print that is numbered 26/250 would be the twenty-sixth print of an edition of 250 prints.

### **Make a print of your own.**

You might want to first try making a print with some easier to use materials. Watch a video at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). Once you are really good at the simple process, you might want to try using linoleum. Learn how at [www.princetonol.com](http://www.princetonol.com).

## Related Images

Albrecht Durer was a distinct and gifted German artist of the Renaissance period who mastered the art of the woodcut, a precursor to the linoleum print. Learn more about his masterpiece, *The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* created in 1497-1498. It is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).



The Boston Museum of Fine Arts collection of Japanese woodblock prints, called Ukiyo-e, is the largest and finest outside Japan. Learn more about their collection at [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org).

David Preston is a contemporary Australian artist who uses linoleum prints as his primary medium. Look at his landscapes, still lifes and portraits at Arts Connect, [www.artsconnect.com.au](http://www.artsconnect.com.au).

## Related Links

In *The Journey*, Selma Bortner uses fantastic images of people, animals and monsters at sea to tell a story about her husband's battle with heart disease and her own battle with breast cancer. As you know, these diseases afflict people of all ages around the world, and every day people in the medical research profession are battling to find cures. By hosting a lemonade stand, running a race, or selling hand made linoleum cut note cards at a school fair, you can help one of these organizations:

Website of the American Association for Cancer Research. This Foundation directly funds cancer research, so helping them would involve creating an event of your own, and sending in a donation at [www.aacr.org](http://www.aacr.org).

Get involved! Learn to “fight childhood cancer one cup at a time” by hosting an Alex's Lemonade Stand at [www.alexlemonade.org](http://www.alexlemonade.org).

Learn more about the American Heart Association, which supports research, education, and community programs related to heart health and heart disease at [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org).

Learn more about the American Cancer Society on your own. Some of their programs include Relay for life, Daffodil Days, coaches Against Cancer, and Making Strides Against Breast Cancer. You could also host an event of your own, and make a donation to this organization at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

