

*A Common Tongue* for a Divisive Time:  
An Analysis of John Buck's Symbols

Danielle Turner

August 20th, 2018  
ARTZ 498 01: Internship  
Missoula Art Museum

Modern technology delivers news to screens around the world. Relentlessly stories seemingly develop at an ever accelerating rate to beleaguered observers. Faced with constant the constant availability of information, contemporary artists find a muse in the evening news now more than ever. John Buck is one such artist, the sculptor-cum-printmaker holding a sustained interest in translating headlines, history, and societal issues into works with enigmatic symbolism. Most often employing this method directly in his woodblock prints, time has rendered a print such as *A Common Tongue* (1992) prophetic (fig. 1). This signature large format image depicts black and blue snakes twined together centrally atop a warm gradient and finely detailed background drawings. Reacting to great upheaval in normal international relationships in the early 1990s, *A Common Tongue's* observations endure and evolve for contemporary viewers with startling relevance. The longevity of this work, best read in the context of its time, speaks to Buck's skill and the prominence his work has risen to in contemporary art.

Life began for the future artist in Ames, Iowa, in 1946. Buck grew up watching his father, himself once holding aspirations of being an artist, whittle a variety of things from wood.<sup>1</sup> No doubt Buck was ingrained with an appreciation for craftsmanship and an inclination to create three-dimensional work. Leaving Iowa to pursue aspirations of producing art, Buck earned his BFA in 1968 at the nearby Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design in Kansas City, MO. Exploring sculpture predominantly in his early career, Buck continued into postgraduate work in 1971 at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. After a period at Skowhegan Buck transitioned to University of California, Davis, studying under famed ceramic sculptor Robert Arneson.

---

<sup>1</sup> Elenor Heartney, Bud Shark, and John Yau, *John Buck: Iconography*, (University of Washington Press, 2008), 12.

Recently coming into his own at UC Davis, Arneson was a sought-after professor. Spurning Abstract Expressionism with like-minded colleagues at Davis, creating work with irreverent flair. This playful work came to be known as Funk Art for its technically unrefined and edgy appearance. Under Arneson's instruction, Buck could have tapped into current events with an awareness of history to inform his work thematically.

During the year of Buck's enrollment, Arneson had recently returned from sabbatical and began feverishly exploring self-portraiture. Many of these works explored classical art traditions with the same disregard for institutional propriety of his Funk sculptures.<sup>2</sup> Buck will later pay homage to this body of work by Arneson in the sculpture *A Captured Likeness* (2001). A chiseled wooden base supports a glass jar head full of wooden small symbols and totems, referencing standard classical busts. The objects, possibly representing the jumbled thoughts of the subject, question the classical importance of rendering ideal over the individual features. Director and Curator of the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art Lisa Tesner asserts that Buck enjoys the movement of the sculpture remixing the contents of his sculpture. "Buck likes the fact that the carvings within the jar are loose and therefore move and readjust as the sculpture is moved about, presenting a composition that is always changing a visualization, perhaps, of thought jostling about in one's mind."<sup>3</sup> She also notes, "Buck adds the inability to pin down the composition is metaphoric of Arneson's famous mercurial temperament."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> David Benezra, *Robert Arneson: A Retrospective*, (Des Moines Art Center, 1985), 29-34.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Tesner, Kenneth Wells, and John Yau, *John Buck*, (East of Borneo, 2014), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Tesner, Wells, and Yau, *John Buck*, 29, 43.

At UC Davis Buck met his future wife, fellow sculptor Deborah Butterfield, and graduated with his MFA in 1972. Having worked as a teaching assistant during his formative period at Davis, Buck moved on to teach at the Gloucestershire College of Art and Design in Cheltenham, England in 1972-1973, followed by teaching positions and residencies at Mira Costa College, University of Cincinnati, and Humboldt State. In 1976, Buck moved to Bozeman, MT to work as a professor of sculpture at Montana State University until 1990.<sup>5</sup>

Here he settled with Butterfield and later engaged in a migratory lifestyle, splitting their time between homes in Montana and Hawaii. These homes in two iconic American landscapes play an important role in Buck's later work.

After losing access to the university infrastructure required to do the kind of metalworking he pursued in school, Buck began using wood out of necessity.<sup>6</sup> It wasn't long after this switch that Buck began printmaking in addition to his sculptural work. His interest was piqued on a trip to China in 1981, when he witnessed a craftsman in Xi'an create a hand rubbed print from a large stone.<sup>7</sup> Seeing this process in action, Buck returned to the United States with a desire to begin his own work in printmaking. At first, Buck depended on Bud Shark, a master printer based at Sharks Inks in Colorado, to realize his prints on paper. Recently, Buck created his own printmaking studio in Bozeman to have more control over the creative flow of his works.

---

<sup>5</sup> John Buck, "John Buck Biography" (Imago Galleries, 2018), [www.imagogalleries.com/bios/John\\_Buck\\_Biography.pdf](http://www.imagogalleries.com/bios/John_Buck_Biography.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Corey Jones, "John Buck's Massive Wood Sculptures Move and Mystify," [www.cpr.org/news/story/john-bucks-massive-wood-sculptures-move-and-mystify](http://www.cpr.org/news/story/john-bucks-massive-wood-sculptures-move-and-mystify). August 6, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Tesner, Wells, and Yau, *John Buck*, 33.

Starting with a large block of wood, Buck carefully carves the central image, a compositional hallmark of his printmaking. Next, Buck intuitively draws into the block with only a ballpoint pen to make his layered background. Leaving a consistent fine line quality, this approach balances the dominance of the central image with phrenic energy and cryptic symbology. When the image is complete, the block is cut apart to ink each section, which achieves the desired hues without multiple printing passes. The pieces are reassembled like a puzzle to pull a single print from the surface. *A Common Tongue* was made in Buck's jigsaw manner during a period of time Buck was reacting to world events in his works.<sup>8</sup>

*A Common Tongue* stands at a massive 62 x 36 1/2 inches in eight colors forming a warm and cool contrast between background and foreground elements. In the center, spanning nearly the full length of the print, two snakes twist together four times, forming three rings between them. The snake on the left is colored black, the one to the right a dark blue; their slithery bodies are described with thick white lines. Behind this simple image is a background roiling with white lines of fine quality. Transitioning in a gradient from top to bottom, the hues shift from orange to red to maroon. The color and detail of the background contrast with the central figure of the snakes. The line work describes a grafittied brick wall pattern interspersed with references to international politics.

Most of these elements are nearly equal in size, zigzagging their way down the image. In the upper left corner, a globe in a cage is flanked to the right by a cauldron filled with three flags on their poles. Beneath this pot, flames surround a skeletal Uncle Sam figure, smoking and

---

<sup>8</sup> Linda Tesner, *John Buck: Recent Sculptures and Woodblock Prints*, (Lewis and Clark College, 1999), 11.

blowing a cloud across the image to form a chain circle around a castle with parapets distinctive of certain regions. Below this castle sits an atomic symbol at the end of a railroad track disappearing into the distance.

The track recedes to a vanishing point forming the top of a five pointed star containing a sickle with sharp angular lines between the blade and handle. Behind the central serpents, two hands reach toward each other above a cropped Washington Monument and a geometric figure joined by angular lines similar to that at the left, which fade back into the brickwork near the bottom right.

Great works in art history depicting catalyzing moments are best viewed with an understanding of the time in which they were made and for whom they were intended. Without this framework, historical images become mystifying and the significance of symbols and compositional choices lost on the collective conscience of modern viewers. For instance, Picasso's relatively recent painting, *Guernica* (1937), lacks its full poignance if not examined through the lens of the Spanish Civil War prompting Nazi Germany's reprehensible bombing of citizens in Guernica, Spain. Buck's prints are no exception to this rule. Looking at headlines concurrent with *A Common Tongue*'s making give insight to much of the cryptic imagery.

The early 1990s were rife with change, upheaval, and war for the world political stage. The Berlin Wall had fallen, Bush and Gorbachev agreed for the first time to reduce existing stock piles of nuclear weapons in the START Treaty of 1991, and the Soviet Union faced its collapse after a period of intense diplomacy marking the end of the Cold War with the United States. Brutal fighting in the Gulf War and the Madrid Conference that followed also greatly involved the U.S. These events would have dominated the headlines Buck saw through 1992.

A print called *The Times* (1991), made while the chaos was unfurling, features a heap of rolled newspapers ablaze on top of a dark background with a bleak repetition of deaths-head hawkmoths contrasting with the fire they circle (fig. 2). World news was on Buck's mind as he retired from teaching and fully turned his attention to his art practice, he reacted to world events in his work.<sup>9</sup>

Another piece in this period seems to act as a counterweight to *A Common Tongue* and underscore Buck's interest in the origin stories of miscommunication. *The Language of the Times* (1990) centrally features the Tower of Babel (fig. 3). The Tower was created by man's arrogance to reach Heaven but God cast it down, striking the men to speak in different tongues. Both prints are gridded with symbols that compose Buck's visual lexicon. *A Common Tongue's* symbols of Russia, the Middle East, and the United States speak to the conflicts dividing people of the time. The title, as well as images, seem to represent the desire to connect to each other's universal humanity. The hands reaching towards each other motion to a desire to understand despite the forces that divide.

The snakes dominating most of the composition tend to mean something dangerous or evil to most modern viewers. Wise sayings refer to liars as snakes in the grass, or of speaking with a forked tongue, as when the snake tempted Eve in Eden. With these connotations serpents may be associated with politicians or leaders on the world stage, forging international deals conjures visions of a pit of snakes.

---

<sup>9</sup> Linda Tesner, *John Buck: Recent Sculptures and Woodblock Prints*, (Lewis and Clark College, 1999), 11.

The arrangement of the snakes in *A Common Tongue* is familiar to many viewers. The way the snakes twist references the emblem American medical community uses as its symbol, the caduceus (fig.4). This symbol, however, was itself an ironic miscommunication. The caduceus was the staff used by the Greek god Hermes, a messenger of Olympus, to convey communications quickly. In 1902 a Captain in the US Army, recommending an official symbol for the medical corps, mistook the caduceus for the Rod of Asclepius.<sup>10</sup> Already used by European medics, the Rod of Asclepius is a single coiled snake associated with the Greek mythological healer Asclepius (fig. 5). In the past, snakes were known also for their renewal and knowledge, and these symbols were important to the medical community that has long tried to understand the practice of physicians worldwide. This simple misidentification speaks to the larger issue of understanding actual languages and symbols from across the globe and across time. Medicine has long had its roots in Latin, once a common tongue to communicate discoveries but now a dead language that would not evolve over time.

In the early 1990s a monumental advancement created a new common language and a common way to communicate it around the world. The World Wide Web became available to the public on August 6th, 1991. Using its own universal language of coding, this technology made colossal impacts in daily life and society as a whole. In Buck's print the hands reaching towards each other are surrounded with dense rows of parallel lines. Suggesting speed, these marks could be indicative of this monumental change in communications. Bearing in mind the original incarnation of the internet was ARPANET, created for defense purposes out of Cold

---

<sup>10</sup>Anil Shetty, Shraddha Shetty, and Oliver Dsouza, "Medical Symbols in Practice: Myth vs Mythology" August 2014.



War fears that missile strikes could wipe out centralized information, the symbols composing the background of the print are decentralized as well, dispersing elements as the internet disseminated data.

*A Common Tongue* is rife with symbols that Buck uses to refer to the recently collapsed Soviet Union and ending of the Cold War. The brick wall motif grounding negative space in the background and symbols appearing through the surface are direct references to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The hammer and sickle, Communism's insignia, appears throughout the composition atop a flag pole and, in the bottom left corner, it is severed by angular lines. The angular lines appear to form the body of a man, representative of the people who composed the Soviet Union moving towards the future. The star encircling the sickle turns into a track leading towards an atomic symbol, referencing the START Treaty that was agreed to just as the USSR crumbled. An iconic Russian onion dome tops one of the parapets in the castle illustration, joined by western- and Middle Eastern-styled towers.

The Middle East is touched on in the background castle image. The skeletal Uncle Sam is a source of fire under a cauldron serving as a melting pot of nations, and he blows smoke to create the castle image. These representations point to the United States role as an aggressor and source of peace talks and treaties. The image imparts little faith in the promises of Washington, as the promises made were not kept.

The small cage at the bottom right is joined to the Washington Monument by another angular figure, just as the sickle figure was the bottom left, is perhaps the murkiest of Buck's symbols. The unassuming drawing could be read simply as a schematic for a missile representative of the START Treaty. However, other Buck works, as well as his past experiences

suggest this could be his personal symbol for a gibbet.

Gibbeting, also referred to as hanging in chains, was the practice of indefinitely displaying criminals corpses after execution in the United Kingdom. As a result of the Murder Act of 1752, those executed only had two destinations: the dissection table or the gibbet. The gibbet served as a ghastly warning of punishment that endured indefinitely, to the point the gibbet's occupant was only a skeleton.<sup>11</sup>

The tapered form Buck employs is one of many forms that gibbets took (fig. 6). Buck also illustrates a human cage as the central figure in the aptly named piece *Prisoner* (1987) (fig. 7). In *Language of the Times*, the symbol is presented as a small part of the whole, with a skull hovering close by in the bottom right square. Recurrences of gibbets throughout Buck's work may stem from Buck's time teaching in Cheltenham, England, approximately 20 miles west of five gibbet sites from the mid to late 1700s.<sup>12</sup> These ghoulish historical remnants, towering 20 feet into the air, were in Buck's physical and cultural periphery. Reading Buck's imagery with a historical lens seems to point to all of those who have suffered as prisoners under these various political regimes.

Buck's characters at play in *A Common Tongue* are dominating headlines today with surreal accuracy. Boris Yeltsin led Russia after the fall of the USSR, and his successor, ex KGB Vladimir Putin, has been accused of interfering with the 2016 US elections through use of the internet to inflame political divides. The President of the United States has broken all norms of communication via off -the-cuff Tweets, spurning allies, embracing enemies, and accusing those

---

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Tarlow and Zoe Dyndor, "Gibbeting." [www.criminalcorpses.com/gibbeting](http://www.criminalcorpses.com/gibbeting)

<sup>12</sup> Tarlow and Dyndor, "Gibbeting Sites 1752-1834."

who report on the actions of the current administration of producing “fake news.” For the Middle East, chaos hasn’t eased, only intensified, whether it's the devastating war in Syria or Israel’s violent expansion for settlements. The only difference from the time *A Common Tongue* was created to today is the rate at which technology allows people to receive news. The common tongue of the internet has turned itself into a pit of snakes, once a decentralized platform to protect democratic freedom. When viewing *A Common Tongue* in this context, symbols evolve for contemporary viewers, but Buck’s historical observations are relevant and pointing to the roots of the issues faced today. Buck’s print avoids becoming stuck in a single period of history, speaking to his skill as a visual artist fluent in symbolism.

Earning his place as a printmaker and sculptor of renown, Buck’s prolific bodies of work are featured in prestigious collections with other titans of the art world. His work is featured in collections from coast to coast, from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the Seattle Art Museum in Washington, and 58 public institutions in between. Maintaining less-popular ways of art making in spite of trends towards new frontiers of aesthetics and media, the strength of Buck’s carving and representational work does not falter.

Forging his own path through the art world, Buck creates work that stands the test of time. *A Common Tongue* is still engaging for viewers who share an awareness of current events and history’s connections. Whether woodblock prints, rich with symbols for viewers to decipher, or kinetic wooden sculptures clacking animated stories, Buck’s work will remain relevant for generations to come.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1. Buck, John, *A Common Tongue*, 1992, woodblock print, 62 x 36 1/2 inches, Missoula Art Museum Collection, Gift of Miriam Sample, 2005. Accessed August 21st, 2018.  
<http://missoulaartmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/0345E6F3-2DEB-46B0A73A1-1619049554603>



Fig. 2. Buck, John, *The Times*, 1991, woodblock print, 53 1/2 x 36 1/4 inches. Sharks Ink's, Lyons, Colorado, Accessed August 21st, 2018. <https://sharksink.com/print/the-times/>



Fig. 3. Buck, John, *The Language of the Times*, 1990, woodblock print, 80 x 52 inches, 2018. Accessed August, 21st, 2018. <http://tandempress.wisc.edu/project/john-buck/>



Fig. 4 (left). Caduceus. Shetty, Anil, Shraddha Shetty, and Oliver Dsouza. "Medical Symbols in Practice: Myth vs Mythology." National Center for Biotechnology, U.S. National Library of Medicine, (Aug. 2014) Accessed August, 21st, 2018. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4190767/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4190767/)

Fig. 5 (right). Rod of Aesclepius. Shetty, Anil, Shraddha Shetty, and Oliver Dsouza. "Medical Symbols in Practice: Myth vs Mythology." National Center for Biotechnology, U.S. National Library of Medicine, (Aug. 2014) Accessed August, 21st, 2018. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4190767/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4190767/)



Fig. 6. Gibbet. Ingers, "A cage....." *Trip Advisor*, March 19th, 2018, Accessed August, 21st, 2018. [https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g188671-d7702654-i308305594-Torture Museum Oude SteenBruges West Flanders Province.html](https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g188671-d7702654-i308305594-Torture%20Museum%20Oude%20SteenBruges%20West%20Flanders%20Province.html)





Fig. 7. Buck, John, *Prisoner*, 1987, woodblock print, 74 x 37 inches, Artnet, Accessed August 21st, 2018, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/john-buck/prisoner-Ofao7NvFpU4UAMDaVQplZA2>

## Bibliography

- Benezra, Neal David. *Robert Arneson: a Retrospective*. Des Moines Art Center, 1985.
- Buck, John. "John Buck Biography." Imago Galleries, 2018, [www.imagogalleries.com/bios/John\\_Buck\\_Biography.pdf](http://www.imagogalleries.com/bios/John_Buck_Biography.pdf). (Accessed July 22, 2018).
- Heartney, Elenor, Bud Shark, and John Yau. *John Buck: Iconography*. University of Washington Press, 2008.
- Jones, Corey H. "John Buck's Massive Wood Sculptures Move And Mystify." Colorado Public Radio, NPR, 6 Aug. 2015, [www.cpr.org/news/story/john-bucks-massive-wood-sculptures-move-and-mystify](http://www.cpr.org/news/story/john-bucks-massive-wood-sculptures-move-and-mystify). (Accessed June 30, 2018).
- Shetty, Anil, Shraddha Shetty, and Oliver Dsouza. "Medical Symbols in Practice: Myth vs Mythology." National Center for Biotechnology, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Aug. 2014, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4190767/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4190767/). (Accessed July 5, 2018).
- Tarlow, Sarah, and Zoe Dyndor. "Gibbeting." HARNESSING THE POWER OF THE CRIMINAL CORPSE, Wellcome Trust, 2016, [www.criminalcorpses.com/gibbeting/](http://www.criminalcorpses.com/gibbeting/). (Accessed June 25, 2018).
- Tesner, Linda, Kenneth Wells, and John Yau. *John Buck*. East of Borneo, 2014.
- Tesner Linda. *John Buck: Recent Sculptures and Woodblock Prints*. Lewis and Clark College, 1999.