

= Prelude to a Million Years =

Prelude to a Million Years : A Book of Wood Engravings is a 1933 wordless novel consisting of thirty wood engravings by American artist Lynd Ward ( 1905 ? 1985 ) . It was the fourth of Ward 's six wordless novels , a genre Ward discovered while studying wood engraving in Europe , and delved into under the influence of the works of Frans Masereel and Otto Nückel . The symbol @-@ rich story tells of a sculptor who , in his quest for ideal beauty , neglects the reality of the struggles of his neighbors in the depths of the Great Depression . The engravings are done in a softer Art Deco style in contrast to the German Expressionism @-@ influenced artwork of Ward 's earlier works .

= = Background = =

Lynd Ward ( 1905 ? 1985 ) was a son of Methodist minister and social activist Harry F. Ward ( 1873 ? 1966 ) . Throughout his career the younger Ward displayed in his work the influence of his father 's interest in social injustice . Ward married writer May McNeer in 1926 and the couple left for Europe , where Ward spent a year studying wood engraving in Leipzig , Germany . There he encountered German Expressionist art and read the wordless novel The Sun ( 1919 ) by Flemish woodcut artist Frans Masereel ( 1889 ? 1972 ) .

Ward returned to the United States and freelanced his illustrations . In 1929 , he came across German artist Otto Nückel 's wordless novel Destiny ( 1926 ) in New York City . The work inspired Ward to create a wordless novel of his own , Gods ' Man ( 1929 ) , which he followed with Madman 's Drum ( 1930 ) and Wild Pilgrimage ( 1932 ) . In December 1931 , Ward and McNeer were among the nine cofounders of Equinox Cooperative Press , dedicated to a hands @-@ on approach to bookmaking .

= = Content and style = =

The book opens with a dream sequence in which a sculptor worships before a flower symbolizing beauty . The sculptor struggles to capture his vision of beauty in a sculpture of an idealized woman . In his artistic pursuits he neglects the reality around him and the toll the Depression of the 1930s has taken on the people whose paths he crosses ? a neighbor who is beaten by her husband , violent social protest , jingoistic nationalists , and drunkenness . He is engulfed in flames when he returns to his studio trying to flee it all .

Ward returns to the theme of an artist in a decaying culture that he explored in his first wordless novel , Gods ' Man ( 1929 ) , and intended the work as a commentary on how the Depression that had colored outlooks since Gods ' Man ; headlines declaring endless layoffs , strikes , lock @-@ outs , and political spin . To Ward , " Inevitably a process of polarization of the citizenry was set in motion " .

The style has evolved from the angular German Expressionism of Ward 's earlier books to a softer Art Deco one . He uses symbols throughout the book , such as the spinning of a spiderweb to indicate the passage of time , a fire hydrant echoing the emotions of a street riot , towering city buildings for capitalism , and flags for patriotism . The most prominent symbol is a flower , representing the artist 's distracted quest for beauty while he remains indifferent to the turmoil around him .

= = Production , publication , and reception = =

Ward made thirty wood engravings for the book , ranging in size from 5 × 3 inches ( 12 @.@ 7 × 7 @.@ 6 cm ) to 5 1 ? 4 × 3 1 ? 4 inches ( 13 @.@ 3 × 8 @.@ 3 cm ) . It was published in 1933 by the Equinox Cooperative Press , a bookmaking cooperative that Ward had cofounded . The first edition was the third book Equinox published . It was limited to 920 copies and printed from the original woodblocks . It was hand @-@ bound in French folds and a gold foil spine . Modestly priced , it sold well and brought in revenue to sustain Equinox 's other book projects .

Reception was mixed . Reviewer E. L. Tinker praised Ward 's visual mastery , but denigrated Ward 's repetition of plot ? the protagonist 's " revolt against the injustices of society his preoccupation with sex , his self @-@ loathing after he has succumbed to the scarlet woman , and his final disillusionment " . Wood engraver John DePol considered Prelude to a Million Years his favorite of Ward 's wordless novels .