The year was 1916. The place—Cleveland, Ohio. Richard Laukhuff issued an invitation to visit his new store at No. 40 Taylor Arcade where, he promised, one could find “unusual books, pictures, and other things...the noteworthy in literature and art from this country and abroad...to keep in touch with modern movements in the literary and artistic world...to obtain any book or work of art you may desire.”

Who was Richard Laukhuff? What was the early twentieth century cultural context that gave rise to Laukhuff’s bookstore? How did it achieve landmark status in Cleveland’s literary and artistic history?

Richard Laukhuff was born in 1875 in the southern German village of Pfedelbach. His father, a descendant of a long line of organ builders, bought a small castle in the neighboring town of Weikersheim, Baden Wurttemberg. Here, he prospered in his trade as an organ-maker and the family enjoyed a rich cultural life immersed in the arts, literature and music. Richard was a boy when his father died. His uncles took over the business and Richard apprenticed as an organ-maker. At 21, his apprenticeship completed, Richard Laukhuff, now a journeyman organ builder, worked in Italy for three years and then in France for three more years.

In 1902, at age 27, Richard Laukhuff emigrated to the United States and Salem, Ohio, where his first job was in an organ factory. Dissatisfied with the quality of the product as compared with European standards, Richard Laukhuff moved to Cleveland. He found a job with the H. Black Company, a manufacturer of women’s wear. Possessed of strong organizational and business skills, he soon rose to factory manager.

In 1916, World War I was underway when Laukhuff lost his job at the H. Black Company, an unwitting victim of anti-German sentiment. Fearful about securing employment that would utilize his skills and knowledge, he decided to open a bookstore. Always interested in books, he had at that time a collection of about 6,000 volumes, most of them purchased when he was in Germany, Italy and France. The content of the collection was based in the humanities, literature, arts, and music. Also included were titles related to books and printing, most of them uncommon in this country. This collection served as the nucleus of his opening-day stock. Most of the titles were in German and French, languages in which Laukhuff was fluent. Among Cleveland’s cosmopolitan population, he found a small but significant market for books in foreign languages.
As his stock attracted interest, he was able to buy more stock and withdraw those titles that remained of his own collection. At first he planned to sell only Continental literature, but he soon felt it was important to support contemporary writers. Laukhuff, who knew the work in the original, could be counted on to solve problems created by a translation or to summarize untranslated work. He felt Cleveland could support a bookstore that handled fine books, which otherwise had to be ordered from New York.

Although never a leading literary center, Cleveland enjoyed a full and active literary life. It had been traditionally well served by its bookstores and public library, and viewed with high regard as a retail market among publishers. During the first half of the twentieth century, the major bookstores gave way to a proliferation of smaller, more diverse stores. Prominent among them was Laukhuff’s. Considered very progressive, it offered avant-garde literature, photographs, and the works of local artists. Artists and theater people relied on Laukhuff’s for information on the latest developments in art and theater in Europe.

Germans were a presence in Cleveland’s cultural life, especially in the field of art. The Cleveland Art Club, also known as the Old Bohemians, was founded in 1876 and provided the city with its first nucleus of notable artists, most of them—such as Frederick C. Gottwald, Otto Bacher and Max Bohm—were the sons of German immigrants. Many had trained abroad, primarily at the art schools in Munich and Düsseldorf. A succeeding generation of artists of German descent dominated the city’s art life until World War II. When the Kokoon Arts Club was founded in 1911, eleven of its thirteen charter members were of German descent. Many from this generation of artists also received their instruction abroad, and helped make Cleveland a leading center of art activity during the 1920s.

Laukhuff’s bookstore opened in 1916 at 40 Taylor Arcade (646 Euclid Avenue). Built by the William Taylor & Son Company Department Store (630 Euclid Avenue), located between East Sixth Street and East Ninth Street on Euclid Avenue’s south side, the arcade, adjacent to the store’s east side, connected Euclid Avenue and Prospect Avenue. The bookshop was the size of a small store, one of many rented to various tradesmen. Laukhuff’s had a very large window across the whole front; its entrance was to the right. Working at his side was Richard’s wife, Hermine, a German émigré, whom he met here. Their marriage was delayed when Hermine, on a visit to Germany to prepare for her wedding, was detained by the outbreak of World War I.

Characterized as “a store that began as a connoisseur’s library” Laukhuff sold only books he could respect and rigorously excluded popular fiction and magazines. There were collections in all fields of the humanities and liberal arts and a good selection of “little” magazines. There were also exhibitions of the work of important local artists, such as Henry Keller, Charles Burchfield, William Sommer and William Zorach. To honor their patron,
William Sommer created a poster for Laukhuff’s that advertised the bookstore. William Lescaze designed a bookmark that was included with each purchase which read “Richard Laukhuff, 40 Taylor Arcade—Only Good Books.”

Widely read in philosophy, history and politics and deeply interested in art, music, theater and dance, Laukhuff created the bookstore in his own image. He stocked dozens of hard-to-find-literary magazines, imported books by the great European thinkers of the time and magazines filled with examples of German expressionist art, displayed prints and paintings and made the place a forum for the free discussion of new ideas. Art students and professors found inspiration in the huge selection of German art prints. Gerlach’s Judengruberei series published in Vienna between 1910 and 1920 stimulated those seeking ideas for costumes and posters for the annual Kokoon Club Bal Masque. Laukhuff regulars, painter Charles Burchfield and architect William Lescaze were impressed and influenced by the illustrators in the Gerlach series.

Laukhuff was described as “an enthusiastic reader, a man in love with ideas.” The bookstore functioned as an informal educational institution where “at any time of day one could drop in on what became a kind of continuing seminar. The chairs at the back of the store were always occupied, though the occupants varied from hour to hour. Here literature became a living force as ideas were debated and styles of writers analyzed.”

One patron, artist and advertising director, Philip Kaplan in his essay “The Making of a Collector: Laukhuff’s of Cleveland” recalled his introduction to the bookstore and its proprietor:

Cleveland in the early 1920s was a cultural city, but I was not aware of it. The day I walked into Richard Laukhuff’s book store at 40 Taylor Arcade, culture slapped me in the face and brought me into this world a second time.

I was all of nineteen then, and I knew very little about the world of Cleveland and its people. I was a Russian immigrant and had been in America less than a dozen years. After my eighth grade education I worked at various office jobs until I settled for the one I liked.

That day in spring, I was on my lunch hour and was browsing thru the Arcade when I was attracted to an unusual display of books and color prints. It took a lot of courage for me to enter a shop where I was the only customer. My uneducated eye roamed the store quickly. I was not sure why I was there.

Suddenly, a tall, heavily-built man in shirt sleeves and wearing a flowing bowtie came toward me. He did not ask me what I was looking for but eyed me suspiciously as he circled around me. (In later years, I watched him do the same thing to new customers,
usually driving them out of the store in a hurry.) Fortunately, I spied a large collection of magazines in the rear of the shop and made a dash for them. The periodicals were neatly piled in small stacks that included old numbers as well as new ones. I started to thumb my way through issues of Little Review, Broom, Liberator, Secession, and many other odd numbers. I kept my eye on the man, too, whom I later came to know as Richard Laukhuff. I could see the amused look on his face as he watched me going through the periodicals.

I was impressionable. For reasons unknown to me at the time, the little magazines excited me and everything in them seemed to relate to me at once. In no time at all I paid for a dollar’s worth and headed for the door.

It was a week later that I came back to buy more of the little mags. I was fascinated by the art, typography, illustration. The strange man in the shop began to recognize me on my weekly visits. His stern face now had an easy smile, and he was curious enough to ask me what I had learned from the magazines that I had been buying. Laukhuff, a good student of human frailties recognized my limitation and, in a generous mood, he proceeded to give me my first liberal education on modern art and literature—and little magazines. That talk of his changed the course of my life.

Forty Taylor Arcade now became the center of my world. I was not the only one interested in the little mags. As each new issue arrived so would the small group of steady readers. Now, I too became a regular, meaning that I could be found at Laukhuff’s three or four times a week. As we gathered around the periodical stand we would have great discussions about the merit of the publications. Laukhuff played his part as moderator, teacher, professor and advisor. I, for one, digested everything along with my sandwich at these noon-time forums.¹⁰

Hart Crane, was 17 years old when Laukhuff’s opened in 1916. John Unterecker in Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane wrote:

He was at first a timid and later an enthusiastic member of the group of readers, writers, and artists who gathered there and was active in the back-of-the-store seminars. Here he would pore over the little magazines just in from Chicago and New York, studying them as possible markets for the poetry he was producing, and enthusiastically questioning Laukhuff about the great European writers to whom they were being introduced.¹¹

Richard Laukhuff’s Cleveland bookstore was an artistic and literary landmark of comparable importance as an institution to Alfred Stieglitz’s New York “291” Gallery. The proprietor was often an editor, exhibitor, and always a teacher.¹² Philip Kaplan described the
excitement of meeting Sherwood Anderson at Laukhuff’s “during his struggling days when he lived in Ohio.” When Langston Hughes visited, Kokoon Club member Kaplan tried to arrange an evening for him as a guest. To his chagrin, when fellow Club members learned the poet was black, he was rebuffed and refused entrance.

“But it was Hart Crane’s unexpected visits that caused the most excitement.” When visiting his family in Cleveland, Crane always stopped in at Laukhuff’s. A frequent subject of discussion at the store, his career was followed through publications in the “little” magazines. At Laukhuff’s, characterized as “the meeting place for Cleveland’s avant garde, Philip Kaplan explained:

...you would catch artist William Sommer on his lunch hour. Nibbling on a piece of cheese or an apple, he would open his little loose-leaf black notebook and show you his latest cubist salt-and-pepper-shaker drawings or would read aphorisms, similes, quotations and fragments from his favorites: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Ibsen and Spencer. When a small group gathered around him he would hold them spell-bound, as any great actor would, telling his most recent adventures in the arts, with the elements, or with the pigeons in Cleveland’s Public Square. He would pull out a long list of books that his friend Hart Crane had told him to read as soon as possible and he was running in all directions to catch up with the list.

Hart Crane was introduced to William Sommer by poet Samuel Loveman in the spring of 1921. Separated in age by a generation, the mutuality of intellectual interests in literature, music, athletics and alcohol, cemented a relationship that Crane wrote of to a friend:

I have run across an artist here whose work seems to carry the most astonishing marks of genius. A man of 55 or so—works in a lithograph factory—spent most of his life until the last seven years in the rut of conventional forms—liberated suddenly by sparks from Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso...I have taken it upon myself to send out some of his work for publication...

In the early 1900s Cleveland was stirring with creative activity. By 1916, it was the sixth largest city in America. An industrial center for the production of steel, automobiles and tools, it was expanding with the creation of bridges and transportation lines and commercial and residential structures. Culturally motivated Cleveland philanthropists channeled their civic pride toward the creation of the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Cleveland Orchestra. Theater enthusiasts formed the Cleveland Play House.

In 1916, the same year Laukhuff opened his bookstore, the Play House Company with its motto—“Art in Democracy”—was organized. Its stated purposes were to establish an art theater; to encourage native art in all its forms and native artists; and to cultivate the rich legacies in folk art of Cleveland’s cosmopolitan population. Richard Laukhuff played an
important role in the founding of the Cleveland Play House. The bookstore was a meeting place for actors, directors, stage designers, and playwrights who counted on Laukhuff’s for the latest developments in the European theaters. Tickets for performances were sold from his shop.

Raymond O’Neil, a drama and music critic for The Cleveland Leader and part of the Laukhuff scene was exploring new theater forms. Constructing a model stage, he created cardboard figures, and experimented with lighting to create shadowgraphs and accompanied their movements with music. In 1914, O’Neil went to Europe to study German, French and Russian theater. Upon his return, the next year, Charles and Minerva Brooks invited a group including Raymond O’Neil to discuss forming an Art Theatre. They proposed to undertake the study of folklore and the simple dramatic expression of the people as the first source of material for presentation using puppets, shadowgraphs, and performers. Raymond O’Neil was chosen Director.

In 1916, the season opened in a barn on the Francis E. Drury estate at East Eighty-Seventh and Euclid Avenue. The next year, 1917, The Play House moved to the former Cedar Avenue Church at the southwest corner of Cedar Avenue at East Seventy-Third Street where it remained for ten years.

In 1918, Richard Laukhuff, the personal choice of Director Raymond O’Neil, was elected to the Board of Directors and served until 1921. Habitues of Laukhuff’s were prominent among Play House lecturers, including Richard Laukhuff himself. Cleveland artists William Sommer, Henry Keller, Frank Wilcox, Charles Burchfield, August Biehle, William and Marguerite Zorach who exhibited at Laukhuff’s were offered another venue with the opening of the Play House Gallery. Artist/lithographer William Sommer created sets, costumes and announcements for a 1918 production of Everyman and the Dumb Messiah.

Recognizing Cleveland’s cosmopolitan groups and the wealth of divergent national art traditions, the theater sought to draw its activity from this population, to feature their folkways and art in exhibitions, concerts and plays.

In the fall of 1918, the same year in which Richard Laukhuff joined the board of directors, a play written by recent Hungarian émigré Joseph Remenyi entitled 30 Jefferson Arcade was presented by the Play House Company. Remenyi, the editor of a Hungarian newspaper and thoroughly familiar with Laukhuff’s bookstore, based the play’s title on the store’s 40 Taylor Arcade location. Written in the playwright’s native Hungarian, it was translated by Remenyi’s wife, Margrit, who then played the lead.16

In 1949, the Laukhuffs moved their bookstore a few doors west from the 40 Taylor Arcade location to the Euclid Arcade (510 Euclid Avenue). At Christmastime, in the front window of the shop at No. 36 Euclid Arcade, there appeared the brilliant cubist watercolor
designed and executed by William Sommer, extending greetings and beckoning Laukhuff’s patrons. For over 40 years, until his death on July 15, 1957, at 81, Richard Laukhuff served the cause of literature. A Cleveland Press editorial noted at the time of his death, “Nothing pleased him more than to have a customer express surprise at finding some obscure classic on his shelves,” to which he would lend his typical comment: “Why not? THIS is a BOOK store.”17

After Richard’s death, Hermine Laukhuff operated the store for a few more years and finally closed it. In 1960, 10,000 volumes were purchased from Mrs. Laukhuff by the Peninsula (Ohio) Library and Historical Society.18 Laukhuff’s personal books, the ones that he kept at home, were in Mrs. Laukhuff’s care for many years. When Philip Kaplan inquired about them, she indicated that she was prepared to sell some of them.19 Over a period of twenty years, Richard Laukhuff’s personal collection of books and art were thoughtfully and lovingly sold and given, celebrating a lifetime of friendship and affection documented in correspondence between Hermine Laukhuff and Philip Kaplan.

In closing, some observations are offered as “nota bene,” “epilogue” or “afterword.” While conducting this study I was caught up in the dynamics of the artistic and literary life that was Laukhuff’s; this is the stuff of drama and theater. When I learned that 30 Jefferson Arcade created by Joseph Remenyi in 1918 was based on Laukhuff’s 40 Taylor Arcade book store, I tried to secure the script at the archives at the Cleveland Play House but without result. I believe that it remains an exciting project for a rising playwright.

It was my good fortune to learn that the twenty-year correspondence between Hermine Laukhuff and Philip Kaplan over the sale of her husband’s library was housed at Kent State University Library Special Collections, Kent, Ohio. My access to the correspondence revealed that Hermine Laukhuff, companion to her husband in life and work, was a highly intelligent and knowledgeable woman. Her insights and observations shared with Philip Kaplan extend and deepen the saga of Laukhuff’s bookstore as an artistic and literary landmark. At the same time it documents a friendship that began when a young Philip Kaplan entered the portals of Richard Laukhuff’s bookstore in the 1920s and was carried forward with Hermine Laukhuff when both were in their later years. More than was possible to include as part of this presentation, it deserves and will receive a study of its own which I will pursue.

Finally, it seems curious to me that Richard Laukhuff, surrounded as he was by writers and artists, has been the subject for only one writer—Philip Kaplan—and to my knowledge only one artist—William Lescaze—who did a portrait. Yet recollections of Richard Laukhuff abound; his significance in the artistic and literary life of Cleveland is legendary. As one observed “the transaction between bookseller and customer was not primarily commercial; it was intellectual.”20 He had, in the words of another, succeeded in creating for Cleveland “an oasis of culture.”21
Endnotes


5. Duino; Kaplan, 121; 1916 Cleveland City Directory; Interview with Charles Donahue, Attorney and legal guardian for Hermine Laukhuff, 6 June 1995.

6. Unterecker, 47.


9. Unterecker, 47.


11. Unterecker, 47.


13. Kaplan, 123.


17. Unterecker, 47.

