



“Her insight into the deepest roots and purest meaning of the creative process was a gift she imparted to all who studied and worked with her.”

Mikhaïl Zakín

VISUAL ARTS FACULTY 1975 – 1990

She was raised and home-schooled by a great uncle who made violins and was a devout follower of Thoreau. She changed her name twice before marrying. For a time, she lived in Greenwich Village with an Italian sculptor 20 years her senior.

She became one of the first two women in America to build and fire a salt kiln, and she invented a highly versatile and durable clay called MZ. Such was the unconventional, trailblazing life of former Sarah Lawrence visual arts teacher Mikhaïl Zakín, who died September 9, 2012, at the age of 92.

Zakín—whose given name was Miriam Atkins—came from a prominent Russian Jewish immigrant family in Massachusetts. Her mother died when Zakín was young, and her uncle took her to live in his isolated hut, where he taught her violin and encouraged her to pursue stone sculpting and silversmithing.

She left home at 17. Unable to sell her sculpture and jewelry without a male intermediary, she changed her name to Mikhaïl. She lived independently in New York and Nantucket before marrying Gabriel Zakín, with whom she had three children.

Zakín studied sculpture at the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts and the Art Students League. When she met master potter Karen Karnes, who became her mentor, her life changed; she traded sculpture for pottery. Initially, Zakín created functional work on the wheel. Later, she explored hand-building, employing the force of trapped air in boxes, which morphed into larval and anthropomorphic forms. Sarah Lawrence colleague and friend Ursula Schneider (visual arts) calls her “a master in clay,” her works “forceful and delicate.”

In her memoir, *Clay Journey*, Zakín spoke of her love for teaching, saying she “came to feel it was easily as important, challenging, and fulfilling as working with clay.” She continued to commit herself to her artistic work,

so as to better understand her students’ creative struggles. “The students who came into my life,” she wrote, “enriched and renewed me with their growth and blossoming, as they found their own infinitely unique voices in the material we each loved.”

With Karnes, Zakín co-founded The Art School at Old Church, a cultural resource center in Demarest, New Jersey, in an abandoned building they turned into a thriving school and gallery. She loved travel and brought art students to Europe, Asia, and Mexico to work in each locale. She also spent several years in Korea, doing research, teaching, and making a documentary film.

Zakín was a guiding force in the visual arts program at Sarah Lawrence from 1975 to 1990. Students and colleagues alike say she conveyed complex concepts simply and offered keen insight into their work. Says artist and close friend

Orna Weinroth ’85, “She had such a discerning eye. She would tell you where you needed to go without any care about herself.” Michele Brody ’89 describes Zakín pushing her out of the nest: “She opened my eyes to expanding my horizons as an artist beyond the crafts medium of fiber and clay, to try out welding, sculpting, and woodworking.”

Zakín wrote, “In the ninth decade of my life there are still worlds to discover, still lessons to be learned from people and from clay.” Shortly thereafter, she was diagnosed with cancer and consciously embraced her life’s end.

Mikhaïl Zakín lived a vital and engaged life. Says colleague and friend Kris Phillips (visual arts), “She was an extraordinary artist and teacher; her insight into the deepest roots and purest meaning of the creative process was a gift she imparted to all who studied and worked with her.” —Gillian Gilman Cuff ’88



ABOVE: “METAMORPHIC FORM,” 1976. SALT-GLAZED STONEWARE, 4½ x 11 x 9 INCHES. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SLC ARCHIVES.