

A Novel Idea

One exhibit focuses not on a visual artist but a novelist, presenting Henry Miller's world.

By Agata Popęda

Magnus Torén has been in charge of the nonprofit Henry Miller Memorial Library in Big Sur since 1993. He is the one who chose treasures—letters, books, photos—for the *Garden of Earthly Delights: Henry Miller's Big Sur* exhibit, but he himself is “the chosen one” as the guardian of the Henry Miller Library. Maybe that's by cosmic necessity or, if you prefer, by “a rather extraordinary coincidence,” he says.

Torén left his native Sweden in August 1977 on a sailboat with a plan to sail the world with his friends. The book he took with him and read on the journey was *Colossus of Maroussi* by Henry Miller, written during Miller's travel to Greece in 1939, very different in tone from his other, more scandalous and more famous works. Neither the narrator (Miller in 1939) nor the reader (Torén in 1977) knew they were on the way to the place that would become their home: Big Sur.

From a perspective of time, Miller would often say in his letters that his

solitary life in Corfu prepared him for an even more isolated existence among the California redwoods he soon proclaimed as his paradise.

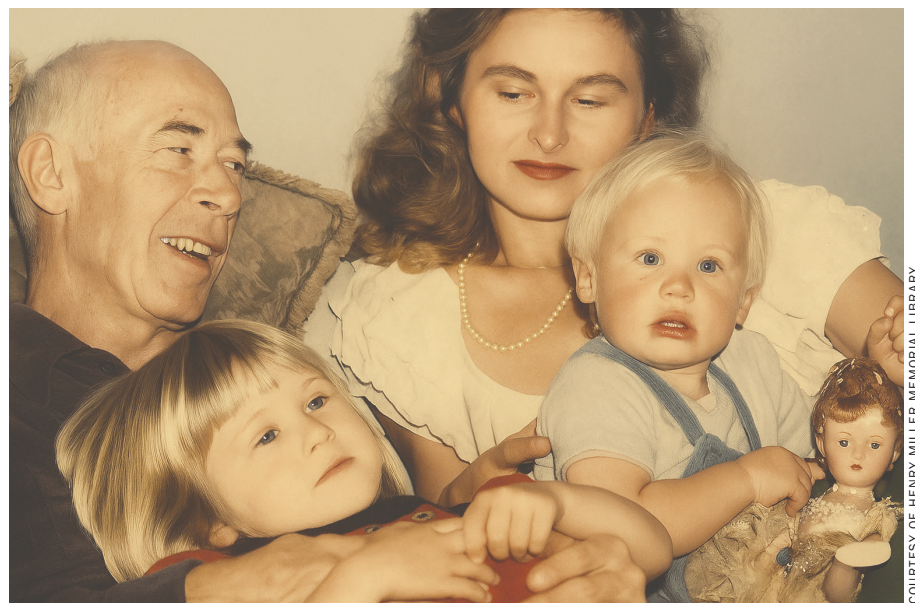
Weekly: Do you remember why you picked *Colossus* for that journey?

Torén: I don't. But I can say it's one of the most inspiring books of all of Henry's books, perfect at the commencement of a journey. It is very much about an immersion into another culture; he sings a love song to Greece.

When I was 16-17, I looked up to a group of older guys that I both admired and somewhat feared, and I remember that they were reading *The Tropic of Cancer*. And I remember trying to read those, but failed.

When you arrived in Big Sur, were you aware of that place being important to Miller?

Not in 1978, when I was here the first time, taking a break from the boat. But I came back in '84 and even before I met my wife, I was invited by Henry Miller's daughter to a party at Miller's house at Partington Ridge.



Henry Miller with his wife, Janina Lepska, and children Valentine and Tony, circa 1950. Before Miller made it as a commercially successful writer, he painted and sold watercolors to make a living.

COURTESY OF HENRY MILLER MEMORIAL LIBRARY

And then I just fell into the best job in Big Sur. I walked into the library one day and the man who worked there said: “I'm no longer going to do this.” And I said, “Who's gonna do it?” “Well, I don't know.” And I said, “I'll do it.” And essentially, that's what happened.

What was the image of Miller local people that knew him were passing to you?

People range in appreciation of Henry for different reasons. There are people who know him, and then people who know him only through gossip.

Some didn't appreciate the attention he was bringing to this fragile landscape that is constantly under threat from overuse, especially after his 1957 book, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymous Bosh*.

What happened when you started exploring Miller yourself?

My appreciation was growing, but it's not a binary situation. He was a multifaceted, fascinating individual. I appreciate his vitality, his curiosity and his generosity. Yes he had five wives, and yes, he begged for money but he would also be giving it away the next day to another artist in need. So he was really a beautiful man through and through.

Let's talk about the exhibit since you curated it, and you made the selection.

Initially, I thought it

Magnus Torén at his Partington Ridge home. As the guest curator of *Garden of Earthly Delights*, he selected letters, books and photos depicting Henry Miller's life. A reproduction of Miller's desk and typewriter are also displayed.

was going to be more about Henry's life. But then I thought it would be more interesting to present Henry in the context of his neighbors, the extraordinary community in which he lived. I mean, how many neighborhoods would contain such extraordinary individuals such as Henry Miller's neighborhood did?

I'm talking about Jaime de Angelo, Giles and Sheila Healey, Louisa Jenkins, Bob Nash, Maud Oakes and the Hopkins family. These are individual artists who were living in this neighborhood when Henry was here. Nicholas Roosevelt was his immediate neighbor, Theodore Roosevelt's cousin.

So that's a grab bag of his neighbors, and in the midst of all this is Henry, this incredibly broad-minded, curious person, sitting with his typewriter facing the wall, and writing.

What is your favorite artifact?

Painter Ephraim Doner and Henry met in Paris, and completely coincidentally, they end up living on the coast here, near each other. And Henry did a beautiful watercolor portrait of Ephraim, and that's one of my favorite items in the exhibit. Along with perhaps this sort of iconic first edition of *The Tropic of Cancer*—the very first book that Henry Miller got published, which launched his whole career as a writer.

One could argue that if *The Tropic of Cancer* had not been published, who knows what would have happened, because Henry was really at his wit's end at that time in Paris, and he had very little money, and nobody wanted to read what he wrote.

He said “to hell with everything, I'm going to get this book written.” And then he writes *The Tropic of Cancer*, and Anaïs Nin falls in love with both him and the book, and together they figure out how to get it published. And then, you know, the book causes a huge sensation, and the rest is history. ★



DANIEL DREIFUSS