

3 Connecticut Abstractionists

Sunday, September 20 - Sunday, December 6
Art Gallery

Reception: Sunday, September 20
5:30-7:30 p.m.

The three artists whose work is represented in this exhibit are Louis Schanker (1903-1981), painter; Rhys Caparn (b. 1909), sculptor; and Seymour Fogel (b. 1911), painter. These artists, who have been in the mainstream of the modern movement for the past five decades, have been part of the New York school as well as maintaining studios in Connecticut. All three are predominantly abstractionists, although they have worked in a realistic mode at some time during their careers.

Louis Schanker, resided with his wife, Libby Holman at "Treetops" in Stamford. Throughout his career Schanker worked simultaneously in painting, graphics, and carved sculpture. He attended Cooper Union and later studied at the Academie de la Grand Chaumiere in Paris.

During the thirties, Schanker, as a member of the New York City Federal Art Project of the W.P.A., was one of several artists who produced a mural for WNYC, the municipal radio station. Later, he created a mural for the Hall of Medicine and Public Health Building at the New York World's Fair of 1939.

Schanker taught printmaking at the New School from 1943 to 1960 and at Bard College from 1949 to 1964. His color woodcuts appeared in the first international exhibition of color woodcuts and linecuts at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, in 1954. His work has been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Examples of his art are owned by all major art museums in New York and such other art institutions as the Cleveland Museum, Chicago Art Institute, and the Detroit Institute of Art.

American art in the nineteen-thirties was dominated by a hard core realism, stemming from an emerging regionalism and a heightened social consciousness. The American Scene and Social Realist schools were a reaction against the previous two decades (1910 - 1920) when pioneering Europeans, such as Vassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Casimir Malevich, had experimented with non-objective elements to create abstraction. The thirties proved to be crucial to each of the creative young lives of Three Connecticut Abstractionists. As the decade began, Louis Schanker was 27, Rhys Caparn was 21, and Seymour Fogel 19. While all three later worked in abstraction, their art in the thirties tended more toward the prevailing realism, although often belying the path toward abstraction each would subsequently follow.

Connecticut, to where each would eventually move, helped to provide a setting where the artists produced their strongest work. All three began life in New York--Schanker and Fogel being born in New York City, and Caparn in Onteora Park in the Catskill Mountains. Louis Schanker died in May, 1981 at the age of 78 after many years of living and working in Stamford. Schanker was acquainted with both artists, although Fogel and Caparn have never met. Both Caparn and Fogel maintain studios nearby--in Newtown and Weston respectively.

Beginning a career as an artist is difficult in the best of times, but the Depression Era in America provided an uphill struggle for even the most determined. In 1935, the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration began to employ artists on a national scale. Fogel and Schanker were fellow members of the New York City mural division project and by the end of the decade both had completed major murals for the 1939 World's Fair--the Works Progress Administration Building (Fogel) and the Hall of Medicine and Public Health Building (Schanker). They were well prepared for this extraordinary opportunity--both had studied at the Arts Students League, while Schanker had also studied at Cooper Union and the Academie de la Grand Chaumiere in Paris and Fogel attended the National Academy of Design. While Rhys Caparn had not been involved with W. P. A., she was well trained at Bryn Mawr, the Sorbonne, Ecole Artistique des Animaux in Paris and with Alexander Archipenko in New York.

All three artists have been superlative teachers at various times during their careers--Caparn at the Dalton School in New York, Fogel at the University of Texas and Michigan State University, and Schanker at Bard College and the New School for Social Research.

Stylistically they had virtually abandoned conventional realism by the forties. Caparn's authoritative sculptures of animals and birds in plaster and bronze began under the tutelage of her teacher Édouard Navellier in Paris. After visiting Europe in the late forties her formal vocabulary had expanded to encompass architectonic ideas of arches and walls, but her work remained rooted in a sensitive response to nature.

Fogel's mural paintings of the thirties display an affinity with Diego Rivera with whom he worked in New York. Although mural commissions have been a constant throughout his career, they represent only a part of his prodigious output which also includes painting, drawing, constructions, and prints. Since the mid-forties, Fogel has worked largely in a strong abstract geometric style with occasional forays into the organic.

Schanker is arguably the least non-objective of the three, but his distortions of the figure certainly took him further in the direction of abstraction than had been achieved by Georges Rouault, his major influence. His commanding images, both in painting and prints, are characterized by heavy black lines against areas of rich prismatic color. After working in low-relief hardwood sculpture in the mid-thirties, he perfected the color woodcut and was largely responsible for its revival in America.

The creativity of the three artists has been recognized both here and abroad and is represented in the permanent collections of many major museums. Collectively, 150 years of mainstream artistic production on the New York - Connecticut axis have left our state with a rich visual heritage.

Dr. Robert P. Metzger
Director of Art

Oral history interview with Bernard Braddon and Sidney Paul Schectman, 1981 Oct. 9

Braddon, Bernard, Sidney Schectman, Dealers Mercury Gallery, New York, N.Y.

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-bernard-braddon-and-sidney-paul-schectman-12316>

MS. BERMAN: Who were the people that Rothko was closest to?

MR. SCHECTMAN: Well, I know he liked Schanker. I once talked to him about him, but he told me that Schanker was a playboy of some sort even then, but a great painter and a great wood block...you know, painted, the greatest. "But I don't know where he's going to go," he would say because he thought he was frivolous. And that's the kind of person Rothko was, terribly, terribly serious.-----

MR. BRADDON: Yes, he's a very close friend of mine. Schanker's a good friend, Louis Schanker, and I've seen him many times here.

MR. SCHECTMAN: Very close.

MR. BRADDON: At the time I lived near him in Brooklyn Heights. Schanker lived on State Street and I lived on Remson Street, so I visited him. And I've seen Schanker in subsequent years. The same with Louis Harris. Kerkam I'd seen frequently.

MR. SCHECTMAN: I had been buying Schanker's work fairly recently until about a year ago. He had a show at the Associated American Art Gallery two years ago and I bought four of his early (wood cuts). I thought they were magnificent, and I just did that. I'm not collecting right now, yet I couldn't resist it.-----

MR. BRADDON: I saw Bolotowsky just a few weeks ago at a service, a little memorial service for Schanker. Bolotowsky spoke very charmingly, very rapidly--he reminisced. But we had a nice meeting with him. We were glad to see each other.

Schanker, Rothko, Harris, Kerkam, Schectman, Braddon

THE 30s REVISITED



FOREWORD

The 1930s were crossroads in time between the frantic, plentiful twenties and World War II. These years were marked by The Depression and The Dust Bowl, and every American would be deeply affected before the decade was over.

This enormous variety of experience was recorded by the artists of the day, some working on their own, many working for government programs. Our exhibition of nearly 250 prints by more than 100 artists offers many interpretations of many situations - it is a vast collection of etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts made in the ten years from 1930 to 1939.

The 1930s were years of enormous social change, felt most directly by the labor force. By 1933 more than a quarter of the work force was unemployed and for artists the situation was even more critical. Workers with jobs were ever more dependent on their employers, some of whom exploited that situation. Strikes and demonstrations flourished. Soup kitchens became necessary. Many families faced terrible hardships that strengthened some and destroyed others.

As the country's leadership changed from Herbert Hoover to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the government instituted programs to help the unemployed. Among the first projects for artists was the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) which lasted from December, 1933, to June, 1934. This was followed by the Works Progress (later Project) Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), begun October, 1935, and disbanded in 1943. There are more than fifty WPA prints in this exhibition, many from the New York Division and many with the stamp of the agency.

In New York the first director of the WPA's Graphic Art Division was Gustave von Groschwitz, who served from 1935 to 1938. He was followed by Lynd Ward. Jacob Kainen, Werner Drewes and Louis Schanker were also among those who made prints, taught technique and encouraged the development of new methods under the WPA. Von Groschwitz explained that artists were entirely free to produce any sort of print, but only those subjects finally approved would be printed in editions of about 25. These were intended for distribution to schools, libraries and government offices. Those with the stamp of the agency were intended for this distribution; those without the stamp are common, either they were left unstamped when the agency ended, or they are from the few impressions given to the artist for each edition printed. Much of the WPA material in this show comes from someone who had been directly involved, and who was among those given an opportunity to acquire prints at very reasonable prices when the program was discontinued.

In spite of the WPA unemployment remained severe, and the concept of labor came under renewed consideration. In this exhibition the following occupations are portrayed: fisherman, cowboy, farmer, teacher, factory worker, miner, model, police officer, lawyer, auctioneer, judge, blacksmith, salesperson, circus and vaudeville performer, dancer, movie star, cameraman, musician, construction worker, businessman, jockey, football player, waiter and waitress, fireman, sailor, rescue worker, pilot, mechanic, librarian, dockworker, shop owner, power plant operator, laundress, horse trader, croupier, organ grinder, sidewalk apple seller, artist, mother.

Cover: Detail, 208. Joseph Vogel, Another Day, c. 1936-39

In the great drama of the 30s attitudes of anger and despair were investigated by Louis Lozowick, and human dignity was depicted by Rockwell Kent and Leon Gilmour. Urban regionalism, already begun by John Sloan and Kenneth Hayes Miller, is seen in the prints of Reginald Marsh, Isabel Bishop, and Raphael Soyer. Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood drew upon their fellow mid-westerners, and this rural regionalism was encouraged by the publisher Reeves Lewenthal, founder of Associated American Artists.

Racial strife accelerated and was recorded by Bernard Brussel-Smith, George Biddle, and Curry. The breadline was the subject for prints by Clare Leighton, Marsh and Lozowick. The social isolation of the life of the poor in the city was interpreted by many, including Armin Landeck, Fritz Eichenberg, and Will Barnet.

Artists such as Stow Wengenroth and Luigi Lucioni continued their interest in the idyllic landscape and in so doing contributed a quiet optimism. Their prints held out the hope that the country would return to less troubled times.

Still other artists were influenced by avant-garde European movements. Futurism may be seen in Decoration for Home Relief Bureau by Florence Kent, and the trend toward abstraction in the prints of Stuart Davis, Morris Blackburn, Schanker and Drewes. Another message from Europe was the rising Nazi/Fascist menace, so graphically recognized by Lynd Ward.

In the complex web of social and artistic currents, the rich played on to be caricatured by Paul Cadmus, and the fantasy, escapist world of the movies was captured by Reginald Marsh.

This large body of work, so disparate and so moving, speaks to those who lived through the 30s as well as those who only know them from the incredible stories with which they were raised. What a range of memories and emotions they stir - of the hungry and humiliated, but also of hard times endured and conquered. For a decade the government had been a major sponsor of the arts, and the artists the social conscience of a nation.

Sylvan Cole, Jr.
Director

August 1983

¹Gustave von Groschwitz, interview with Sylvan Cole, Jr., at AAA, March 23, 1983.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following people who have helped make this exhibition possible:

Gustave von Groschwitz, Former
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Hansen; Assistants: Joseph
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Furman, Jr.



165.

OLEY, MOSES

153. INDUSTRIAL SHORE, c.1936-39
Lithograph, edition about 25
11 1/2 x 16 3/4, made for the
Federal Art Project. \$125

OWEN, FREDERICK L.

154. FULL AND BY, 1932
Etching, edition 202
11 3/4 x 8 3/4, published by AAA,
1934. \$125
155. TRADE WINDS, 1938
Etching, edition 162
10 7/8 x 14 1/4, published by
AAA. \$125

RICHTER

156. AUCTION SALE, c.1936-39
Lithograph, edition about 25
11 1/4 x 16, made for the Federal
Art Project. \$110

RIGGS, ROBERT

157. THIRD ROUND, 1932
Library of Congress 68
Lithograph, edition about 50
14 1/2 x 19 3/8, unsigned (signed
in the stone). \$600
158. THE WINNER, 1932-34
LC.75, lithograph, edition about 50
15 x 20 3/4, unsigned \$550

ROBINSON, BOARDMAN

159. HORSE AUCTION, 1939
Lithograph, edition 250
8 x 11 1/2, published by AAA. \$90

ROSS, SANFORD

160. HIGHWAY IN CONNECTICUT, 1939
Lithograph, edition 25
9 5/8 x 13 1/4, exhibited:
American Prints, 1940 Venice
Biennale. \$60

RYDER, CHAUNCEY F.

161. FARMYARD IN WINTER, 1934
Etching, edition 193
7 x 8 3/4, published by AAA. \$90

SAMUELS, IRVING K.

162. BROAD CHANNEL, c.1936-39
Lithograph, edition about 25
13 3/4 x 17 1/4, made for the
Federal Art Project, stamped. \$150

SCHALDACH, WILLIAM J.

163. THE HOT CORNER, 1939
Drypoint, edition 75
12 x 8 7/8, exhibited:
American Prints, 1940 Venice
Biennale. \$75

SCHANKER, LOUIS

164. POLO, 1937
Brooklyn Museum 12, color
linoleum cut, edition 20
17 x 22 1/2 \$900

165. COPS AND PICKETS, 1939
BM.26, woodcut, edition 35
9 1/2 x 12 3/4 \$350
166. MUSICAL CLOWNS, 1939
BM.31, color woodcut, second
edition of 21
11 1/2 x 15 1/4 \$575

SCHOPPE, PALMER

167. 'SPERIEANCES MEETIN', 1935
Lithograph, edition 25
13 x 8 3/4 \$200
168. BORN WID A VEIL, 1935
Lithograph, edition 25
13 1/8 x 9 1/8 \$200
169. CLAP YO HANDS, 1935
Lithograph, edition 24
13 x 9 \$200

SHARP, WILLIAM

170. THE HAUPTMAN TRIAL, 1935
(Relating to the Lindberg Case)
Lithograph, edition 250
9 3/4 x 14, published by AAA. \$50
171. LUCKY LUCIANO TRIAL, 1936
Lithograph, edition 250
9 3/4 x 14, published by AAA. \$50
172. VERA STRETZ MURDER TRIAL, 1936
Lithograph, edition 250
9 3/4 x 14, published by AAA. \$50

SHIELDS, FRANCIS

173. THE DESCENT, c.1936-39
Lithograph, edition about 25
12 x 17, made for the Federal
Art Project, stamped. \$125

JAMES GUY

LOUIS SCHANKER

April 16 through May 18, 1985

LOUIS SCHANKER 1903-1981

Louis Schanker, an early avant-garde artist, was a member of "The Ten Whitney Dissenters," a protest movement that championed artistic experimentation and internationalism. Schanker's semi-abstracts which he began to make in 1933 were primitive in contrast to the cool and elegant passages of School of Paris Cubism and were instrumental in reintroducing Americans to expressionism in abstract art. With heavy black lines on backgrounds of densely packed patches of prismatic color, the paintings were Schanker's expression of "The Ten's" group statement that their art showed "objects and events as though for the first time, free from the accretions of habit and divorced from the conventions of a thousand years of painting."

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Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11 to 5

Throughout his career Schanker always worked simultaneously in painting, graphics and carved sculpture. He was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists. Schanker's work of the 1930s and 1940s has a special place in American art.



LOUIS SCHANKER
"Football," c. 1936
Oil on canvas
35½ x 44 in.

conscious surface. Between the two groups was a third that was as pluralistic as the American melting pot.

Taking as an example the first comprehensive survey of twentieth-century American work that was seen in Europe after the war, "Modern Art in the United States," organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, it is possible to see the diversity of post-war artistic expression and observe the position of prints in that context. Of the approximately twenty-five pre-war artists represented, more than half had made prints; only five of the nearly thirty-two contemporary painters had made prints (usually one or two), but none of these was included in the exhibition. The section devoted to contemporary prints presented forty-eight artists, mainly printmakers, one-third of whom had been influenced or taught by S. W. Hayter. Slightly more than a third of the works exhibited were color woodcuts, five were lithographs (three in color), and three were silkscreens; all were made between 1945 and 1954, with the meaningful exception of one of Josef Albers's offset lithographs from the 1942 series *Graphic Tectonic* (Fig. 15).

It is useful to examine this exhibition in order to find some reasons for the near-eclipse of the type of printmaking represented in it that occurred around 1960, when painters began to include lithography and silkscreen as principal elements in their total creative activity. These prints display most of the modernist stylistic trends of the 1920s and '30s. The figurative works are pointedly neither social realist nor provincial (the two modes no longer acceptable as fine or modern art). Most of the prints have Surrealist or Expressionist foundations, with derivations from Ernst, Masson, and Picasso permeating a good deal of the imagery. Because most were created by printmakers who had not fully digested the influences from abroad, there are few substantive images, although the prints are well executed. The predominating impressions are those of tactility and color. In the intaglio prints of Peterdi, Lasansky, and their students, and in the woodcuts of Frasconi, Schanker, and Yunkers, there is an insistent emphasis upon texture, as the deeply engraved or etched lines and harshly grained wood prevail over the weaker imagery. Technique is a primary concern and the excitement of working with new or unusual materials—such as embedding wires into wood, or cutting into plastic—overwhelms most of the profound aesthetic elements.

The new generation looked at existing prints as sources of new ideas for their own creations. For example, in 1949 Rolf Nesch, a German artist directly influenced by E. L. Kirchner and who worked in Norway during and after World War II, had a show in New York of his intricate multi-panel works, printed from assemblages

in the old established workshops of New York and Los Angeles, but it demanded a good deal of expertise in preparing the stones and printing, and physically was almost impossible to produce without assistance—and assistance was almost impossible to procure without cash, always in short supply. (The students in Hayter's shop, including Pollock, had to pull their own prints, which explains very well why there were no editions of Pollock's engravings during his lifetime.) Woodcut, on the other hand, was an intensely personal medium. The woodblock never had to leave the artist's studio, from the moment of the first cut to the completion of the final prints. Not even a press was needed, since the prints could be taken simply by rubbing the back of a piece of paper pressed against the inked surface of the block. This was exactly the type of work American artists favored: a mixture of personal expression, handicraft, and cost efficiency.

In 1950, when the Brooklyn Museum mounted "American Woodcut: 1670–1950," it included the work of some contemporary artists with some expertise in the medium, such as Antonio Frasconi (from Uruguay, who had begun to make woodcuts there in 1944), Adja Yunkers (who arrived from Stockholm after the war [Fig. 18]), and Josef Albers. Central to the teaching of woodcut in the New York area was Louis Schanker (Fig. 17), an American abstract painter who, with Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, was a member of "The Ten" in the late 1930s. In the 1940s he taught printmaking at the New School for Social Research and for one year shared his workshop with Hayter. Although Schanker taught woodcut, he did make some etchings with Hayter during this period. It is known, however, that Hayter had a strong aversion to woodcut (he refused to continue being a member of the Society of American Etchers if they admitted any "woodpeckers").⁵ It is not known if Adolph Gottlieb's few woodcuts of 1944–45 were the result of his earlier association with Schanker, but it is certain that Schanker was probably the most direct tie to the burgeoning interest in woodcut in the 1950s. His workshop was home to young artists, such as the sculptor Leonard Baskin, who must have considered the precious Surrealist methods implicit in the Hayter method out of step with the times.

Before further examination of the development of American printmaking, mention should be made of the Europeans, who dominated the American art scene and created a few prints in the United States. At Atelier 17, prints were occasionally made by André Masson, Yves Tanguy (Fig. 10) and Jacques Lipchitz (Fig. 11)—both of whom remained in America—Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí (both of whom worked in the shop after the war), and Matta (who, rather younger than the better established artists, was friendly with the Americans).

ART and ARTISTS

By DOROTHY HALL

Louis Schanker at AAA

An exhibition of prints and drawings by the late Louis Schanker can now be seen at Associated American Artists. Approximately 80 works, mostly woodcuts dating from 1924 to 1973, constitute a review of this artist's oeuvre and reveal its development as well as the various influences that helped to form these mainly semi-abstract images. It is obvious that Mr. Schanker was very receptive to the ideas of many other artists, among them, Klee, Miro, Feininger, Picasso and Ben Shahn and incorporated recognizable elements of each in his own evolving imagery. Woodcuts from the 40's such as **Polo**, **Football**, **Dance** and **Rotating Figures** as well as **Circle Image** from the 50's attest to the artist's continuing interest in motion, especially the gyrating kind expressed in a vocabulary of animated linear forms and looping calligraphy. Highlights of the show include **Composition with Figures**, a forceful abstraction in black and white, **Don Quixote and Sancho Panza**, involving outlined semi-abstract figures in blue and red, and **Abstract Landscapes #1**, a 1946 color woodcut of particular appeal for its compartmented images and striated textural elements. **Mythological Cock** is another memorable and dynamic image in this penetrating look at one artist's work.

LOUIS SCHANKER

PRINTS AND DRAWINGS



September 4-27, 1986



ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS
20 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019 (212) 399-5510

FOREWORD

American modernist prints of the first several decades of this century have not received the consistent critical and commercial attention that they deserve. It was a pleasure, therefore, to view David Kiehl's excellent survey "In Pursuit of Abstraction," which was exhibited in the print galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art this spring. That show brought together important prints by many artists long affiliated with AAA, including Louis Shanker (1903-1981), who pioneered the translation of a European-born aesthetic into uniquely American graphic images.

It was doubly a pleasure to see at the exhibition Una Johnson and to introduce her to David Kiehl, thereby bringing together two champions of this neglected period of American printmaking. During her distinguished career as Print Curator of the Brooklyn Museum, Una Johnson was often the only voice speaking encouragement to experimental printmakers like Louis Shanker. She is the author of the definitive reference to his graphic work, and we are grateful for her contributing an introduction to our current retrospective exhibition.

We are also grateful to the Estate of Louis Shanker, the artist's sister Mrs. Minette Siegel and nephew and niece Mr. and Mrs. Lou Siegel, for their cooperation and hospitality. Without their work, this exhibition would not be possible.

Robert P. Conway
Director

INTRODUCTION

Louis Schanker first became interested in the development of the woodcut and linoleum block print during his extended work in mural painting at the Science and Health Building at the 1939 New York World's Fair and in the lobby of radio station WNYC. After a careful study of Japanese woodblock color prints he embarked on his own exploration of new possibilities in the medium of the relief print, especially the woodcut and linoleum block print. He occasionally had worked in intaglio methods but it was the woodcut that most often held his attention during the next several decades. Applying the larger gestures of mural painting he soon removed his own printed images from the illustrative and narrative themes of the traditional relief print. His graphic oeuvre of more than one hundred fifty prints records many of his imaginative innovations and experimental ideas.

In 1937 Schanker completed a complex composition entitled *Polo*, (Catalogue No. 12), a linoleum cut that demonstrated his ability to initiate new methods and procedures in relief printing. For this work he carved a number of blocks each carrying one of the flat washes of color. A final or key block designated the basic thrust of his design and was printed as an intaglio plate. In many succeeding woodcuts the artist often caught the defining actions of a number of active sports. Conventional perspective was not allowed to trap the eye of the viewer. Instead Schanker relied on movement, pattern, sharp angles, clear colors and uncomplicated images to give his compositions a deceptive depth and engaging animation.

In his large scale woodcut entitled *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza* (Catalogue No. 52) the artist first printed in black an unmarked block to which impression he overprinted other blocks in color. This method of printing enhanced the luminosity of his colors and united the entire composition. He also changed the textures of the blocks by employing unconventional tools such as carpenter's rasps, nail points and grids of wire meshes in order to "mar" the surface of the block. An example of these procedures is noted in the fine woodcut *Carnival*, 1948 (Catalogue No. 65). Schanker always printed his own blocks because he enjoyed the surprises and the variations that were obtainable only by hand printing. However, this somewhat laborious method also limited the number of impressions the artist was willing to print. During the mid-1950's the artist developed his own particular variations of the plaster relief print. Using his earlier blocks as molds he was able to obtain not only the colors he desired but also the depths of the knife or gouge cuts within the block.

Schanker has remarked: "Much of my work (in painting, sculpture and prints) is generally classified as abstract although all of my work develops from natural forms. I have an inherent need to express myself in relation to those forms." (*The Tiger's Eye*, No. 8, June, 1948, p. 46). However, in the mid-1950's and throughout the 1960's abstract images consistently appear in his work. The circular image with its countless variations and elusive interpretations becomes the leit-motif in all of his later compositions. The present retrospective exhibition featuring his woodcuts well defines Louis Schanker as an imaginative artist and a skilled and innovative printmaker.

Una Johnson
Curator Emerita
Brooklyn Museum

American Prints

RECENT ACQUISITIONS



121

LOUIS SCHANKER (1903–1981)

121. *Aerial Act*

Color woodcut, 12 × 14 in.

Signed (at lower right): Louis Schanker

Executed in 1940

REF.: Brooklyn Museum, no. 36

Schanker's relief prints, especially those in color, are among the most innovative examples from the late 'thirties and 'forties in this medium. Schanker was especially inventive in his introduction of textural patterns into his woodcuts. In addition to vigorous cutting, he would also impress wire grids and roughen the surface of the block with unusual tools such as rasps or nail points. His highly abstracted forms, enlivened with clear, strong colors, or cooled with overlays of subtly greyed tones, project a sense of charged energy and motion. *Aerial Act* was created while Schanker was employed as a supervising artist by the New York Graphic Arts Section of the Works Progress Administration.

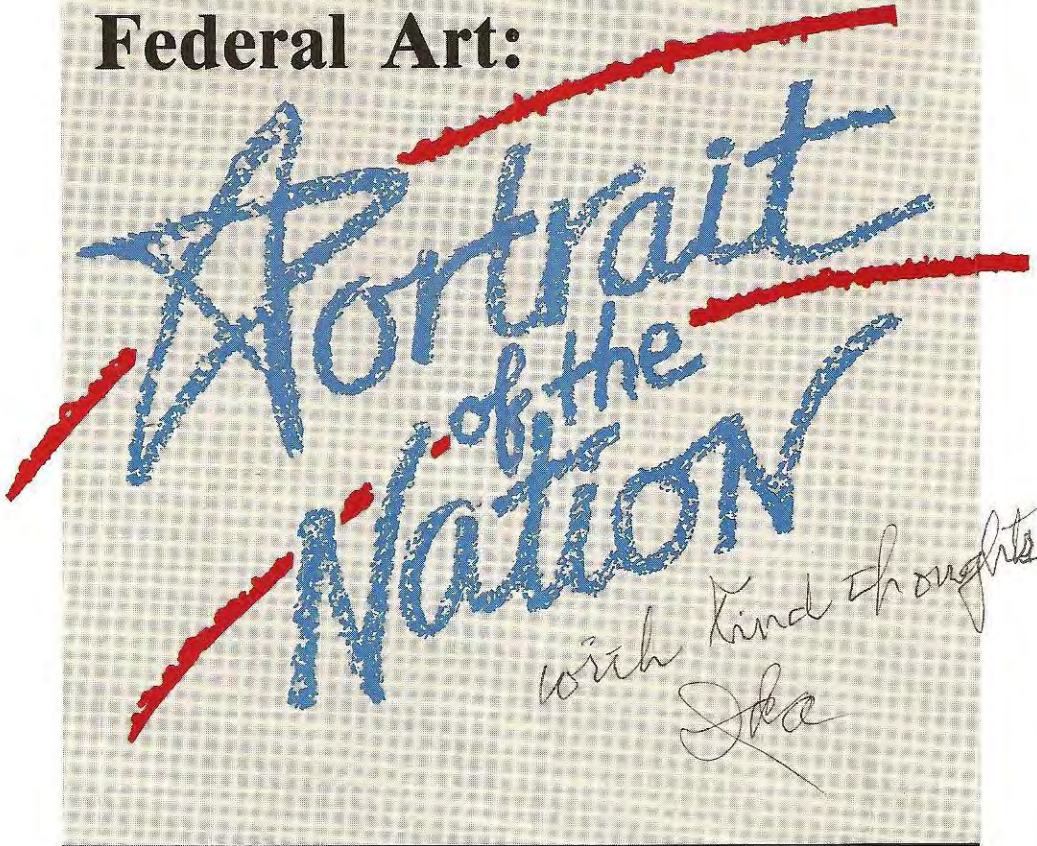
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*signed by fellow WPA artist Ida Abelman

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Louis Schanker, *Aerial Act*

1903-1981

Though much of my work is generally classified as abstract, all of my work develops from natural forms. I have great respect for the forms of nature and an inherent need to express myself in relation to those forms. No matter how far my experimental design may take me . . . there remains always a core of objective reality which I have no desire to destroy or even to impair but only to investigate, analyze, develop.[1]

LOUIS SCHANKER WAS ONE OF MANY MEMBERS OF THE AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS who chose to base his art in the objects, patterns, and rhythms of nature. Although never a student of Hans Hofmann, Schanker's ideas about art had many parallels with Hofmann's. Concern for the spatial dynamics of a painting's surface, and an insistence on some aspect of nature as a starting point for art, are two areas that mirror a shared philosophy between the two artists. Although much of Schanker's later work is completely abstract, during the 1930s and 1940s he frequently used direct, identifiable themes---motifs drawn from sports, his early years working for a circus, and even socially conscious subjects not normally employed by abstract artists.[2]

As a youth, Louis Schanker quit school and ran away to join the circus. He put in two years of "interesting but gruelling hard labor." [3] After leaving the circus, he worked as a laborer in the wheatfields of Canada and the Dakotas, as a "gandy dancer" on the Erie Railroad, and as a stevedore on Great Lakes steamers. For almost a year Schanker cast his lot with hobos, riding freight trains throughout the country. In 1919, he put this itinerant life behind him and began attending night classes at Cooper Union. Subsequently, he studied at the Art Students League of New York and the Educational Alliance. Schanker spent 1931 and 1932 in Paris. He took classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and worked on his own, doing plein air landscapes and street scenes. The work of Renoir, Degas, and Signac made a deep impression on the young artist. After he moved to Mallorca in 1933, Schanker began abstracting form to a greater degree and incorporating Cubist devices of uptilted planes and prismatic color in his work.

During the mid 1930s, Schanker began making prints and subsequently became a graphic arts supervisor for the WPA. He also completed murals for radio station WNYC, the Neponsit Beach Hospital in Long Island, and the Science and Health building at the 1939 New York World's Fair. During World War II, Schanker worked as a shipfitter and began teaching the technique of color woodblock printing at the New School for Social Research. In 1949, he became an assistant professor at Bard College, where he remained until his retirement.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Schanker exhibited frequently in group shows both in museums and in commercial galleries. He became especially well known for his innovations as a printmaker. Schanker belonged to "The Ten," a group that exhibited together in protest against the hegemony of American scene painting in Whitney exhibitions and in support of artistic experimentation and an international (rather than nativist) outlook in art.[4]

Schanker imbued his prints, paintings, and sculpture with an animated expressionism that aims at a fundamental emotional structure. Sculptures such as Owl, carved in 1937, adroitly convey not only the bird's physical appearance, but the quality of mystery that has made it a symbol of wisdom and secrecy. Three Men, exhibited in the American Abstract Artists' first annual exhibition in 1937, exemplifies the expressive, angular animation for which Schanker's work was frequently praised in press reviews of the 1930s.

1. Louis Schanker, "The Ides of Art: 11 Graphic Artists Write," Tiger's Eye 8 (June 1949): 45.

2. In a letter to the editor of Art News in 1938, an art historian noted the similarities between Schanker's Circus, a WPA mural done for the children's dining room in the Neponsit Beach Hospital and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's I Saltimbanchi. In his reply, Schanker said that he had chosen his subject matter based on his own experience: "I ran away from school to join the 'big top' and put in two years of interesting but grueling hard labor as a 'canvas-man,' 'animal ostler' and 'property-man' for clowns, acrobats and other performers with one of the best known American circuses. The visual memories that I retain of this period are, needless to say, vivid if not particularly humorous." Louis Schanker, "The Artist Replies," Art News 37 (29 October 1938): 16.

3. Louis Schanker, letter to the editor, Art News 37 (29 October 1938): 16, 21. I am grateful to Joel Schanker, Louis's brother, for relating details about Schanker's life and work in a videotaped interview, 9 June 1988.

4. Other members were Ben-Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, Louis Harris, Earl Kerkam, Ralph Rosenborg, Joseph Solman, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko (then still using the name Marcus Rothkowitz). The group associated for five years and held exhibitions at Montross, Passedoit, and Mercury galleries, and at the Galérie Bonaparte in Paris. For further information about The Ten, see Lucy McCormick Embick, "The Expressionist Current in New York's Avant-Garde: The Paintings of The Ten" (Master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1982)

Source: Virginia M. Mecklenburg. "The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction, 1930-1945" (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art and Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), pp. 154-158. Copyright 1989 Smithsonian Institution. All rights reserved.