Abstractions, The Woodblock Color Prints of

Louis Schanker, 1943, Johnson, The Brooklyn Museum

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY AND HUMAN experience restlessly shift their patterns, while the media and skills of art change little. The dependence of the artist on intangibles rather than on crucible or blue print makes it most unlikely that time will transform his tools. As long as the master of the brush or burin, the chisel or knife partakes deeply of the world of change, probing his utmost apprehension, the instruments of yesterday should eloquently serve.

In his graphic work, Louis Schanker has employed the old and familiar medium of the woodcut to create prints wholly contemporary in design, color and form. His abstractions are characterized by an unusual commingling of range and restraint, boldness of line and plastic use of color. Born in New York in 1903, Schanker, as a youth, travelled with one of the "big tops." "I ran away from school . . . " he recalls, "to put in two years of interesting but gruelling 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."

Equally strenuous activities followed as harvest hand in the wheatfields of Canada and the Dakotas, "gandy dancer" on the Erie Railroad, stevedore on Great Lakes steamers. For nearly a year, travelling on freight trains some fifteen thousand miles throughout

the United States, he cast his lot with hoboes. More recently he has worked as a shipfitter in the Federal Ship Yard.

These Whitmanesque peregrinations left little time or inclination for more formal schooling. Schanker studied art at Cooper Union, the Art Students League and the Educational Alliance, but is largely self-taught. For two years he travelled in France and Spain. In 1935 he made his first woodcut, *Trio*, involving a seven-color printing. He has since produced more than forty prints. In 1940—1941 he made a number of woodcuts for the New York City W.P.A. Art Project of which he later became graphic arts supervisor. During the season of 1943—1944 he will conduct a course at the New School for Social Research in the technique of woodblock color prints.

Most of Schanker's designs have begun as oil paintings, been translated into woodcuts, then, occasionally have emerged from the woodcut stage as low-relief sculpture. Such translation may be noted in *Dancers, Football Players* and *Men Running*. A small number of compositions, six all told, have been cut in linoleum blocks of which *Polo* is the most ambitious. In all of his work he seeks to express new relationships between organic and geometric forms and objects in motion. The thrust and counter thrust of movement, whether in a polo game or in a repeated theme of music, take on fresh graphic meaning and enjoy free range of expression. An admirably independent artist, he aspires to impart to the observer a sense of participation, and to interpret in abstract but highly personal terms the life about him.

The artist's method of printing is similar to that of ancient China. The paper upon which the impression is to be made is carefully placed and firmly held on the inked block. A small flat disc of wood one quarter of an inch thick and three and one-half inches in diameter covered with several layers of strong linen or cotton cloth, and tied in place by a knot on the back of the disc, forms the pad or baren. This is pressed over the surface in an even, rotating motion until the paper retains the printed image. Each color usually requires a separate block and an added printing. In the course of this hand process the color values of every print

within an edition must necessarily vary to a slight degree, rendering each unique. This is to be noted especially in the intricate designs of the woodcuts entitled *Musical Composition* and *Non-Objective.*

The current exhibition and catalogue present the chronological development of Schanker's graphic work to date. They also present the abstraction as a means of expression which can hold its rightful place beside realism, in America far more commonly expounded.

UNA E. JOHNSON, *Curator*
Department of Prints and Drawings

Bishop's visit. He will celebrate the stars.

Schanker in One-Man Show

EAST HAMPTON — Louis Schanker, regarded by art critics as one of America's leading avant garde painters, will have his thirtieth one man show at the Bleecker East Hampton Gallery the week of July 21. Mr Schanker recently had a successful showing of his new paintings at the Dewey Gallery where his work was on exhibition for a month.

A recognized master in the field of wood block color printing, Mr Schanker has innovated and developed the unique circle image dominant in his recent paintings. In the present group of canvases to be shown he reveals a new color vibrancy and glow which still suggests his well-known circle image but go further in dimension.

His recent art show at the Dewey Gallery was highly praised by Emily Genauer, art critic of the New York Herald Tribune, Stuart Preston of the New York Times, and several other important critics. He is one of the leading pioneers of the New York School of Painting.

His wood block color prints and paintings have been exhibited in the collections of the foremost museums in the United States and abroad individually and in group showings in Paris, Rome, London, Tokyo and Auckland, New Zealand. Of particular interest to Long Islanders is a series of panel paintings for the Neponsit Beach Hospital.

Prior to his association with the Dewey Gallery, Mr Schanker exhibited at the Willard Gallery, the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, and other galleries throughout the United States. His paintings and prints are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, Whitney Museum, Brooklyn Museum and the New York Public Library as well as other museums and outstanding private collections throughout the country.

Louis Schanker is one of the organizers and directors of the Dewey Gallery which opened in April 1962. This is the first Madison Avenue gallery where the contributing artists operate as dealers, working to the mutual benefit of painters and collectors alike. As artists working for their fellow artists they can offer the appreciation and understanding of their work, and the collector benefits by their knowledge and experience as well known artists.

New York Herald Tribune
Sunday, June 3, 1962

Emily Genauer:

Quiet Pleasures Of Serious Art

THE atmosphere in the art galleries of New York this week was gentle as the late May breeze. No big new museum exhibitions Taking a Stand, or Surveying a Trend, or Celebrating an Anniversary. No little shows of artists protesting big shows. I must, therefore, as an honest reporter first and a drum-beater for art second, point out that readers whose interest in art is fairly casual can skip this week's new arrivals at no great peril of feeling a dullard at dinner party conversations.

For more serious art enthusiasts, however, the week offered quiet but real pleasures, and material for reflection, too.

Four of the new exhibitors, for example, have been around for decades. Louis Schanker, exhibiting at the Dewey Gallery; John Ferren, at the Rose Fried Gallery, and Julio de Diego, at the Landry Gallery, have been estimable figures since the '30s. William Pachner, at the Krasner Gallery, began to register on the local scene in the '40s.

Change and Constancy

All of them look, if one may use the expression, as fresh as paint. It's particularly satisfying in the case of Schanker, because in his latest work he has changed so much, and in the case of Ferren and de Diego, because they haven't. Pachner has changed, too, but the more he changes, the more he's the same.

Let me explain, so I don't sound like Pollyanna, just too glad about everything. Schanker's newest pictures are abstractions painted around what he calls the "circle image." They're a long, long way from the semi-abstract, decorative, WPA-commissioned murals he painted, along with Stuart Davis and the late Byron Browne, for the studios of radio station WNYC, where they may still be seen. Schanker went completely abstract years ago. But always there remained in his work a tentative quality, an exploitation of texture as if to make up for the sacrifice of symbol, a preoccupation with means as if to compensate for uncertainty about ideas.

In his newest work there is beautiful assurance, and no less freedom. There are a new buoyancy and verve. Symbol has returned, but it has been purified, simplified, given more universal application. The symbol is a circle, set in animated but controlled space. But is it not also, in some canvases, the moon, the sun, or earth itself, or in some others, the moving roundness of a clock pendulum?

On Two Levels

Now one can look at Schanker's canvases, enjoy the counterpoint of their circular shapes playing against bold vertical or horizontal bands, the transparency of their quiet colors and the bold vibrancy of their oranges and blues and, mostly, the luminosity that pervades every inch of canvas. But one is also, viewing them, given poetic pegs for free association. And this enjoyment on two levels is a plus. The rewards of the Schanker show, then, are not just handsome, exhilarating pictures, but the spectacle of a veteran constantly growing, evolving, refining.

Arthur Tress '62

LOUIS SCHANKER
. . . a profile

Mysteriously, the middle son in a family of three boys and four girls—none of them with a heritage of creative art—becomes an artist at fifteen. A brother discards a toy set of oil paints and Louis Schanker inherits it, copying meticulously the picture postcard Michaelangelos that come with the tubes. He knows, at fifteen, how he wants to spend the rest of his life.

Louis Schanker's father had seven children and a wife to support from the earnings of his Bronx tailoring shop. The last thing he or his wife wanted their son to be was a painter. The Schanker children were going into business, or through college and into the professions. Louis was mad to think he could make his way as a painter. But Louis was sure, and at fifteen he enrolled at Cooper Union for evening classes and during the day he ran errands for a New York publishing firm.

"My second job was as office boy for Jesse Strauss, president of Macy's. All I had to do was help him take off his hat and coat when he came in, and hand them to him when he left. He fired me when he discovered that I'd lied about my age."

After four years at Cooper Union (and a variety of jobs) Louis Schanker left home He went on a "hobo" trip across the country and joined the Sparks Circus in Macon, Georgia. "I travelled with the circus for a year," he remembers, "and sketched everything from clowns to elephants." His job was to care for the ring horses and he loved it.

The following year he worked in the North Dakota wheat fields, threshing behind teams of horses and building up the muscles that give him the appearance of a reincarnated John L. Sullivan (complete with mustache) rather than the stereotyped example of the starving painter. When he got to the coast, Louis Schanker joined up with the Barnum and Bailey circus for awhile but he was beginning to feel homesick for the East. "That's where the painters were," he says. So he signed up as a coal stoker on one of the Great Lakes steamers and worked his way home. He enrolled as a student in the Educational Alliance Art School in New York, working nights as a soda jerker. He rented an old skylight studio across the street from the school so he'd waste no time getting to classes. (Recently his work was shown in a group exhibit at Art Alliance in which successful students of the past 100 years participated.) "But I was in a rut," he says. "I really hadn't broken away from the American traditional school of art. I still didn't know what was going on in Europe."

He sold his first paintings for $25 when he was only 18 and between 1922 and 1929 he sold paintings, jerked sodas, studied and saved for a trip to Europe. He had his first group show at the Uptown Gallery on 57th street during that period and at the Marie Harriman Galleries—his first big break was showing at the Harriman Galleries over some impressive competition.

When he was 28, Louis Schanker went to Europe. For two years he studied, visited galleries and had fun. He says: "That trip was the beginning of a whole new approach for me. Up to then I was typical of the American painter who was too scared to

Bard, 1963 Alumni Magazine

break away from tradition. But then I was suddenly faced with the work of Cezanne and Picasso—the whole French post-Impressionist crowd—and my eyes were opened to all the possibilities I'd been missing."

When he returned from Europe, Louis Schanker joined the WPA arts program and directed the woodcut division for awhile. He did a communications mural for the WNYC lobby (which is still there) and a series of clown murals for a Queens Hospital. As a result of those two jobs he was invited to do a mural for the Flushing World's Fair. He has no idea what happened to it when the Fair closed but it was apparently a good example of his new abstract approach to art.

Then in 1933, Louis Schanker had his first big one-man show at the Contemporary Arts Gallery and it was a critical success. He was becoming well known and he was invited to become one of the "Willard Gallery artists." From that time on, all his work went first to the Willard. He has had 30 one-man shows here and abroad since he began to paint and countless group shows all over the world. In 1959, when this writer was living in Santiago, Chile, an invitation came in the mail from the Instituto Chileno-Americano to see a travelling exhibit of woodcuts sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. It was a pleasant surprise to find that, out of 40 woodcuts in the exhibit, three were by Louis Schanker and two were the work of Carol Summers '51. Bard was well represented.

During the war, Louis helped build PT boats. "There's probably some similarity between carpentry and painting," he says. "Anyway, the Navy thought so." He spent some of his time, toward the end of the war, helping to build ships in New Jersey. But he never stopped painting. In 1949 he hit upon his idea for plaster relief prints and had several successful exhibits in the new medium. In fact, in 1952, he had a rare experience for any artist—three shows at once: a sculpture exhibit at the Sculpture Center in New York, a print show and an exhibit of his paintings at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery. Last year his paintings were exhibited in New Zealand and he has been shown at the Tate Gallery in London.

In 1960 Louis Schanker was married to Libby Holman. They live in New York City and in Stamford, Connecticut where Louis has a roomy studio in which he can work on all his interests from large abstract paintings to sculpture prints. He has been teaching at Bard since 1949 and has seen many talented painters emerge from the Bard art studios. In addition to Carol Summers there is Steve Burr '53 who recently won a $1000 award from the National Academy of Design, Al Aron, '55, Steve Barbash, '55, Danny Newman, '51, whose work attracted the attention of Time Magazine's art editors, Carolee Schneemann, '56, Bob Solotaire, '53, and others.

One of his present art majors says of him: "Mr. Schanker's great contribution to Bard is his lack of pretension. He has a workman's approach to art—it's honest and direct. And there is a warmth and sincerity that gets through to us. We respect him as an artist and as a person."

Louis Schanker has some things to say about the academic world in general. "It's not what it used to be," he says. "But it can't be helped. More kids are going to college than when I first started to teach, and colleges have to grow. Otherwise there'd be no place for all those extra art students to go. But you have to complain. You can't just say 'that's the way it is' and let it go at that. It helps to gripe a little. But you know and everybody else knows that nothing can be done about it. We have to lose some good things with expansion—but everything humanly possible is being done to keep the uniqueness of our college—and that's a comfort."

"About Prints" S. W. Hayter, 1964 Oxford University Press
pg. 21

The simplest method of printing from any of the plates produced by the various methods described is in black on white and generally with a uniform inking from the rollers. Certain wood blocks cut on the plank by Gauguin were printed with unequal inking; either by slightly lowering the level of certain parts of the block or by partially wiping away the ink from certain parts, a half-tone grey is produced between the black of the original surface and the white cuts. In recent times there has been, most particularly in America, a great development of woodcut in colour on blocks of very large scale. The print (Pl. 9) of Louis Schanker, who since the thirties has been one of the most active teachers in this technique, shows certain peculiarities of printing which are typical of this whole school. He headed a print-making project in W.P.A. (a relief scheme set up by Roosevelt during the depression), and from his example the great development of

colour woodcut in America chiefly stems. The cutting of a series of blocks intended for colour has clearly to be undertaken systematically so that the registration of colour is exact; in the classical Japanese technique a 'key' block to be printed in black or grey would first be cut. In the frame around the image notches fix the position of a sheet of paper cut to size. Then if similar notches are cut in the frame of each colour block to follow, an impression from the first key block can be printed back (counter-proof) on to these new blocks, giving the positions of elements of colour which will then fall at each printing within the spaces defined by the first block. Another convenient device is to stick down on to each block a print of the key block made on thin, almost transparent paper, which can then be cut through in each case. In Western techniques of multiple block printing by hand a frame or 'chase' holds the block, and the notches or tabs that hold the sheet of paper are on this frame and not on the block itself; but in all cases the object will be to register the position of the image on the sheet of paper in a uniform fashion with as much accuracy as possible.

pg. 23

The normal procedure in printing colour from wood blocks involves a succession of operations in which the oil-base or, in the case of Japanese prints, the water-base colour is laid on the blocks by rollers or even with brushes and each printing allowed to dry before the next colour is printed: with a glass the succession of operations can be followed on the print. It is clear that this has some importance in the result: a simple experiment will show that red printed over a blue has a different effect from the same blue printed over red. However, in the case of the print of Louis Schanker (Pl. 9), printing was carried out wet on wet: i.e. before one colour had time to dry another was printed so that some degree of mixing of the colours appears; and as very heavy inking was used at times, a sort of marbling due to the stickiness of the ink pulling away some of the previous colour is also apparent. The effect is of course similar to that of oil painting, from which the method is evidently derived. Somewhat similar effects are obtained in certain prints by means of serigraphy (described in Chapter 6), but careful examination will show a distinct difference in the quality of the surface. With a serigraph no trace is seen of the characteristic indentation which is always found to some extent in prints from blocks; the colour lies upon the undisturbed surface of the paper, and generally shows the texture of the screen itself.

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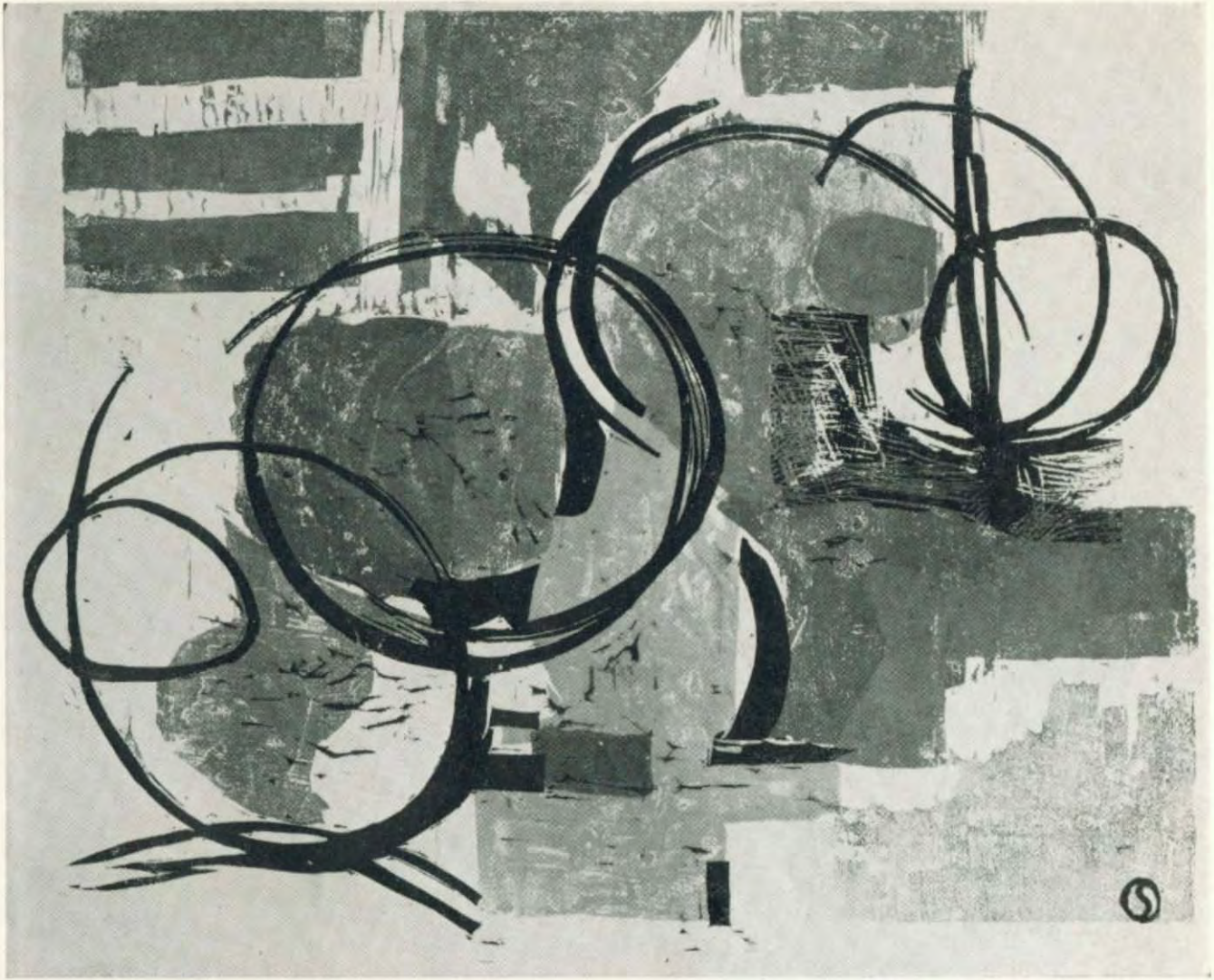
The block-printer Louis Schanker at the time of my arrival in New York in 1940 was still directing a project in print-making under the Works Project Authority: a most imaginative scheme set up under the New Deal to provide subsistence for artists. Directed at the time by a general, having no doubt a thoroughly military ignorance of aesthetics, it always seemed to me the more effective in that it was completely indiscriminate, requiring from its artists nothing but the

obligation to work and supplying them with materials and mere subsistence. Every major artist of the time in America was involved in this scheme. Such an organization, if continued for over a generation in any country with sufficient potential, could be expected to promote a magnificent development of talent; and even if it did not last so long, the enormous subsequent development of the arts in America and her present position as one of the major influences of the day owe a great deal to this scheme. Within this organization Schanker inducted a great number of young Americans into the craft of wood-cut—more especially his particular technique of printing from different blocks wet on wet, to give results approaching the richness and complexity of oil painting.

When I returned to Europe for the



9. LOUIS SCHANKER. Circle Image. 1925. Colour woodcut $14\frac{1}{2}'' \times 18\frac{1}{2}''$

Stamford Advocate 5/21/70

Louis Schanker, Early Life Rebel, Enjoys Days In Rustic Home Studio

By MARIE UPDEGRAFF

If a fortune teller gazed into her crytal ball to see what was going to happen to Louis Schanker, neither she nor Louis Schanker would have believed it.

The Stamford artist, who married wealthy, twice-widowed "torch singer" Libby Holman in 1960, rebelled at age 14 against just about everything — family, school, religion.

If he had had his way at the time, he might have been killed or disabled in World War I. Or, today, he might be a retired circus roustabout.

Instead, at his present age of 66, Mr. Schanker is not only a leading designer, carver and printer of woodcuts, but also a respected painter and sculptor. Bard College, where he taught art for 15 years, has named him professor emeritus.

Found in Top Collections.

His work can be found in the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, the New York City Public Library, the Chicago Art Institute — to name a few hallowed halls that include him — and in many top private collections. This fall a Rockefeller grant to the Brooklyn Museum will enable the museum to publish a book of his woodcuts in color and black and white.

A highly intelligent, considerate man with a fringe of white hair and a full white mustache, Mr. Schanker radiates good will and physical stamina. The other morning, as he sat in the library of "Tree Tops," his wife's 100-acre estate on Merriebrook La., it amused him to recall how, as a youth, he tried to derail his life —and had a lot of fun doing it.

Tried to Enlist at 14.

"I was born in a cold-water flat in the Bronx," he began, "and, when I was 14 I ran away from home to go to war. I changed the date on my birth certificate to prove I was 18. But, the Army decided it didn't look kosher and told me to go home.

"I rebelled against religion. My parents were orthodox Jews who had a small store in the Bronx which sold tailor's trimmings. Also, I rebelled against school. My first month at the old Townsend Harris High was my last. To me, academic subjects meant nothing but frustration."

So young Schanker quit school and went to work for E. P. Dutton & Co. as a messenger. One day he saw a set of oil paints in a store window, and, with money jingling in his pocket, bought the set as a birthday present for his older brother. Louis was the fourth of seven children, three boys and four girls.

Brother Didn't Paint.

But, his brother took no interest whatever in the paint set. Finally, Louis picked it up and began coloring the spaces of the picture that came with it. (He insists the spaces weren't numbered in those days.)

Then, he went on to painting on blank paper. His new interest in art propelled him back to school, to study drawing at Copper Union at night.

The lure of adventure continued to haunt him, however. So, when he was a strapping 19-year-old with black hair and the endurance of an elephant, he dropped the art courses to run away with two friends and join a circus in Macon, Ga.

The hick-town Sparks Circus, which played one-night stands in towns of 5,000 or less, hired him to take care of its ring horses. In the circus pecking order the wire walkers, animal trainers, and other performers were the elite. Fellows like "Blackie" Schanker who did the menial jobs were considered "scum."

Gambled Away Money.

"I was paid five dollars a week plus 'found,' which meant room and board," he said. "I never saw a penny of my five dollars because I always lost it in circus crap games. But as long as they fed me, I didn't care."

Nevertheless, he cared enough to try to organize the "scum" to demand more money. Management found out and abruptly fired him in a little town in Michigan.

After a summer on a harvesting crew in the Midwest wheat fields, young Schanker returned to New York to seriously study art at the Art Student's League and the Educational Alliance, a settlement house. He earned money manning a soda fountain from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. When he wasn't painting, he posed for art classes.

Studied in France.

"I made enough money on tips at the soda fountain to finance a year in France and Italy in 1931, during the depression," he said. "I studied at the Grande Chaumiere and had a studio outside Paris. I was still doing realistic painting."

But, as time passed, his work became increasingly abstract. Until today he rarely creates anything that could be considered realistic.

The artist who completed only one month of high school went on to teach at Bard College, becoming an associate professor. At roughly the same time, he spent 18 years teaching at the New School for Social Research.

Mr. Schanker's marriage to the famous Miss Holman, widow of tobacco heir Zachary Smith Reynolds and widow also of actor Ralph Holmes, was another unexpected event in his unpredictable life. They met in 1958 at the New School. Miss Holman had just finished starring in Lorca's tragedy, "Yerma," her first appearance after a long absence from the stage.

"You Must Meet Libby."

"One of my former girl students at the school was in a Zen Buddhism class with Libby," Mr. Schanker explained. "This student kept telling me I must meet her friend Libby, and one day she brought Libby into my classroom.

"We had about a minute. I said, 'I'm glad to meet you,' and Libby said, 'I'm glad to meet you,' and that was that. She had to go to her Zen class, and my next art class started coming in.

"I didn't see Libby again until the same student had an exhibit at one of the New York galleries, I said, 'Hello,' and she said, 'Hello,' and we both attended a party after the show. It wasn't until we started going together that I had any idea who Libby Holman was."

Originally, the dynamic Elizabeth Holman came to New York City from Cincinnati to study law at Columbia, but was sidetracked into the theater. In 1926, she made a hit overnight singing "Moanin' Low" in "Garrick Gaieties," and from then on was famous as the "torch singer." Her plans for a legal career went down the drain.

Wed In Jamaica.

Two years after they met, Mr. Schanker, whose first marriage had ended in divorce some time before, and Miss Holman, were married in Jamaica.

On a knoll at "Tree Tops" stands the artist's modern studio building, where he often spends 12 hours at a stretch. It has a fireplace and a generous expanse of windows and skylights which let in candid north light. The studio holds samples of his sculture, woodcuts and paintings and, of course, the tools with which he works.

Circles and spheres particularly fascinate him. "They are the perfect shape," he explained. "You drop some liquid on the floor and it forms a circle, never a square or a rectangle."

Creates "Feelies."

This fascination takes form in wood scultpure that Mr. Schanker calls his "feelies." Standing about in his studio are a number of pieces, some taller than a man, inside of which he has chiseled and polished one or more moveable spheres. They remain entrapped, exactly as he formed them in the body of the work, like an unborn child in the womb. The spheres can be rotated, but they can't be removed without breaking the piece.

Mr. Schanker invited a group of teenagers from a blind school to one of his New York shows, specifically so they could feel his scultpure. He says the blind youngsters were ecstatic over the experience.

Currently, he was prepared an exhibit of bright acrylic abstract paintings on sheets of plastic that he chiseled out ever so slightly to create a textured effect. They will be shown in a New York gallery. Occasionally, he has exhibited one or two of his pieces at the Stamford Museum.

"I don't think any artist can explain his work or why he does what he does," Mr. Schanker commented. "It's a matter of feeling, mainly, and a sense of color, space and movement. Preconceived ideas don't necessarily turn out that way. You allow accidents to happen, because accidents make art exciting."

The rebel who tried to go to war in 1917 has become a rebel against the war in Vietnam.

"Libby and I and some others have organized a group called 'Peace Now' to end America's participation in the Vietnam war immediately," Mr. Schanker said. "Libby is chairman of the movement. We have just sent telegrams to all 100 senators and to President Nixon, urging them to get out of the war right now."

 1980, doubleday Una Johnson

what many artists were seeking. Today there remain many artists, especially in intaglio and the relief print, who prefer to print their own editions.

In 1940, Louis Schanker, whose woodcuts in color had first appeared in the later 1930s, began teaching his methods and new approaches to the woodcut medium to a small group of artists at the New School in New York. For a brief season Schanker and his fellow artists shared a small, cramped studio with Hayter's Atelier 17. Soon, however, such quarters became far too small, and Atelier 17 was moved to an independent studio in a nearby section of Greenwich Village. In 1942 Schanker began a long series of very large woodcuts in color that included *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza* and *Abstract Landscape*. In them he first explored the possibilities of printing a solid black on which he then overprinted other colors. The colors thus overprinted on undampened Japan paper have an enhanced richness and luminosity. *Carnival,* a woodcut issued in 1948, is a tour de force in the extended range of colors made possible by skillful overprinting and the controlled movement of abstract images in two-dimensional space. (See color illustration no. 1.) Schanker's intuitive sense of rich color and his ability to successfully employ it in his gouaches and woodcuts had a strong influence on his own painting and on those of his contemporaries. An intricate study in the movement of large, diversified forms within a composition is carried out in his woodcut *Static and Revolving,* issued in 1948. The intermingling of colors and large gestural circular images with many variations became the leitmotiv of Schanker's graphic work throughout the 1950s.

Boris Margo, working independently, issued many Surrealist etchings and cellocuts. He had arrived in the United States in 1930 by way of Canada, after a childhood and youth spent in Russia. In his student days his interest turned to the paintings of Bosch and Brueghel and to the romantic mysticism and luminous color of medieval icons which he observed in the museums of Odessa, Leningrad, and Moscow. A later concern with philosophies of the Far East and the scientific accomplishments of the western world have colored his mature work. These wide interests together with a thorough knowledge of painting, sculpture, and prints have made him an exceptional artist and an inspiring teacher.

In 1932 Margo had begun his first experiments in what he termed the cellocut medium. Since that time he has developed this particular medium into a unique expression in twentieth-century prints. His first series, entitled *Portfolio of Early Cellocuts,* was completed during the years from 1932 to 1942. A second, *Portfolio Planned for Letter Press Printing,* contained twenty examples and covered a short period of his work from 1947 to 1949. This was a pioneer effort in which the artist employed the power press as a means of producing original prints from his own plates. Among Margo's early cellocuts are his *Space Ship* and *Night and the Atom,* both issued in 1946, which reveal his interest in nature and its resources.

In 1949 he issued an elaborate portfolio of large cellocuts entitled *The Months.* His imaginative invention and exploration of the medium and its vast possibilities combined with his own superb skill in printing made this series a high point in his work. Margo attempts to set down graphically some of the impersonal concepts and calculations of the scientist and engineer in terms of the personal and intuitive expression of the artist. The recording of light images, imaginary lines in the measurements of arcs of light, and the interrelation of translucent planes are frequently seen in his compositions. Clear primary colors emphasize the tensions and rhythmic flow of images in deep space.

In the more than 160 prints which compose his graphic oeuvre Boris Margo has not only created the image on the plates but also printed them. He is capable of controlling the printing press as he does a brush or chisel. He considers this total involvement in a particular metier necessary in the realization of his compositions. In the seeming simplicity and unobtrusive order of their calligraphic imagery the later cellocuts evoke a mysterious presence.

Spanning a long period of printmaking are the graphic works of Will Barnet, Max Kahn, and Benton Spruance. As teachers and artists they influenced and trained many younger artists in the various media of prints. Will Barnet, well-known painter and printmaker, is fully at home in all the media of modern printmaking. Early in the 1930s he experimented

of Harunobu and later in the stylized woodblock prints of Utamaro. In the West nineteenth-century commercial printing houses applied embossed designs to special calendars, trade cards, and other advertising devices.

In the twentieth century the metal prints of Rolf Nesch in Norway are classic examples of the low relief print. In Paris, Pierre Courtin issued rare works of great sensitivity. In Italy, Micossi sought out unlikely vistas of little-known hill towns to create romantic cameo-like compositions. Also in Italy, Lucio Fontana created repeatable printed images from plates whose surface projections pierce the paper during printing. After many experiments with both plates and presses Fontana was able to produce editions of identical impressions. Printed in a rich, solid black, they are exceptional examples of fine modern printmaking. In the United States the embossed print has been in evidence since the early 1940s.

Plaster Relief Prints

Compositions in plaster with their sharply cut-out areas and pulsating lines were part of the experimental work at Atelier 17 in New York. These were imaginatively developed by the painter John Ferren in his rare plaster relief plaques "pulled" from inked metal plates. Misch Kohn, from 1952 to 1957, printed his large-scale wood engravings under extreme pressure to obtain deeply embossed surfaces of unusual richness. Notable examples are his *Kabuki Samurai* of 1954 and *Processional,* issued in 1955.

In 1960 Louis Schanker issued a series of woodcut-plaster prints in which he introduced in a heavily embossed picture frame, semblance of a third dimension. Such prints approach low-relief sculpture by exploiting the expansional properties of the paper itself and also ingenious printing methods. This idea had been employed at Atelier 17 in inkless embossments and also in the metal prints of Rolf Nesch. However, Schanker's work in the relief woodcut and plaster relief print was an unusual innovation. Because of the complicated printing procedures Schanker printed only small editions or a few artist's proofs.

Inkless Intaglio

As early as 1953 Margo initiated the printed cellocut in some of his paintings, which were shaped canvases. In 1960 he began a further development of the cellocut medium, employing the cellocut plate as an inkless intaglio combined with the soft rich tones of lithography. His 1972 portfolio of twelve large prints is a summing up of his work from 1960 to 1972. In it the fantastic and surreal imagery which often appears in his oeuvre is greatly simplified. Color serves as a subtle background against which the heavily embossed images catch and hold the angle of light. Margo has remarked:

> "As time goes on, I feel the greatest virtues are in simplicity. One result of this growing conviction is that color, to me, becomes most effective when least evident. Many of my recent cellocuts exist primarily through the shadows cast by their raised surfaces on the white paper."[2]

Other artists have enlarged the scope of the embossed print through varying interpretations and techniques. Nevertheless, most have worked within the limitations of the paper itself. They have stretched or expanded the paper to its limits, but generally they have chosen not to pierce or cut the carrying agent of their images. Josef Albers, in 1958, worked briefly in inkless intaglio to create pristine images of the square. Other intaglio methods have been employed by Ezio Martinelli, Doris Seidler, Adja Yunkers, Glen Alps, Robert Broner, Romas Viesulas, and Minna Citron. Through the skillful application of inks of varying viscosity Dean Meeker has raised the surface of his image through the screen print, demonstrated in his print entitled *Black Mood,* issued in 1955.

Special note should be made of the entire graphic oeuvre of Omar Rayo, a Colombian artist who has lived and worked for extended periods in New York. His highly competent low-relief intaglio images are printed from inked or inkless plates on heavily sized English watercolor papers. They may be total abstractions of flawless elegance or they may be composed of a single readily discernible image. A safety pin or a sneaker is handled with the same knowing crafts-

tion is built up in soft yet pulsating colors. Broad areas of yellow, blue, orange, and a greenish-tone black are placed against a glowing red background. The entire work is bathed in a shimmering luminosity. Here, as in his landscapes, the masses of bright color not only provoke surprise and accentuate the intensity of the work, they also soften or mute the smaller areas to give a heightened sense of mystery and uniqueness to the character of the sitter or to a particular landscape.

The prints of Mauricio Lasansky have remained firmly within the figurative tradition. Very large in scale and involving intricate techniques of the intaglio process, his prints chart the progression of his life and that of his family. The small ironies of life as well as its grave problems hold his attention. (His earlier work is discussed on pp. 101–2.) During the first half of the 1960s Lasansky was greatly preoccupied with the development of a long series of life-size drawings that he designated as *The Nazi Drawings.* Some of the images had their roots in his earlier prints. The artist's intent was to record in unforgettable and unrelenting images the inhumanity and violence that is still possible in the twentieth century. Perhaps as a relief from the tensions and stabbing imagery of these drawings Lasansky also issued a number of prints of a different order. Their titles suggest a distant and possibly more peaceful culture. Strong blacks and bright colors now encompass broken or fragmented forms, as may be observed in the large intaglio *Quetzalcoatl* of 1972 as well as in the artist's composition *Young Nahua Dancer,* completed in 1973 after nearly a dozen years of work. (See color illustration no. 16.) The fifty-four plates required in the final orchestration of the work are a measure of the tenacity and completeness of Lasansky's vision and his command of his highly technical medium.

A new departure marks the graphic work of Misch Kohn in the later 1960s and is apparent in the intaglio-collage in color issued in 1968. In the present decade Misch Kohn has developed an imagery that is almost entirely abstract. His technical virtuosity and his imaginative use of materials have given diversity to his work. He fabricates his own papers, often utilizing discarded trial proofs from earlier editions. A single composition may include engraving, aquatint, woodcut, and chine colle. Symbols and calligraphic notations used in earlier prints (pp. 86, 91), wine labels, letters and fragments, old prints and personal memorabilia have been incorporated into this later work. Clear, rich colors give an added coherence to the lively turmoil of images. Kohn's amusingly titled etching with chine colle, *Blow Up Your Balloon and Tie with E,* and his *Construction with F,* issued in 1977, are splendid examples of his recent prints.[18] (See color illustration no. 17.)

Will Barnet continued his abstract works in both the woodcut and the intaglio medium (see pp. 82–83) with equal success. His woodcut *Singular Image* of 1964 (see color illustration no. 18) and his two aquatints of 1967 related to the totemic symbols of the Northwest Coast Indians are entitled *Big Grey* and *Compression—Spokane.* Their simplicity and power record Barnet's response to the landscape of the Northwest and its early Indian inhabitants. His later large-scale figurative prints in silhouetted forms and dark colors are often set against a geometric background. Appearing in the later 1960s, these highly stylized compositions are a fusion of his long interest in the genre work of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century itinerant painters and his own abstract images mentioned above. Issued in lithography, aquatint, and screen printing, they demonstrate his knowledge of the media of the modern print.

The spiraling forms and calligraphic elements prominent in early woodcuts of Seong Moy (see pp. 83, 86) have gradually been submerged into simplified and contemplative abstract images in muted colors. This change in style appears in his large color relief prints and in his acrylic collages on canvas during the past two decades. A singularly contemplative mood prevails in the subtle imagery of *Black Stone and Red Pebble,* a relief print issued in 1972 (see color illustration no. 19), and in a number of other compositions of the later 1970s. In these tempered graphic works Seong Moy brings together the elusive elements of an eastern heritage and the directness of a contemporary abstract vision.

In the summer of 1978 Schanker again returned to woodcuts in a series of very large prints often printed

in as many as ten colors. These late works are composed of intricately cut curved shapes printed in black which are combined with other flat abstract forms in a surging array of clear, high-keyed colors. These large compositions are achieved in a single printing, the entire operation being carried out by the artist. The graphic oeuvre of Louis Schanker (see also p. 82), with its bold, forthright images and its range of color nuances, lucidly documents the versatility of the twentieth-century relief print and the imaginative utilization of a printing technique.

Artists who have widely different geographic backgrounds have worked in the figurative tradition. Their major prints appear in the 1960s and continue into the following decade. Their independent search for meaningful images that mirror their ideas and experiences form a telling counterpart to Abstract Expressionism and to the styles of Pop and Op prints. Many of the artists working in the figurative tradition saw foreign military service and later spent a year or more in Europe or in the Orient on grants made available through federal or private funds. Prints are a well-established part of their total creative oeuvre. Representative of those artists in the New York area are the intaglio prints of Chaim Koppelman, Gerson Leiber, and Al Blaustein.

Chaim Koppelman has issued prints of figures within a larger landscape. However, his compassionate concern with social change, war and its effect on ordinary human beings soon becomes uppermost in the delineation of his work. It is as a moralist and a partisan for peace that he makes his most eloquent visual statements. He is not deterred from tough-minded appraisals of the destructive consequences of war and of political experiences. He has harnessed his skills and his unblinking imagery to the troubled, often controversial problems of our times. Among his large graphic oeuvre is *Retired Napoleons,* 1965, in which the surface of the paper is cut to reveal three identical faces, and a later embossed intaglio, *Murdered, Vietnam,* 1968. Koppelman is not alone in his visual and partisan demands for humanistic values; nevertheless, he is one of the most eloquent. His fine draftsmanship is, also, to be noted in his 1970 aquatint, *Homage to Degas.*

The intaglio prints of Gerson Leiber, a prolific artist, register an entirely different approach. New York is his microcosm, and he views it with perceptive vision and irony tinged with geniality. The vastness of the city panorama and its tides of humanity are caught in sharp vignettes. They are keenly observed and set down in graphic statements whose greatest impact is made through a warm detachment and an understatement of compelling facts. The sustained caliber of his etchings is to be noted in *The Beach,* 1965, and *Pigeon Woman,* 1971, both etchings.

Al Blaustein, born in New York City in 1924, is a painter and printmaker who has also worked in sculpture. He studied at Cooper Union and later worked with Gabor Peterdi at the Yale Summer School of Art at Norfolk, Connecticut. The recipient of many scholarships, he has traveled extensively in Europe, Africa, Japan, and India. Blaustein's interest in people and their various modes of life is reflected in his drawings, which constitute the basis of his etchings. In his intaglio work, Blaustein is concerned chiefly with western ideas and subjects. An introspective mood prevails in *The Recluse,* issued in 1958. Thoughtful but strange fantasies lurk in the depths of *The Music Room* and in *Faigele.* Often preoccupied with problems of society, this artist turns his attention to figurative works that express individual disquietudes and occasional enchantments.

Dean Meeker has issued both intaglio and screen prints of note. (See p. 155.) Although born in Colorado, he has lived mostly in the Middle West. Since 1946 he has taught painting, drawing, and printmaking at the University of Wisconsin, where he holds a professorship. As an artist, his recurring interest has been in historic and mythological subjects. He remarks:

> "The Hero, Icarus, Genghis Khan all are out of the fabric that stimulates the detachment and transfiguration necessary to the creative impulse. The Hero and his typical metamorphosis, separation, initiation, return, his love of fate that is inevitably death, is vital to my own feeling. Ultimately one reshapes these impulses and retells a story that is not mythological or literary but graphic, with symbols that may or may not communicate depending on the frame of ref-

Circular Forms I (1956)

CIRCULAR FORMS

Louis Schanker's Circle Image enters a new context.

BY SUZANNE BURREY

IF, TO paraphrase Sir Andrew Aguecheek, some artists are born to abstract art, some achieve it and some have abstractedness thrust upon them—Louis Schanker's has been the middle course. Among Americans, he leaned early toward abstraction (he was one of "The Ten" who challenged the Whitney in the thirties); then his subjects were horses and figures, greatly simplified, and now he works in a unique circle idiom, geometrically non-objective. A mural which he did during the middle thirties for Station WNYC, made up entirely of free-swinging musical notes, must have seemed at the time radical indeed. In 1944 he published a portfolio of wood-block color prints (a medium in which he is a recognized master) entitled *Line-Form-Color.** In 1953, *sans* color, and in a liquid white field, or else poster flat, Schanker announced on canvas the seriousness of his circle language. In subsequent Brooklyn Print Annuals he has shown giant woodcuts of black circle forms, climbing as voluminously as smoke clouds up six feet of white paper. And currently, at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, he is showing twenty-five canvases, again centrifugal in conception but much loosened, which he has invested with an exceptional subtlety of color and complexity of surface.

The first impression of the group is of their verdant pallor, of greens and violets in the embrace of Gothic traceries of black and, over all, a screen of tiny dots, in light colors, most often white—a revival of pointillism, not as a means for light but as a kind of surface binder and a statement of the picture

Louis Schanker in his studio.

**Line-Form-Color*, a portfolio of five original wood-block color prints, with preface by Carl Zigrosser (George Wittenborn, Inc., New York). A few copies are still in print.

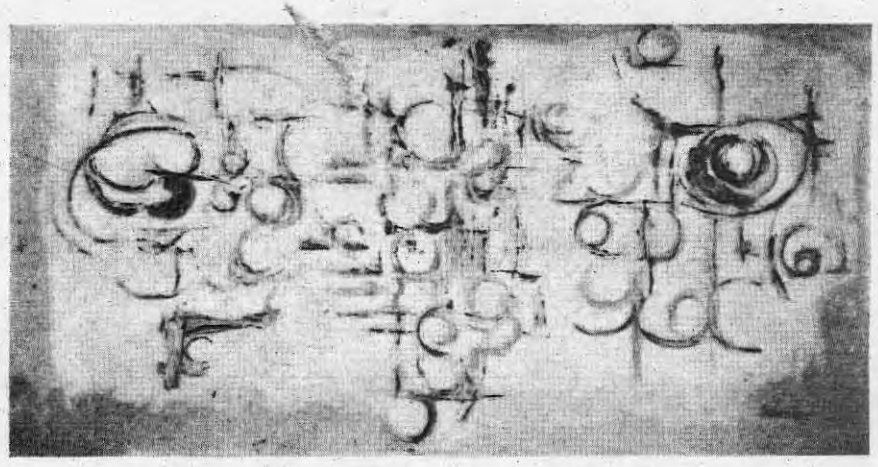
plane. Some bear such titles as *The Sea, The Wave,* but since almost every one is of the same black energies whirling and counter-whirling in a dense grainy field (with the exception of the white silhouettes of three figures, *General and His Family*), the titles are quite beside the point. Although they are equally evocative of whirling molecules or galaxies or microbe paths, the predominance of violets, coral and green and the undulating motion of the blacks do suggest the undersea world, and the words may give some comfort to the stray visitor who, bewildered by the singleness of purpose in these canvases, may wonder if he is confronting an obsession.

Actually, this painting is, if anything, too sane and workmanlike; and its problems lie within its own intricacies of craft. The method is virtually the same for all: first a field of soft color—yellow, violet, green, red; then a series of thick whites and blacks, applied until the surface is ripely blended; the blacks and the foundation colors are then carefully re-exposed by scraping through to them; and the finish is arrived at by sprinkling sometimes sand, sometimes dots of color over the surface to screen careful nuances out of both the blacks and the rich foundation colors. Large in scale for the most part, the paintings are best taken at a distance which renders all these surface techniques invisible. The question then arises: Is the body of his recent work like a fountain that plays unendingly, purely fascinating, or can each painting be identified as an individual conception and solution?

Circular Forms I, Circular Forms II are certainly impressive. And in a few others, including some small ones, the artist seems to have stopped when he had come to terms with an emergent effect. What effect is hard to describe, since the best have the kind of allure that will be only subjective in its satisfactions. They have the power of establishing a relationship, even if only to rock the spectator and draw him into a lovely maze.

SCHANKER'S art does not have the cultivated slapdash "spontaneity" of tachism; and it springs from a different basis than the traditional challenge of making new combinations out of nature's bare bones. These paintings have instead an intellectual element at their root; a freewheeling preoccupation with one geometric form—the circle—for its own sake marks a radical change from the time when Schanker's work was full of powerful, primitive figural concepts, some of which he carved in mahogany. The circle is "intellectual" insofar as it seems to be divorced from any but a symbolic source (as to *what* it symbolizes, in our day it could just as well be the ego as the atom); it serves as an Esperanto of form. But discovering and announcing an Esperanto, a "universal language," does not necessarily make its content meaningful; there is always a danger of auto-infatuation. This is evidenced occasionally among Schanker's numerous canvases, which are not sorted out as to research and realization. In all, there are consistent values, however: energy, reliable color sense and true delight in craftsmanship. For pure dynamism, as a matter of fact, his Circular Forms on wood and plaster (and as prints) outdistance these canvases—perhaps because he has a more direct textural control in these other media. The paintings of this present phase open up another zone of expression. Above and beyond the literal adherence to and repetition of the circle play is the richness of layered colors, which but slightly varies from one work to another. Such is the fascination of these paintings, and their continual motion, that they seem to swing opulently out of a very private rumination or romance.

At right: ***Circle Image No. 38*** *(1954). Below:* ***Circle Image No. 36*** *(1954). Courtesy Grace Borgenicht Gallery.*



FOREWORD

In 1963 The Brooklyn Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings, under the supervision of its curator, Una E. Johnson, began a series of definitive monographs on outstanding American artists who were making important contributions to the field of graphic arts. Through a generous grant from The Ford Foundation Program in Humanities and the Arts, this publishing venture has flourished for the past eleven years. Nine books have been issued from the presses of The Brooklyn Museum and several of the popular volumes are already out of print. The books have proved to be valuable reference tools for scholars researching contemporary American prints and drawings.

Although Miss Johnson retired from The Brooklyn Museum in 1969, her interest in the series has not lessened. It is therefore appropriate that her essay on Louis Schanker is published here.

Miss Johnson selected the first nine artists in the series and the publication of this book completes the original list. However, proceeds from the sale of the series have made it possible to continue the program. A new list of deserving artists is being considered at this time, and in the near future we hope to issue a tenth volume.

It should be noted here that this much-needed series stands as a published monument to Una E. Johnson, a pioneer scholar in the field of graphic arts.

Jo Miller
Curator of Prints and Drawings

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks are extended to Louis Schanker who made his prints available for research and generously gave his time to many interviews, to Tom Jagger for his catalogue research, and to Una E. Johnson for the introduction to this volume and for her constant cooperation. Grateful acknowledgments go to the following staff members of The Brooklyn Museum: Nancy Tousley for her assistance on the catalogue, Beatrice Brailsford for editing the manuscript, Dorothy Weiss for typing and proofreading, and to Daniel Weidmann for the layout and design of the monograph. Thanks also go to Jane Rockwell for special editorial assistance.

INTRODUCTION

In the middle 1930s, the woodcut — oldest of all print media — was revived by a few artists who saw the great possibilities of developing it into a vigorous contemporary expression. Foremost among these artists was Louis Schanker.

Primarily a painter, Schanker also worked in low-relief hardwood sculpture. It was a logical step for him to combine his interest in color and sculpture with the woodcut medium. Thus he began a technical investigation of the clear, flat colors, precise registration, and oblique perspectives of Japanese color woodblock prints. Much as Arthur W. Dow had done thirty years earlier,* Schanker adapted and incorporated Japanese techniques into his burgeoning ideas. He worked freely with many colors in a progression of cut blocks, building his images as Dow had by using various colors printed from separate blocks. Color was used for its compositional value, rather than as a "fill-in" for a key block. Schanker further expanded the inherent possibilities of the woodblock by using sculptor's tools and carpenter's rasps to cut his blocks. In so doing, he considerably advanced the expressive range of the woodcut medium as a distinctly modern and vital idiom.

The artist's first recorded woodcut, *Trio* (1935), was printed from seven carefully cut blocks, one block for each color. This was followed in 1936 by a small composition, *Man at Piano.* In 1937 he issued a complicated and disturbingly appropriate woodcut entitled *Dictator's Dream. Polo,* the first of a half-dozen prints made from linoleum blocks, appeared the same year. Printed from eight large blocks, *Polo* effectively combines translucent colors and movements of fine, staccato lines and swirling forms. In both his paintings and prints, Schanker's interest in color, in movement, and in musical themes conveys the rhythmic actions of performing musicians and athletes in abstract form.

*Dow printed in watercolors from woodblocks cut with a knife, using the side of the wood, rather than the end, as his printing surface. Color was applied freely with a brush and the paper laid on the block and rubbed. Dow was fascinated with the color variations and luminous tones resulting from this method of printing in watercolor on Japan paper. Registration of the various color blocks was accomplished through the use of a key block (from the *International Studio* 59 [July – October 1916], pp. xv–xvi).

During the 1930s Schanker and many other American artists were working on mural projects under the auspices of the Federal Works Progress Administration. Because of his special interest in modern graphics, Schanker was made a supervisor in the graphic arts section of the WPA in New York City. Although he painted prolifically, he found time to produce some twenty woodcuts and linoleum cuts between 1938 and 1939.

Throughout his career, Schanker was never content to merely repeat his early achievements. The artist continued to experiment with the woodcut medium and initiated many variations in the techniques of relief printing. He was also an influential teacher. In 1943 and for several years thereafter, Schanker taught at the New School for Social Research in New York City. For one season he and his first group of students shared a small studio at the New School with Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17.

In late 1943 the first extensive exhibition of Schanker's woodcuts was held at The Brooklyn Museum and Schanker began a series of very large woodcuts in color. In the first of these woodcuts, the ambitious *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza,* the artist overprinted five colors on a solid black block. Bold, angular forms are held within a web of semitransparent and opaque colors overprinted on undampened Japan paper. This technique gives an intense richness and luminosity to the print's uncompromisingly abstract forms. *Birds in Flight,* a print of similar size, followed. It's bold, semiabstract forms and flat, harmonious colors were printed from 14- x 30-inch planks.

A different cadence and approach to abstract imagery is apparent in *Abstract Landscape* (1945). Composed of small, abstract figures and occasionally delineated symbols of birds, leaves, and tendrils, this composition is built within a grid of dark lines. It is a modern version, in muted colors, of Egyptian hieroglyphs. The following year, Schanker turned to the completely abstract images that were to dominate his ensuing oeuvre.

Louis Schanker's skill and understanding of color, harmony, and dissonance led to many exceptional prints. The woodcut *Carnival* (1948) is a tour de force in a wide range of color made possible by skillful overprinting and controlled movement of images in two-dimensional space. During this productive period, his work in color printing was a strong influence on his paintings and those of other artists. But Schanker did not consider his prints as solely experimental or technical exercises. He saw in them a different, but equally valid, means of expressing the same ideas that preoccupied him in his painting.

In *Static and Revolving* (1948), the artist made an intricate study of the circular movement and sudden curtailment of large forms in a two-dimensional space. His development and continued use of the circle image led to prints in which his use of color and of large, simplified forms in space created blunt, primitive rhythms. The circle, in many variations, became symbolic of Schanker's graphic work of the 1950s.

In the same decade, the artist made a number of important innovations in what he termed the plaster relief print. In executing these prints, he often used the woodblock to create a three-dimensional effect. The technical aspect of Schanker's work — one of the early ventures in the development of the sculptural image in twentieth-century graphic art — is described elsewhere in this monograph. Because of the varying blocks and somewhat complicated printing procedures, these experimental prints exist only in artist's proofs or in very limited editions. In these works he used his experimental printing techniques to soften the outlines of his bold, forthright images.

During the 1960s Schanker devoted most of his creative efforts to large-scale hardwood sculptures before returning to the woodcut and relief print. The prints of this period combine the woodcut with sheets of plastic cut in much the same manner as the woodblock. In 1971 Schanker issued about twenty prints, fifteen of which were printed from plastic plates. His most recent work with acrylic paints reveals his interest in their high color intensities and different viscosities.

Printmaking is a natural and appropriate vehicle for Schanker, for it combines his talents as a sculptor with his keen sense of color. The resistance of the block itself to the pressure of chisel, knife, and rasp exacts his most inventive and ingenious talents. His creative purpose is effectively implemented by the use of color as the integral function of his abstract designs. The works which make up Louis Schanker's graphic oeuvre lucidly document the strength and imaginitive approach which characterize American prints produced during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Una E. Johnson
Curator Emeritus
Department of Prints and Drawings

OUTLOOK
he Stamford Museum & Nature Center
September 1981

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

PAINTING A PLACE IN AMERICA

EDITED BY NORMAN L. KLEEBLATT AND SUSAN CHEVLOWE

The Jewish Museum, 1991

LOUIS SCHANKER (1903-1981)

Louis Schanker was born in New York on July 20, 1903. When he was a teenager he left school and went to work as a laborer with a circus troupe for two years. He continued to travel, working his way through Canada and the Dakotas as a field hand, gandy dancer, and a stevedore on the Great Lakes. He also rode freight trains across the country before returning to New York in 1919 to study art. Until 1923 he studied drawing from plaster casts in the evenings at Cooper Union and painted in a life class there once a week. He attended the Art School of the Educational Alliance and the Art Students League until 1927.

From 1931 to 1932 Schanker lived in Paris and studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He also worked on his own, making *plein air* studies, and visited museums where he came to greatly admire the works of Renoir, Degas and Signac. In 1933 Schanker lived for a year in Mallorca. It was there that he began to work in a semi-abstract style influenced by analytic Cubism. In other paintings typical of his style of the mid- and late-1930s he employed a heavy black contour against a patchwork of colored atmospheric planes. These were influenced by Rouault as well as the School of Paris. Schanker sought to depict movement, and a sense of time in his works; thus his attraction to subjects such as dance, sports and recreation. The artist also worked throughout his career making carved wood sculptures and reliefs that often reflected the influence of the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi.

In the mid-1930s Schanker became a graphic arts supervisor for the WPA. From 1935 to 1939 he exhibited with the Ten, a group of artists including Gottlieb, Rothko and Solman who reacted against Regionalism and American Scene painting. In 1936 Schanker was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists. His wood-block design was used as the poster for the exhibition *"The Ten" Whitney Dissenters*, held at the Mercury Galleries in New York in 1938. That year he was given a solo exhibition at the New School for Social Research in New York and also exhibited with YKUF. He also created an abstract mural for the Hall of Medicine and Public Health at the New York World's Fair in 1939. Schanker frequently exhibited both his paintings and sculpture in the Annuals of the Whitney Museum of American Art beginning in 1939. By the late 1930s and into the next decade his work showed the influence of biomorphic Surrealism. Even at this time his subject matter remained grounded in reality. Only in the late 1940s and beyond did his work approach pure nonobjectivism.

During World War II Schanker worked as a shipfitter. He had also established a reputation in printmaking and in the 1940s he began to teach color wood-block printing at the New School, where he continued as an instructor through 1960. In 1949 he also became a professor of art at Bard College and taught there until 1964. A retrospective of the artist's prints was held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1974. He lived in New York City, Stamford, Connecticut, and East Hampton, New York. Schanker died in 1981.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1933 *Louis Schanker*, Contemporary Arts Gallery, New York

1938 *Louis Schanker: Paintings*, The New School, New York

1974 *Louis Schanker Prints: 1924-1971*, The Brooklyn Museum, New York

1978 *Louis Schanker: A Printmaking Retrospective, 1924-1971*, Associated American Artists Galleries, New York (also exhibited 1986)

1981 *Louis Schanker: Works of the 30s and 40s*, Martin Diamond Fine Arts, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1934 *An American Group, Group Exhibition*, An American Group Galleries, New York

1935 *The Ten: An Independent Group*, Montross Gallery, New York

1936 *Opening Exhibition*, Municipal Art Gallery, New York

1936 *The Ten*, Galerie Bonaparte, Paris

1936 *The Ten*, Montross Gallery, New York

1937 *The Ten*, Georgette Passedoit Gallery, New York (also exhibited 1938)

1937 *American Abstract Artists*, Squibb Galleries, New York

1938 *"The Ten" Whitney Dissenters*, Mercury Galleries, New York

1938 *Second American Artists' Congress Exhibition*, Wanamaker's Picture Gallery, New York

1938 *First Exhibition of Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Arts and Yiddish Books and Press*, World Alliance for Yiddish Culture (Yiddisher Kultur Farband), New York

1939 *The Ten*, Bonestell Gallery, New York

1939 *Annual Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (also exhibited 1941, 1944-1948, 1950)

1939 Hall of Medicine and Public Health, World's Fair, New York

1947 *Annual Exhibition*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

1963 *The Educational Alliance Art School Retrospective Art Exhibit*, American Federation of Arts Gallery, New York

1981 *Decade of Transition: 1940-1950*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

1986 *American Abstract Artists 1926-1985: Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (traveled)

1989 *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction 1930-1945*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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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 Dali (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).

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 that 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

LOUIS SCHANKER

The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection, American Abstraction 1930-1945

1903-1981 National Museum of American Art, 1989

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.

Louis Schanker

1903–1981

Worcester Arts Museum

41.
Abstraction with Heart
1938
Woodcut on cream Japan paper
23.1 × 30.4 cm. (image)
30.1 × 37.7 cm. (sheet)
In pencil, lower margin: *1/15*
ABSTRACTION WITH HEART
Schanker
Brooklyn 13
Worcester Art Museum, anonymous gift, 1988.85

Louis Schanker stood at the center of the circle of avant-garde woodcut artists in New York in the middle of the twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the artist exerted a profound influence on printmaking, through his own technically innovative works and through his activities as a teacher.

This print is exemplary of the mode of European modernism practiced by Schanker in the late 1930s. Earlier in the decade, the artist's imagery was figurative, and he often concentrated on the expression of movement. This print reflects his tendency toward nonrepresentational abstraction, the focus of his prints in the succeeding two decades. In *Abstraction with Heart*, the heavy black lines printed by the key block—lines similar to those circumscribing forms in many of Schanker's earlier prints—were broken up and used to imply spatial ambiguity. Indeed, the theme of this composition, the manipulation of space, was accomplished by effects of overlapping and transparency.

The artist's goals were parallel to those of Blanche Lazzell (cat. 18) and Agnes Weinrich (cat. 20) in their contemporary color woodcuts; however, his means were those of New York painters such as Byron Browne and Arshile Gorky, whose style derived from European modernism. Essentially cubist distortions of space were combined with the bright colors and decorative patterning of the Fauves in Schanker's prints. The hatched lines and checks of Schanker's prints, achieved by a variety of technical means, are reminiscent of Matisse, as are the irregular outlines of form that at times appear scissored. The harmony and joyful mood of this image attest to Schanker's skill as a colorist. The artist used colors to cause forms to seem to advance and recede.

Abstraction with Heart also exemplifies the innovative subtleties of Schanker's technique that impressed Stanley William Hayter (cat. 60).[1] The artist's early woodcuts were printed by hand with small, fabric-covered rubbing pads: his own variation of the Japanese *baren*.[2] During his activity in the FAP workshop, he developed and refined his technique, utilizing several blocks and liberally applying oil-base ink to the blocks. Variations upon this process included printing colors over black ink on undampened paper, in order to achieve new effects of tone and luminosity.

Perhaps the most innovative and effective of Schanker's printing methods was his practice of pressing one layer of ink atop another before the first had the chance to dry. Because he applied his ink thickly to the blocks, some mixing of colors occurred during printing. In the present print, this effect is apparent in passages where red mixed with blue and with yellow. A similar mottled effect resulted from the sticky ink on the block having lifted some of the previously printed color from the paper.

Four blocks were used to print five colors for *Abstraction with Heart*. The oily ink soaked deeply into the paper, and because it was applied so thickly, no wood grain was printed from the surface of the block.[3] Schanker printed by hand rubbing, which is apparent from the verso, where the mottled appearance of ink shows how the sheet was burnished, although on the recto these passages appear flat and saturated.

Schanker's inventive attitude toward technique became a hallmark of his color woodcuts in the 1940s. During this period, he often signed them in the block with an S in a circle, a monogram similar to the Chinese yin-yang symbol. Sometimes Schanker used unconventional tools, such as wire brushes, rasps, and scrapers, to mar the surface of the block. The artist always printed his own blocks and encouraged potentially creative accidents during the process: "The possibility of invention is I believe, one of the most intriguing aspects of woodcut. Traditional tools are no longer sufficient."[4]

Notes

1. Hayter 1962, p. 24.

2. Johnson 1943, p. 4.

3. Aside from the edition of fifteen impressions, there were eight trial proofs. See ibid., no. 7.

4. Lieberman 1955, p. 50. See also AAA 1978 and 1986b; Watrous 1984, pp. 97–98, 178–179.

The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930's and 1940's

Selections from the Penny and Elton Yasuna Collection, AAA

31

Football, 1938

oil on canvas

28¾ × 37¼ in.

(73 × 90.9 cm)

signed and dated

at lower left: *Schanker '38*

Louis Schanker was prominent among the painters of the 1930s and 1940s for his advocacy of expressionism in American abstraction. His constant activities as a sculptor and as a printmaker were also reflected in his paintings, both in style and technique. Born in New York, Schanker left school as a teenager to join the circus. After several peripatetic years as a laborer, he settled in New York in 1920, beginning five years of part-time studies at Cooper Union, the Education Alliance, and the Art Students League. Although his earliest works reflect the Social Realism promoted at the league, he experimented with the styles of the School of Paris in the 1920s. Schanker left for Europe in 1931, studied briefly in Paris, and then traveled widely. When he lived in Majorca in 1933, his style became markedly abstract, with a vivid palette and cubist distortions of space.

Soon after Schanker's return from Europe, his work reflected the influences of Georges Rouault and Fernand Léger, with undertones of German Expressionism. Schanker became a member of the Mural Division of the WPA Federal Art Project; among his most important projects were murals for the lobby of the radio station WNYC in New York (1937) and the Science and Health Building at the New York World's Fair (1939). In the mid 1930s, the artist began making woodcuts, which he printed in colors from multiple blocks. In 1935 Schanker also became one of "The Ten," a group of young artists who championed abstraction and publicly protested the preference of the museum establishment for conservative, representational styles. He was also a founding member of the AAA. From 1938 to 1941 Schanker was employed by the Graphic Arts Division of the Federal Art Project, and he became a supervisor for relief printmaking.

From the late 1930s on, he worked simultaneously in painting, printmaking, and carved sculpture, and he found reciprocal influences in subject, style, and technique among these media. *Football* belongs to a series of paintings and prints that Schanker produced in the late 1930s and early 1940s depicting figures engaged in sports. Several oils of this period represent the subject of football, and one four-color woodcut of the same title relates closely to this particular canvas.[1] Schanker transferred to the painting the angular, splintered quality of the lines hewn from the woodblock. Beginning with sketches, he abstracted several figures in action and the shapes between them into a collection of forms floating before a flat, unmodulated field. Although these are essentially simple geometric solids, they hang on a linear superstructure of thick lines. However, like many of Schanker's paintings of the period, this composition is more formal than linear, and it derives from the work of such French Cubists as Albert Gleizes and André Lhote.

Schanker used several technical tricks to vary the quality of the paint on the heavy canvas he favored. He varied a dry-brush technique with passages of thickly applied impasto, and he added grit or sand to the paint in order to achieve a range of textured, tactile surfaces. The artist softened some forms by scraping away paint. Later, he overpainted the ground in a darker shade of gray, thereby isolating some forms and introducing intricacies of overlap and transparency.

During the 1940s, Schanker began teaching printmaking courses at the New School for Social Research, where he briefly shared a studio with Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17. The thrust of Schanker's teaching and his own work was independence and experimentation, and he attracted and motivated many innovative artists. He held several teaching posts at the New School, the Brooklyn Museum School, and Bard College from the mid 1940s until his retirement. In the 1950s Schanker became very active with printmaking associations, exhibiting prints which focused on abstract circular forms and which employed shape and color to express a kinesthetic sense of revolution. In the following decade Schanker returned to sculpture, carving freestanding pieces from wood and plastic; in the 1970s he also experimented with relief prints from carved lucite plates.

DA

Note

1 The woodblock *Football* is listed in Johnson (no. 39).

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LOUIS SCHANKER, A NOTED ARTIST

Louis Schanker, 78, a noted painter, printmaker, and sculptor, whose work is represented in the collections of all of the major art museums in New York and included in the Whitney's current, "Decade of Transition: 1940-50," died last Thursday at Lenox Hill Hospital, Manhattan, having recently suffered a stroke.

Mr. Schanker and his late wife, the blues singer Libby Holman, opened their house on Further Lane, East Hampton, to numerous fund-raising events including a party for Coretta King Jr. to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the summer of 1970. Miss Holman died the following year. Mr. Schanker also maintained a home in Stamford, Conn.

Mr. Schanker was among a group of artists in the 1930s, including the late Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, also of East Hampton, who inveighed against prevailing trends of regionalism and realism in American art and sought, instead, to make it more experimental and international.

Mr. Schanker told Arthur Roth in an interview published in the Star in 1967 that the swing to folk music among the young probably also represented another rebellion of sorts. "I think it's a rejection of the mechanical world that young people find themselves in. . . . You find the same sort of thing in the various movements of modern art that are actually rejections of sophistication in art."

Mr. Schanker was amember of the New York City Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s. He was among several artists who created a mural for the municipal radio station, WNYC. He later also did a mural for the Hall of Medicine and Public Health Building at the 1939 World's Fair.

His work appeared in the first international exhibition of color woodcuts and linecuts at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1954. A show of his prints was held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1974 and in 1978 he exhibited etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts at the Associated American Artists Galleries in New York. A one man show of his work is now on view at the Martin Diamond Fine Arts Gallery in Manhattan.

Mr. Schanker taught printmaking at the New School for Social Research from 1943 to 1949 and at Bard College from 1949 to 1964.

He was born in New York City in 1903 and studied at Cooper Union, the Art Students League, the Educational Alliance School of Art and in France and Spain.

His sister, Minette Siegel of Brooklyn, and a brother, Joel Schanker, survive. Services were private.

S.P.

L 21

LOUIS SCHANKER, 78, A PAINTER, IS DEAD

In 30's 'Protest' Group That Tried to Make Art Experimental and International

By GRACE GLUECK

Louis Schanker, a painter, printmaker and sculptor, and member of a "protest" group of artists in the 1930's that sought to make American art more experimental and international, died Thursday at Lenox Hill Hospital. He was 78 years old and had recently suffered a stroke.

Mr. Schanker, throughout a career that spanned more than 50 years, worked simultaneously in painting, printmaking and carved sculpture, freely transferring the techniques of one medium to another. As a painter, he was best known for his work of the 30's and 40's done in a semi-abstract mode that was influenced by European modernism.

In 1938, Mr. Schanker joined Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb and other artists in a group known as "The 10." They were against the prevailing currents of regionalism and realism in American art and saw their exhibitions as protests against "the reputed equivalence of American painting and literal painting."

Member of W.P.A. Project

The Whitney Museum of American Art, then a stronghold of realist styles, was a particular target.

A member of the New York City Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration during the 30's, Mr. Schanker was one of several artists, including Stuart Davis, to produce 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.

He was also known for his color woodcuts and taught printmaking at the New School from 1943 to 1960 and at Bard College from 1949 to 1964. His work in the medium appeared in the first international exhibition of color woodcuts and linecuts at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1954.

In 1974, a show of his prints was held at the Brooklyn Museum and in 1978 he showed etchings, lithographs and woodcuts at the Associated American Artists Galleries in New York.

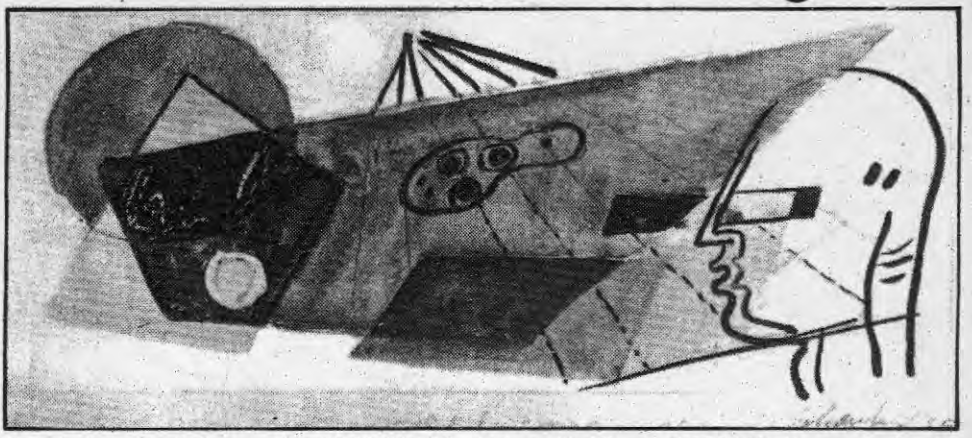
In Shows at Whitney and Gallery

Work by Mr. Schanker is on view in an exhibition at the Whitney, "Decade of Transition: 1940-50," and in a solo show at the Martin Diamond Fine Arts Gallery, 1014 Madison Avenue. Examples of his work are owned by all the major art museums in New York and by others around the country, including the Cleveland Museum, the Chicago Art Institute and the Detroit Institute of Art.

Mr. Schanker had homes in New York; East Hampton, L.I., and Stamford, Conn. He married twice, the second time to the singer Libby Holman, who died in 1971.

Surviving are a sister, Minette Siegel, of Brooklyn, and a brother, Joel. There will be a private service.

Louis Schanker Bids Goodbye



Watercolor sketch for mural at N.Y. World's Fair at M. Diamond 1014 Madison - to June 4

Louis Schanker passed away the other day at the age of 78, an artist who has made contributions to American art over many years. He was a man of tremendous talent and experience in art, but one who always sought out new fields for his experiments. He was noted as an early printmaker. Printmakers must be experimenters, and that suited his nature best. He also did murals early, receiving important commissions.

Schanker was so skilled in painting that he could change styles and not lose stride. While others would need two years to produce their satisfactory work in a new style, he could do so at once. This could have been a mixed blessing, for Schanker was always searching, changing direction. In latter years, he moved into sculpture, still finding new outlets for his many-sided genius. He was forever youthful and open to new ideas—and we'll miss you, Louis.

Paimer Poroner

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LOUIS SCHANKER

Louis Schanker was The Ten's great printmaker. A master of the woodcut, he created the image for the Whitney Dissenters show reproduced as the frontispiece.

Born in 1903, Schanker quit school as a teenager and joined the circus, worked in the wheatfields of the Great Plains, rode the rails. In 1919, he went to New York and began studying art. He spent 1931 and 1932 in Paris and came back something of a Cubist, becoming a muralist and graphic arts supervisor for the WPA and a founding member of The Ten, to which he was attached from start to finish.

Schanker was a radical among radicals. His "conglomerations of color-patches, among other things," wrote the sympathetic critic Emily Genauer in 1935, "are bound to alienate no small part of the gallery-going public."

They did not alienate a small part of the New York art scene, however, and Schanker was invited to the Whitney Annual, even though he later protested against it as one of the "dissenters."

By 1937, however, even the hostile New York Times critic conceded that "Mr. Schanker" had "a touch of lyric feeling." And in 1938, Art News declared that "Louis Schanker's delightful *Street Scene From My Window* calls forth admiration for its delicacy of color and kaleidoscopic forms in plane geometry." In 1989, summing up Schanker's career for a book on American abstraction, Virginia Mecklenburg wrote of "an animated expressionism that aims at a fundamental emotional structure."

Schanker was also a founder of the American Abstract Artists and participated in its first annual exhibition in 1937. But "(t)hough much of my work is generally classified as abstract," he wrote a decade later, "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." A perfect example would be *Study for the WNYC Mural* (Pl. 25), which Schanker did as a member of the government's WPA mural project in 1939-40. (The WPA employed almost all The Ten at one time or another.)

Schanker taught for many years, first at the New School for Social Research and then, from 1949 until his retirement, at Bard College. He was one of the major printmakers of the 1930s, but when he died in 1981, his reputation was in eclipse. By all accounts a delightful man, Schanker was suspect to some because of his joie de vivre. Rothko once told Sidney Schectman, co-founder of New York's Mercury Galleries, "He's a great painter and a great wood block artist, but I don't know where he's going to go." "He thought he was frivolous," says Schectman. "Rothko was terribly, terribly serious."

But Schanker's effervescence has survived him, as the WNYC study makes manifest; the Brooklyn Museum featured an exhibition of his woodcuts and his reputation is currently undergoing a revival.

LOUIS SCHANKER (1903-1981)

A native New Yorker, Louis Schanker was a teenager when he left school to join the circus. In 1920 he returned to New York and studied at Cooper Union, the Art Students League, and the Education Alliance School of Art. In 1931/33 he traveled and studied in France and Spain, and in 1933 he had his first one-man show. By 1935 Schanker made his first woodcut, finding the medium and establishing a pattern of experimentation that would figure prominently throughout his career.

Schanker was on the mural and the printmaking projects of the New York Works Progress Administration, and eventually became a supervisor on the relief division of the printmaking project. In 1935/36 he exhibited with The Ten Whitney Dissenters* who showed their work at galleries in New York and Paris. He was a member of the American Artists Congress and a founding member of the American Abstract Artists Group. He made murals for the lobby of the WNYC radio station and for the Science and Health Building at the New York World's Fair, 1939.

In 1943 Schanker began to teach at the New School for Social Research, NY, where he worked with Stanley William Hayter at the New York location of Atelier 17. In 1949 Schanker started to teach at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, where he stayed until his retirement.

In the 1940s and 50s works by Schanker were regularly included in the annual printmaking exhibitions of the Brooklyn Museum and were featured there in one-man shows in 1943 and 1974, as well as at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1954/55, and Associated American Artists, NY, in 1978 and 1986. In 1960 his work was included in the landmark 21 etchings and poems portfolio published by the Morris Gallery, NY.

Work by Schanker was included in the exhibitions: In Pursuit of Abstraction: American Prints 1930-1950, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986; the Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction, 1930-1945, at the National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC, 1989; A Spectrum of Innovation: Color in American Printmaking, 1890-1960, and The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930s and 40s, both at the Worcester Art Museum, 1991; and Images from the Federal Art Project, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, 1996. Here, at the Susan Teller Gallery, his work was shown in Circa 1950, December 1991/January 1992, Contemplating Cubism, October/November 1995, American Modernist Unique Works on Paper, 1924 - 1956, January/March 1997, and this current exhibition, Louis Schanker, American Modernist, March 31 through May 13, 2000.

In addition to those institutions mentioned above, work by Louis Schanker is in the New York Public Library and Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Newark Museum; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Cincinnati Art Museum; Cleveland Museum of Art; Detroit Institute of Arts; Art Institute of Chicago; University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington; and the Library of Congress.

*The Ten Whitney Dissenters were: Ben-Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, Adolph Gottlieb, John Graham, Louis Harris, Earl Kerkam, Ralph M. Rosenborg, Marcus Rothkowitz (Mark Rothko), Louis Schanker, and Joseph Solman.

As a teenager, Louis Schanker quit school and ran away to join the circus for two years. He next worked as a laborer in the wheat fields of Canada and the Dakotas, as a worker on the Erie Railroad, and as a stevedore on Great Lakes steamers for almost a year. In 1919 he studied at The Cooper Union, the Art Students League, and the Educational Alliance in New York. 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. 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. In 1935 he became a member of "The Ten," and was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists. That same year he made his first woodcut to which he added seven colors printed from as many blocks. In developing his own style and technique in this unfamiliar medium, he studied German Expressionist and traditional Japanese woodblock prints. He became an assistant professor at Bard College in 1949; he remained there until his retirement. In the 1950s, Schanker made a number of important innovations in what he termed the plaster relief print. In these works he used the woodblock to create a three-dimensional effect that softened the outlines of his bold, forthright images. He experimented with large-scale hardwood sculptures before returning to the woodcut and relief print. In the 1970s, Schanker used plastic plates for his printing; toward the end of the decade, with his newfound interest in color, he began to use acrylic paints as part of his printmaking technique.

Schanker's first solo exhibition was held in 1933 at the Contemporary Art Gallery in New York. In the 1940s and 1950s works by Schanker were regularly included in the annual printmaking exhibitions of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and were featured there in solo shows in 1943 and 1974. Other one-person exhibits were at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (1954-55) and Associated American Artists, New York (1978 and 1986). Selected exhibitions containing Schanker's works include those held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1986 and 1996); National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C. (1989); Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts (1991); and Susan Teller Gallery, New York (1992, 1995, 1997 and 2000). Works by Schanker are included in the public collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York Public Library, The Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of Art, New York; National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania; Cleveland Museum of Art and Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio; The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; and The Newark Museum, New Jersey.

Mercury Gallery October 2004 Retrospective

Louis Schanker (1903-1981)

After studying in Paris and traveling in Europe from 1931 to 1933, Louis Schanker joined his friends in New York, among them Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, to form The Ten, an independent group that exhibited from 1935 to 1938. He also became a founding member of American Abstract Artists. As such, he was among the few Americans to experiment with abstraction at a time when contemporary taste was largely defined by The Museum of Modern Art, which endorsed European modernism, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, which preferred realist American scene painting.

Schanker worked in a variety of media throughout his career. He merged cubist and surrealist elements in the lobby mural of radio station WNYC, in New York, in 1937; his mural for the New York World's Fair of 1939-40 featured angled geometric shapes and organic forms, influenced by Arshile Gorky and Vasily Kandinsky. Paintings such as *Abstraction with Musical Instruments* (1932) show the influence of synthetic cubism.

By 1938, under the New Deal's WPA/Fine Arts Project Schanker was employed as a graphic artist, and until 1941 he worked as supervisor of color woodblock printing, a technique he pioneered. He made other innovations, including printing on a black ground and in relief, as well as from blocks wet on wet, resulting in richly intricate surfaces. Schanker's chalk drawings from 1943 and 1944 are among his most daring and experimental compositions. Planes of color overlay textured drawings and primitivistic sea creatures, and abstracted birds heed the exiled Surrealists' call to give free rein to the unconscious.

Schanker taught printmaking courses at the New School for Social Research and profoundly influenced avant-garde woodcut artists in New York in the 1950s. The artist was rediscovered when he was given a print retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1974. Since his death in 1981 his work has been of increasing interest to scholars and collectors of American art.

Dr. Susan Chevlowe
New York City
August 2004