



Introduction

When dealer-collector Samuel Putnam Avery established The New York Public Library's Print Room in 1900 by a major gift, he advised the first curator, Frank Weitenkampf, "It is desired that this print room contain as complete a collection as possible of the results of the graphic arts as practiced in America." Weitenkampf and successive curators followed Avery's instructions, and gifts and purchases in the first half of the 20th century represent a virtual history of American printmaking.

Etching dominated American printmaking in the first decades of the 20th century. Until the 1930s most American artists seemed unaware of or indifferent to the earlier innovative woodcuts of Gauguin, Munch, and the German Expressionists, yet by the end of that decade Will Barnet,

Louis Schanker, and Werner Drewes had found in the relief print a medium that served their expressive needs and individual —modern” styles. By the 1940s, encouraged by their example and the legitimacy given to the woodcut by the Graphic Arts Division of the Federal Art Project, a number of artists had begun to exploit the artistic possibilities of the relief block.

Woodcut and wood engraving, as practiced with exquisite craftsmanship by Fritz Eichenberg, Lynd Ward, and Grace Albee, were still favored for pictorial book illustration, and for prints commissioned by conservative print clubs and societies. However, from the 1940s through the 1960s the relief print increasingly intrigued artists whose work encompassed a broad spectrum of artistic points of view and styles, including various kinds of realism, surrealism, expressionism, and abstraction. Critics noted that relief prints were growing in scale and painterly effects, the better to rival the power of increasingly monumental contemporary painting. Artists like Leonard Baskin and Misch Kohn, working large wood blocks, tapped the expressive potential of black and white. Milton Avery often limited his palette to black, but then played with the effects possible by varying inking, pressure, and simple color combinations, while Seong Moy, Antonio Frasconi, and Adja Yunkers printed with multiple colors for dramatic impact. Not limited to wood or linoleum, Boris Margo and Edmond Casarella were among those who—inspired by the contemporary innovations in intaglio techniques fostered by Stanley William Hayter’s Atelier 17, and the technical experimentation encouraged by the WPA workshops—utilized new and nontraditional printmaking materials, including celluloid dissolved in acetone, Lucite, and cardboard.

A survey of the prints added to the Library’s Print Collection in the 1940s through the 1960s documents this renaissance in the relief print: given the breadth and depth of these now-historic holdings, there were only modest gaps to be addressed in recent years. Many of these prints were given by or acquired from the artists themselves at or near the time of creation; others came from a handful of adventuresome New York galleries that dealt in contemporary prints, including Grace Borgenicht, the Contemporaries, and Weyhe Gallery. Some were purchased from the International Graphic Arts Society, an organization that commissioned prints for sale to its membership at modest prices. Still others came to the Library through gift and bequest from Una Johnson, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Brooklyn Museum, who (along with the Library’s then print curator, Karl Kup) championed many of these artists through exhibitions, monographs, and her highly influential Brooklyn Museum National Print Annual Exhibition.

In 1951, in her column for *Art Digest*, the critic Dore Ashton praised the Library’s “refreshing interest in America’s contemporary printmakers.” This interest, apparent in the selection of American relief prints on view here, is a confirmation and validation of the Print Collection’s long-standing commitment to the graphic arts in the United States.

Ann Aspinwall, Margaret Glover, Nicole Simpson, Roberta Waddell
Staff of the Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs

Louis Schanker (American, 1903–1981)

Louis Schanker was a key figure in the resurgence of interest in the color relief print. As a technically innovative printmaker and as a teacher, he influenced many of the artists in this exhibition. Trained at Cooper Union, the Education Alliance, and the Art Students League, he made his first woodcut in 1935, a challenging seven-color print, which already reflected his appreciation for the School of Paris (he traveled abroad from 1931 to 1933), German Expressionism, and the Japanese woodcut. Though his early imagery was figurative, his work became increasingly abstract, concerned with Cubist distortions of form and space, realized with bright colors and tactile surfaces. While a member of the Graphic Arts Division of the Federal Art Project, and later the supervisor of color woodblock printing there, he developed new printing techniques. He layered oil-based inks on top of each other, often before the previous layer had dried, to realize dense, inky surfaces; he also printed colors over black ink, giving the colors a special luminosity. For a time Schanker shared a teaching studio at the New School with Stanley William Hayter, another passionate experimenter, though with intaglio processes. Schanker believed that “The possibility of invention ... is one of the most intriguing aspects of the woodcut.”

Louis Schanker (American, 1903–1981)

Forms in Action

Woodcut for Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project, 1941

Gift to The New York Public Library

Louis Schanker (American, 1903–1981)

Indian Dance

Color woodcut for Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project, 1941

Gift to The New York Public Library

Louis Schanker (American, 1903–1981)

Skaters

Color woodcut for Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project, 1941

Gift to The New York Public Library

Louis Schanker (American, 1903–1981)

Static & Revolving

Color woodcut, 1945–46

Norrie Fund, purchased from the artist

With this print, Schanker began a series of studies of circular movement. He explored variations on this image throughout the 1950s.



Louis Schanker (American, 1903–1981)

Circle Image

Color woodcut, 1952

Norrie Fund, purchased from the artist

Louis Schanker (American, 1903–1981)

Circle Image

Color woodcut, issued by the International Graphic Arts Society (IGAS), 1952

Norrie Fund