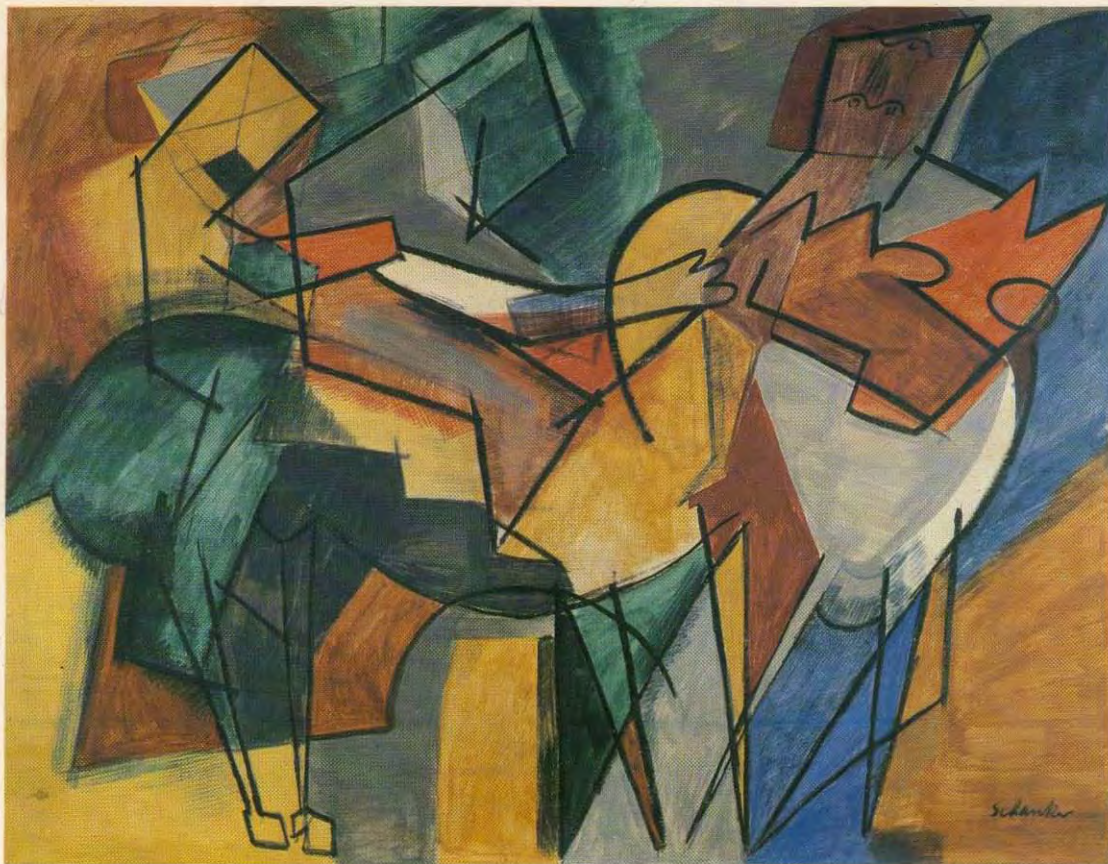


MARTIN DIAMOND FINE ARTS

1014 Madison Avenue New York, NY 10021 (212) 988-3600

Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11 to 5



Louis Schanker: Works of the 1930s and 1940s

For abstract painters in the 1930s, departing from realism was a revolutionary act. This, at any rate, is the message of *avant-garde* artists' manifestos and organizations of those decades. As George L.K. Morris stated in the first American Abstract Artists yearbook of 1938, "artists . . . must strip art inward to those very bones from which all cultures take their life."¹

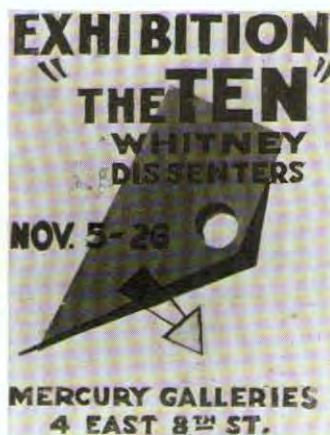
Another artists' group, *The Ten*, had goals similar to the American Abstract Artists. Smaller and less formally organized than the A.A.A., *The Ten*, also dubbed by one of their critics "the nine who are ten" because they lacked a tenth member (John Graham was invited to exhibit as tenth in 1938; Lee Gatch was also invited to exhibit), included Ben-Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, Louis Harris, Earl Kerkam, Ralph M. Rosenborg, Louis Schanker, Joseph Solman and future Abstract Expressionists Adolph Gottlieb and Marcus Rothkowitz (Mark Rothko). The group was a ten-artist protest movement. Throughout the five years of their association, they championed artistic experimentation and internationalism, while hoping that, by showing together, they might gain converts, publicity² and even sales, since their shows were held at the prestigious 57th Street Montross Gallery as well as at the Passadoit Gallery, the Mercury Gallery and the Gallery Bonaparte (in Paris).

The Ten opposed those who, as they put it in a manifesto which was the catalogue of their 1938

group exhibition, defined "contemporary American art dogmatically . . . as a representational art preoccupied with local color."³ They intended their exhibitions as "a protest against the reputed equivalence of American painting and literal painting."⁴ As young New York artists they may have had high hopes for support from the city's fledgling museums, but the conservative position of the seven-year-old

Whitney Museum of American Art rankled them. *The Ten* were also called the "Whitney Dissenters" for even though the Whitney's Biennial exhibitions included abstract painters, and even included members of *The Ten* (Louis Schanker and Ilya Bolotowsky occasionally found themselves in the unusual position of picketing outside the Whitney while their paintings hung inside), sensibilities were overwhelmingly in favor of realist styles. As Lloyd Goodrich stated in a Whitney Museum symposium devoted to "The Problem of Subject Matter and Abstract Aesthetics in Painting," (1933) "The

subject and its representation . . . probably will continue to be, the path by which the artist achieves the greatest formal significance . . . abstractionism . . . has denied itself the most profound plastic values."⁵ *The Ten* contested this point of view. They denounced the "symbol of the silo," by which they meant both the farm subjects of Regionalists John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, and factory scenes by Precisionists Preston Dickinson, Charles





Louis Schanker in front of his
WNYC mural, 1937

Far right:
"The Ten," *Whitney Dissenters*,
wood block exhibition poster
for Group Show, Mercury
Gallery, November 5-26, 1939



Louis Schanker's mural at the World's Fair Hall of Medicine and Public Health, 1939

Sheeler and others. The tone of reviews of *The Ten's* exhibitions⁶ suggests that many critics misunderstood the significance of European modernism for young American abstractionists. Malcolm Vaughn, art critic of the *New York American* in 1935 praised Louis Schanker's "force of bluntness." But Vaughn felt that "modernism is no longer the vogue." *The Ten*, he warned, "would have a hard fight ahead of them, even if they formed their club in the heyday of modernism, twenty years ago."⁷

If Vaughn's comments seem particularly dated now where Schanker is concerned, it is because Schanker's is an art which is important in understanding the development of the second wave of American abstraction which culminated in Abstract Expressionism. Schanker's semi-abstractions, which he began to make in 1933, looked primitive in contrast to the cool and elegant passages of School of Paris Cubism, and where instrumental in re-introducing Americans to expressionism in abstract art.⁸ With their heavy black lines on backgrounds of densely packed patches of prismatic color, the paintings were Schanker's expression of *The Ten's* group statement that their art showed "objects and events as though for the first time, free from the accretions of habit and divorced from the conventions of a thousand years of painting."⁹ Schanker's handling of materials was also an innovation. Throughout his career Schanker has always worked simultaneously in painting, graphics and carved sculpture. Especially in the 1940s, he transferred into paintings the gouged and scratched incisions of the wood block prints for which he is famous, as well as structural motifs borrowed from his sculpture. (The variegated surface of *Danse Macabre*, 1947, derives from the fact that the images are over-painted on a carved woodblock panel.) The sensibility presages Abstract Expressionists' anarchic treatment of materials.

The development of Schanker's art is its own special commentary on what it meant to be an abstractionist in America in the period between World

War I and World War II. He began his career by attending night classes at Cooper Union. There he spent four years (1919-23), first drawing from casts, and then in the life class. (In those early years, Schanker had the opportunity to paint only in a Sunday life class). This early concentration on drawing left its mark in the linear motifs of the oils of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, and Schanker still often works first in outline, adding color at a later stage.

Schanker's early work was, of course, realistic. In Paris in 1931-32, where he studied at the Académie de la Grand Chaumière, but worked mostly on his own on *plein air* landscapes and Paris street scenes, his heroes were Renoir (he did some Renoiresque nude studies), Degas and Signac. The change to abstraction came when, living in Mallorca in 1933, he began to do semi-abstractions: still-lives in which wiry lines delineate Cubistic still-life subjects on tipped-up table tops against a background of muted prismatic colors, and a series of figures with stick-like bodies and square box heads.¹⁰ The major impetus for the figures was, as Schanker recalls it, the art of Rouault "with that black (outline), square heads and arms,"¹¹ although his new style was also heavily influenced by Cézanne, early Cubism and School of Paris paintings. Echoes of Rouault's brooding quality can be seen in the whole series of square headed, thickly outlined figures where themes of confrontation and conflict are expressed in images of athletic contests (*Polo*, 1933; *Football*, 1939; *Leapfrog*, 1936) or of dance (*Indian Dance*, 1937). *Three Men on a Bench* (1937), an ambitious painting of this series, was exhibited in the important American Abstract Artists' show at the Squibb Building in 1937 (Schanker was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists). Another early departure from representational art was *Machine Forms* (1936), a foray into territory explored in the 'teens by Morton Schamberg and other future Precisionists.

Other Schanker paintings merge Cubism with Surrealism, for example, the important mural for the radio station WNYC (1937), in which he combined

cubist flattened space and a cubistic bent guitar with surrealist motifs involving stringed instruments, and placed the forms on a background of hatched lines and color patches. In Schanker's mural for the Hall of Medicine & Public Health Building at the New York World's Fair (1939-40), large, sharply angled geometric shapes are the background foil for a variety of organic cell and amoeba shapes, an oversized head, and directional symbols such as an arrow and dotted lines. One influence was Kandinsky, and the mural can also be compared to Arshile Gorky's *Aviation Murals* of 1935-37, designed for Newark Airport and done when Gorky was on government WPA/FAP.¹² The Newark murals were trend-setting as abstract murals whose success may well have paved the way for acceptance of Schanker's designs. Surrealist motifs continue in Schanker's art. An abstracted landscape image (*Untitled*, 1940) has a population of heavily painted amoeboid and branch-like forms, while *Nude* (1948), a painting in which the dominant fish shape reads simultaneously as a torso and as a projectile, embodies a surrealist-inspired vision of metamorphosis.

Schanker wrote in *Tiger's Eye* (June, 1949), "Though much of my work is classified as abstract, all my work develops from natural forms. . . . No matter how far my experimental design may take me from the spring board I have found in objective patterns. . . . there remains always a core of objective reality."¹³ His insistence on that "core" of objectivity eliminated in paintings by Abstract Expressionists Pollock, Rothko and others defines his pivotal position which is perhaps at a mid-point within the development of American abstraction in the 1940s. In 1944, Carl Zigrosser had quoted Walt Whitman in an introduction to a portfolio of Schanker graphics which was a tribute to Schanker's inventiveness and spirit: "Materials here under your eye shall change their shape as if by magic."¹⁴ Schanker's work of the 1930s and 1940s has a special place in American Art.

Susan Fillin Yeh

Notes

1. Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, New York, Viking Press, 1975, p. 76. For histories of "The Ten," see Ashton, p. 78; Joseph Solman, as quoted in Francis V. O'Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972, p. 122-128; and Susan C. Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists Group: a history and evaluation of its impact on American Art," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1974, p. 50.
2. See *Louis Schanker Papers*, New York, The Archives of American Art, N68-14, for press clippings, catalogues and the artist's scrapbook.
3. Statement in *The Ten: Whitney Dissenters*, the catalogue of their exhibition at the Mercury Gallery, November 5-26, 1938.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Lloyd Goodrich, as quoted in "Whitney Symposium," *The Art Digest*, vol. 7 (May 1, 1933), p. 6.
6. See for examples, Malcolm Vaughn, "Montross Gallery," *The New York American*, Sunday, December 28, 1935, *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 22, 1935, and *The Herald Tribune*, Sunday, December 22, 1935. Favorable reviews are to be found in *The New York Post*, Saturday, December 21, 1935, and *The New York World Telegram*, Saturday, December 21, 1935.
7. See footnote 6.
8. See for example, Jacob Kainen, as quoted in Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
9. See footnote 3. These sentiments pre-figure Rothko's "Statement on his attitude in Painting," in *Tiger's Eye*, vol. 9 (October, 1949), p. 174, and Rothko may well have been involved in writing "The Ten's" statement, which as Schanker remembers it, was put together by "the intellectual part of the group." (Author's interview with Louis Schanker, March 17, 1981).
10. For a Schanker statement, see the *Louis Schanker Papers*, loc. cit., N68-14, frame 0174.
11. Author's interview with Louis Schanker, March 17, 1981.
12. For a definitive study of the Newark Murals, see Ruth Bowman, *Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered*, Newark, New Jersey, The Newark Museum, 1978.
13. Louis Schanker statement, "The Ides of Art: 11 Graphic Artists write," *Tiger's Eye*, vol. 8 (June, 1949), p. 45-47.
14. Carl Zigrosser, *Line Form Color: Louis Schanker Woodblocks*, New York, Wittenborn, 1944.



Louis Schanker's wood sculpture, *Abstracted Man* (center) and oil, *Three Men on a Bench* (right) at the American Abstract Artists' Squibb Building Exhibition, 1937

Works in the Exhibition

1933

1. *Polo*
watercolor & ink, 16½ × 21½ in.
- *2. *Still Life*
watercolor & ink, 18 × 13 in.
- *3. *Still Life*
watercolor, 14 × 19 in.
4. *The Guitarist*
watercolor, 19 × 15 in.

1936

5. *Group Composition*
oil, 29½ × 53 in.
- *6. *Leap Frog*
oil, 24 × 30 in.
- *7. *Machine Forms*
oil, 12½ × 9½ in.
8. *Study for Three Men on a Bench*
oil, 19½ × 24 in.
call: Mr. & Mrs. Harvey Rambach
9. *The Lovers*
watercolor, 9½ × 5¾ in.
10. *Form Arrangement*
pastel, 14 × 8½ in.
11. *Drawing for Squibb Gallery lithograph*
pencil, 9 × 7 in.
private collection
- *12. *Abstracted Man*
painted applewood, 12 in. high
13. *Study for Men on Horseback*
oil, 29 × 36 in.
14. *Family*
oil, 28½ × 36 in.

1937

15. *Indian Dance*
oil, 12 × 15¾ in.
- *16. *Men on Horseback (back cover)*
oil, 54 × 68 in.
- *17. *Three Men on a Bench (front cover)*
oil, 54 × 68 in.
- *18. *Basketball*
oil, 28½ × 35 in.
19. *Conversation*
watercolor, 11½ × 8½ in.
20. *Study for Neponsit Childrens Hospital mural*
watercolor, 5 × 6½ in.

- *21. *Study for radio station WNYC mural*
watercolor, 9 × 41 in.
private collection

22. *Two studies for radio station WNYC mural*
pencil, 5¾ × 20¾ in.
watercolor, 7¾ × 18 in.

23. *Owl*
applewood, 28 in. high

1938

24. *Untitled*
oil, 27½ × 23 in.
25. *Mural study for 1939 World's Fair*
oil, 14 × 28 in.
private collection

- *26. *Mural sketch for 1939 World's Fair*
watercolor, 6 × 13 in.
27. *Second mural sketch for 1939 World's Fair*
watercolor, 5 × 12 in.
28. *Sketch for mural*
watercolor, 6 × 13 in.
29. *Group Composition*
gouache, 12 × 9 in.
30. *Composition*
crayon and ink, 11½ × 14½ in.

1939

- *31. *Football*
oil, 40 × 54 in.
32. *Football*
oil, 29 × 36 in.
call: Mr. & Mrs. Mark Lerner
33. *Football*
watercolor, 12 × 14 in.

1940

- *34. *Forms in Action*
oil, 30 × 54 in.
35. *Sketch for hockey mosaic*
casein tempera, 23 × 22 in.
36. *Form Arrangement*
pastel, 8 × 16 in.
37. *Running Men*
relief, cherrywood, 7 × 16 in.

1941

38. *Exhibition Poster*
woodcut, 17 × 12 in.

1944

39. *Dancers*
casein tempera, 8¼ × 17 in.
40. *Dance Movement*
casein tempera, 14½ × 21 in.
41. *Landscape*
casein tempera, 14½ × 21½ in.
42. *Aerial Act*
casein tempera, 21 × 14½ in.

1945

43. *Landscape*
oil, 27 × 34 in.
44. *Form Arrangement*
oil, 14 × 21 in.
45. *Form Arrangement*
casein tempera, 14 × 21 in.
46. *Untitled*
casein tempera, 21½ × 30 in.

1946

- *47. *Landscape*
oil, 29 × 40 in.

1947

48. *Danse Macabre*
oil on wood, 21 × 66 in.

1948

49. *Nude*
oil, 54 × 30 in.

*Illustrated

Permanent Collections

Albright-Knox Art Gallery
Brooklyn Museum
Chicago Art Institute
Cincinnati Art Museum
Cleveland Museum
Detroit Institute
Metropolitan Museum
Museum of Modern Art
National Museum of American Art,
 Smithsonian Institution
New York Public Library
Philadelphia Museum
Phillips Gallery
Toledo Museum
University of Colorado
University of Michigan
University of Nebraska
University of Wisconsin
Wesleyan College
Whitney Museum of American Art

LOUIS SCHANKER

Works of the 30s and 40s

