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Art: The Printmakers

In the past ten years no art medium in the U.S. has had such a dazzling rise to popularity as the once-neglected art of printmaking. This week two major print annuals give gallerygoers a chance to assay the current crop through a selection of prints that challenge traditional oils and watercolors in both richness of surface and color.

In Washington, D.C., a three-man jury went through 1,175 works submitted for the 14th National Exhibition at the Library of Congress, to pick 200 showpieces. In the Brooklyn Museum another jury winnowed out 109 works for display from the 1,000 entries in the tenth National Print Annual, also put on view 85 prizewinners of the past ten years. Both shows highlight another big factor in the current print boom: because artists can run off several copies from a single plate, prices (\$10 to \$100) are about one-tenth the price of a painting by the same artist.

With the rise of photography, U.S. printmaking came perilously close to dying out or becoming an academic backwater. What started the revival was the discovery of exciting new technical possibilities in the craft. Using up to 16 blocks to print from. Artist Louis Schanker showed the rich color harmonies that could be achieved in what was traditionally a black-and-white medium. A shot in the arm from abroad came when Stanley William Hayter brought his Paris Atelier 17 to Greenwich Village in 1940, made it a center of experimental techniques where artists used everything from wadded newspapers to old lace and orange bags to get fresh effects in etching and engraving.

As sculptors and painters moved into the field, drawn by the new and freer techniques, they helped to accelerate the experimental pace. Among the early innovators: Painter John Ferren, who produced colored prints on plaster instead of paper; Boris Margo, who developed a new, easy-to-work print surface of sheet cellophane dissolved in acetone; Adja Junkers, who blew woodcuts up to mural-sized proportions with his 14-ft.-long triptych in which the center panel alone used eight blocks and 56 colors. Sculptor Leonard Baskin's *Man of Peace*, 1953 (see cut), displayed at Brooklyn's prizewinners' show, achieves monumental proportions in a larger-than-life-size woodcut done in austere black and white.

The works of two other printmakers who picked up prizes in both the Washington and Brooklyn shows indicate that the trend is away from experiment for its own sake. One of the best of the new comers, Edmond Casarella, used cardboard in relief to make *Rock Cross*, but the success of the finished work depends on the careful preliminary sketches he made of rocks along the Maine coast. In *Winter*, Gabor Peterdi of Yale's Design Center combined both etching and engraving techniques. The result, a moody study of brush locked in wintry immobility, is an imaginative rendering of nature straightforwardly observed.

- <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,808525,00.html>