

1980 THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Whitney Museum of American Art

50th Anniversary Party for Artists
Wednesday, January 9, 1980

This memento of the first event in the 50th Anniversary year of the Whitney Museum of American Art celebrates the continuing commitment to artists established by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.

The 50th Anniversary party and this brochure are made possible by Devoe & Reynolds Co. Division of Crow Group, Inc.

GERTRUDE VANDERBILT WHITNEY announced the founding of the Whitney Museum of American Art on January 6, 1930, following a twenty-year period in which she was the most active patron of American art, encouraging artists through purchase and exhibition, and the support of art publications and organizations. She established the close relationship between the Museum and American artists which we are proud to celebrate with this first event in the 50th Anniversary year, to which 944 artists, represented in the Permanent Collection as of January 1, 1980, and listed on the following pages, have been invited. The date in italics following the name of each artist indicates the year in which a work by that artist first became part of the Permanent Collection.

Louis Schanker - 1946

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 cello-cut 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 *Quetzalcoat* 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-

AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS

The Early Years

PS 41

1
Part

Sid Deutsch Gallery; New York City, New York
Telfair Academy; Savannah, Georgia
Cummer Gallery; Jacksonville, Fla.
Hunter Museum of Art; Chattanooga, Tenn.
Weatherspoon Art Gallery; University of
North Carolina, Greensboro, N.C.
Birmingham Museum of Art; Birmingham, Alabama
University of Virginia Art Museum; Charlottesville,
Virginia
New Jersey State Museum; Trenton, New Jersey

Text by
BARBARA ROSE

Louis Schanker
Abstract Composition
1936, oil on canvas
36 x 44

**March 1980
- April 1981**

Wash post - 6/28/80

The Lure Of Prints Charming

And Telling a Monotype From a Mezzotint

By Jo Ann Lewis

Something strange seems to be happening in the Washington art market. According to the Smithsonian house organ, *Torch*, attendance at the seven, Mall museums was down by 19 percent for the first quarter of this year. Commercial galleries, however, report that sales are up.

Could it be that large numbers of Washingtonians—often maligned by local dealers for being scant spenders—are now buying instead of just looking?

"There's certainly a new surge of interest in buying prints," says Betty Duffy, proprietor of the Bethesda Art

Galleries

Gallery, 7950 Norfolk Ave. "There seems to be a whole new generation of collectors, often two-income couples in their 30s, who've become interested in prints and want to learn more."

Many of them were there this week, looking at prints by Martin Lewis, Howard Cook, Max Weber, Peggy Bacon, Rockwell Kent and dozens of other early 20th-century Americans the gallery specializes in. "It's because they've been asking so many questions," Duffy said, "that we decided to organize this show."

"Mediums of Printmaking" will indeed answer a lot of questions about the difference between woodcuts, wood engravings, lithographs, silk-screens, etchings, drypoints, aquatints, mezzotints and monotypes—differences most people don't understand out are afraid to ask about. Here, each medium is explained in a concise label placed next to a group of prints illustrating the medium. You could learn all this from a book, or at the Museum of History and Technology's Graphic Arts Hall. But here, if a work beckons, you can buy it and take it home.

There are many fine prints in the show—and more in boxes—when viewers have learned enough to know what to ask for. Of special interest are some strong abstract woodcuts by Louis Schanker, crowded New York subway scenes by Bernard Brussel-Smith and a very funny lithograph by Chet Le More called "Lord Mayor & Wife."

There are also some prints by formerly well-known artists whose reputations are being resurrected here, including rich black-and-white aquatints by virtuoso printmaker Jay McVicker and early silk-screens Philip Hicken made during the WPA days. "I cannot believe you actually sold those vintage prints," McVicker wrote to Betty Duffy a month ago. "I feel I have been rescued from oblivion," said Hicken. Both deserve the new exposure they are getting. The show continues through July; hours are 11 to 5 Wednesday through Saturday, Thursday until 8.



A CENTURY OF AMERICAN WOODCUTS

1850 - 1950

October 7 through November 1, 1980

Associated American Artists
663 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10022

FOREWORD

The 282 woodcuts, wood engravings and linocuts in this exhibition were made between 1850 and 1950. They were created by sixty-nine artists who came from England, France, Russia, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Italy, Germany, and Canada, as well as the United States.

Chronologically, the exhibition begins with mid-19th century wood engravings that flourished as illustrations. Paper was readily available and technology had met the demand for news and illustration - a demand fanned by the trauma of the Civil War and a burgeoning population. Both Winslow Homer and Thomas Nast had recorded war news, but Nast moved on to biting political cartoons and Homer to perceptive views of everyday life. Homer improved the quality of illustration by drawing his image onto the block himself. This eliminated the transfer artist, although the block was still engraved by a trained craftsman. This skill was itself considered an art, and the reproductive wood engravings of Timothy Cole and Henry Wolf were extremely popular at the turn-of-the-century. The photograph eventually put an end to both reproductive engravings after paintings and wood engravings used for newspaper and periodical illustration. The wood block was thus turned back to the artist for purely creative expression.

Renewed use of the medium began in Europe and spread to this country. The only woodcut by America's major Impressionist, Childe Hassam, is a fine example. As both Americans abroad and Europeans fled the First World War, and then the Second World War, the trend escalated. In the artists' colony of Provincetown printmakers recently returned from Europe and impressed by Japanese woodcuts, experimented with color. B.J.O. Nordfeldt was a member of that group, and he in turn influenced Gustave Baumann (who developed a woodcut reduction process), and James D. Havens. The Russian-born William Zorach, and his wife Marguerite, who had studied in Paris, also worked in Provincetown.

Germany in particular had a strong woodcut tradition dating to 14th century Bible illustration, and epitomized by the work of Albrecht Durer. This history and an expressionist tradition accompanied the many German artists who came to the United States: Baumann, Fritz Eichenberg, Werner Drewes, Emil Ganso, and Hans Mueller. Lyonel Feininger (who taught at the Bauhaus), Lynd Ward, and John Storrs were Americans who studied in Germany. Cubism was a strong complimentary influence, and is evident in the work of Feininger, Storrs, both Zorachs and Max Weber.

The Czechoslovakian Rudolf Ruzicka, and his friends Allen Lewis and J.J. Lankes were specifically concerned with reviving the creative aspects of the woodcut. In part they relate to still another European influence, the English Arts and Crafts movement which encouraged both the medium of the woodcut and fine book illustration. The work of Clare Leighton, who was born in London, is a perfect example of this tradition, but it is also apparent in the prints of Grace Albee, John de Pol, Asa Cheffetz, Thomas Nason, Norman Kent and Leo Meissner, all of whom produced finely detailed representational prints.

The turbulent thirties saw Rockwell Kent examining the human condition. In equally dramatic blocks Howard Cook portrayed city views, while social issues were recorded by Will Barnet, Louis Schanker and Eichenberg. The W.P.A., of which both Drewes and Schanker were graphics arts supervisors, helped spread the popularity of the medium. Jacob Kainen, Louis Breslow and Eichenberg also worked on the W.P.A.

By the late 1930s and 40s woodcut societies had appeared across the country. They offered "presentational" prints by well known artists as well as little known printmakers, often of exceptional talent - such as Warren Mack, Alessandro Mastro-Valerio, Robert van Neumann and Eva Auld Watson. AAA also published woodcuts in this period, starting with a the 1936 Charles Pont, and followed by works of Lankes, Nason, Cheffetz and Landacre.

World War II brought on expressive and moving works by Hans Jelinck and Bernard Brussel-Smith, followed somewhat later by the surreal linocuts of Attiljo Salemme. Anne Ryan, Drewes and Schanker continued experiments in color printing, while Drewes' and Schanker's became increasingly abstract.

This exhibition is a reflection of the historical, social and artistic developments of an exciting one hundred years. We hope you will find it as enjoyable and fascinating as we have.

LOUIS SCHANKER (1903-)

A native New Yorker, Schanker studied at Cooper Union, the Art Students League and the Education Alliance School of Art. Exhibited with the Ten Whitney Dissenters, 1935-36. Worked on the WPA, 1940-41. One-man shows, the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1954-55, the Brooklyn Museum, 1974 and AAA, 1978.

234. COPS AND PICKETS, 1939
Brooklyn Museum 26, woodcut
Edition 35, 9 1/4 x 11 3/4 \$250
235. MUSICAL CLOWNS, 1939
BM. 31, color woodcut
Second edition 21, 11 1/2 x 15 \$375
236. JAI-ALAI, 1939
BM. 30, color woodcut
Edition 34, 10 x 13 7/8 \$375
237. NON-OBJECTIVE, 1939
BM. 32, color woodcut
Edition 30, 9 x 14 1/2 \$375
238. THREE MEN ON A BEACH, c.1939
BM. 35, woodcut
Edition 35, 9 1/8 x 12 5/8 \$250
239. AERIAL ACT, 1940
BM. 36, woodcut
Edition 55, 12 x 14 \$250
240. FOOTBALL, c.1940
BM. 39, color woodcut
Edition 55, 9 7/8 x 13 3/4
Rare trial proof of WPA print. \$475



A CENTURY OF AMERICAN WOODCUTS

1850-1950

Asa Cheffetz

Louis Schanker

Winslow Homer

Rockwell Kent

Lyonel Feininger

Howard Cook

7 March-1 April 1981

ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS

1614 Latimer Street, Philadelphia

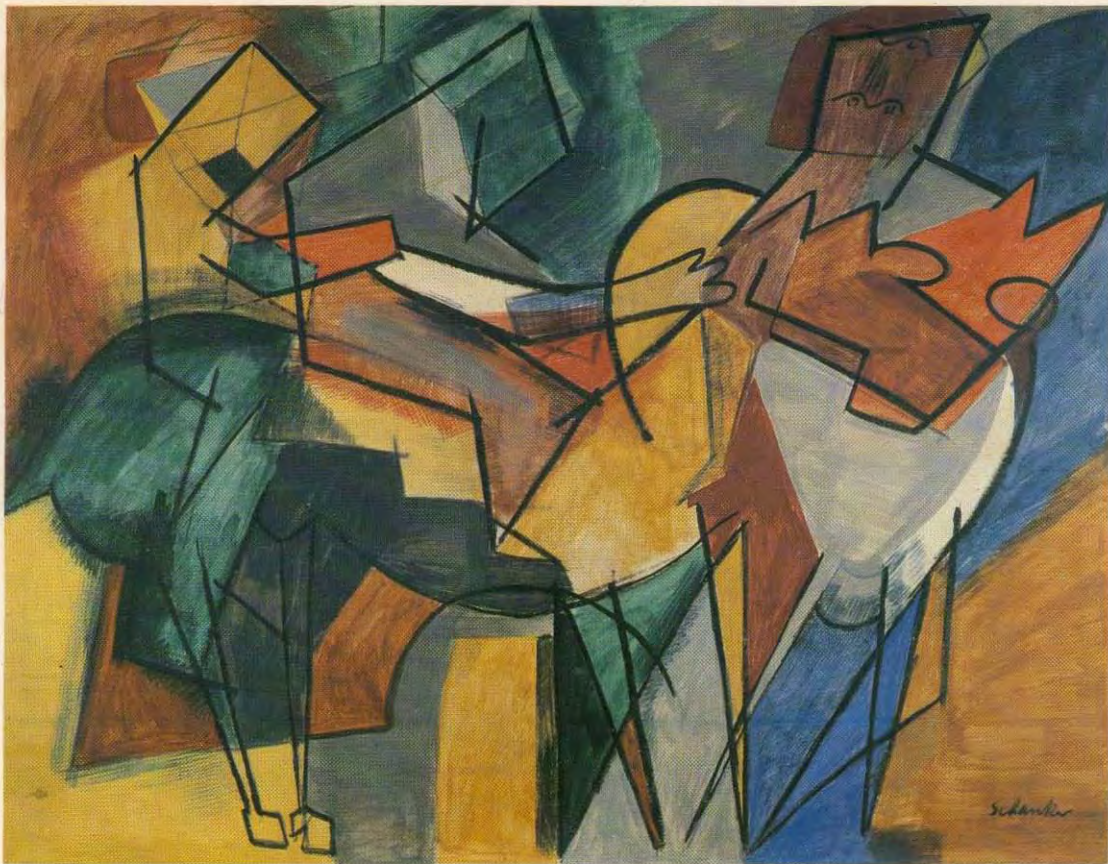
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Louis Schanker: Works of the 1930s and 1940s

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

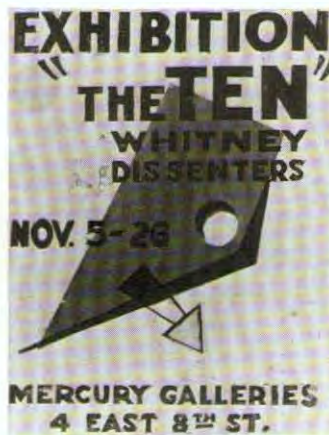
Another artists' group, *The Ten*, had goals similar to the American Abstract Artists. Smaller and less formally organized than the A.A.A., *The Ten*, also dubbed by one of their critics "the nine who are ten" because they lacked a tenth member (John Graham was invited to exhibit as tenth in 1938; Lee 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).

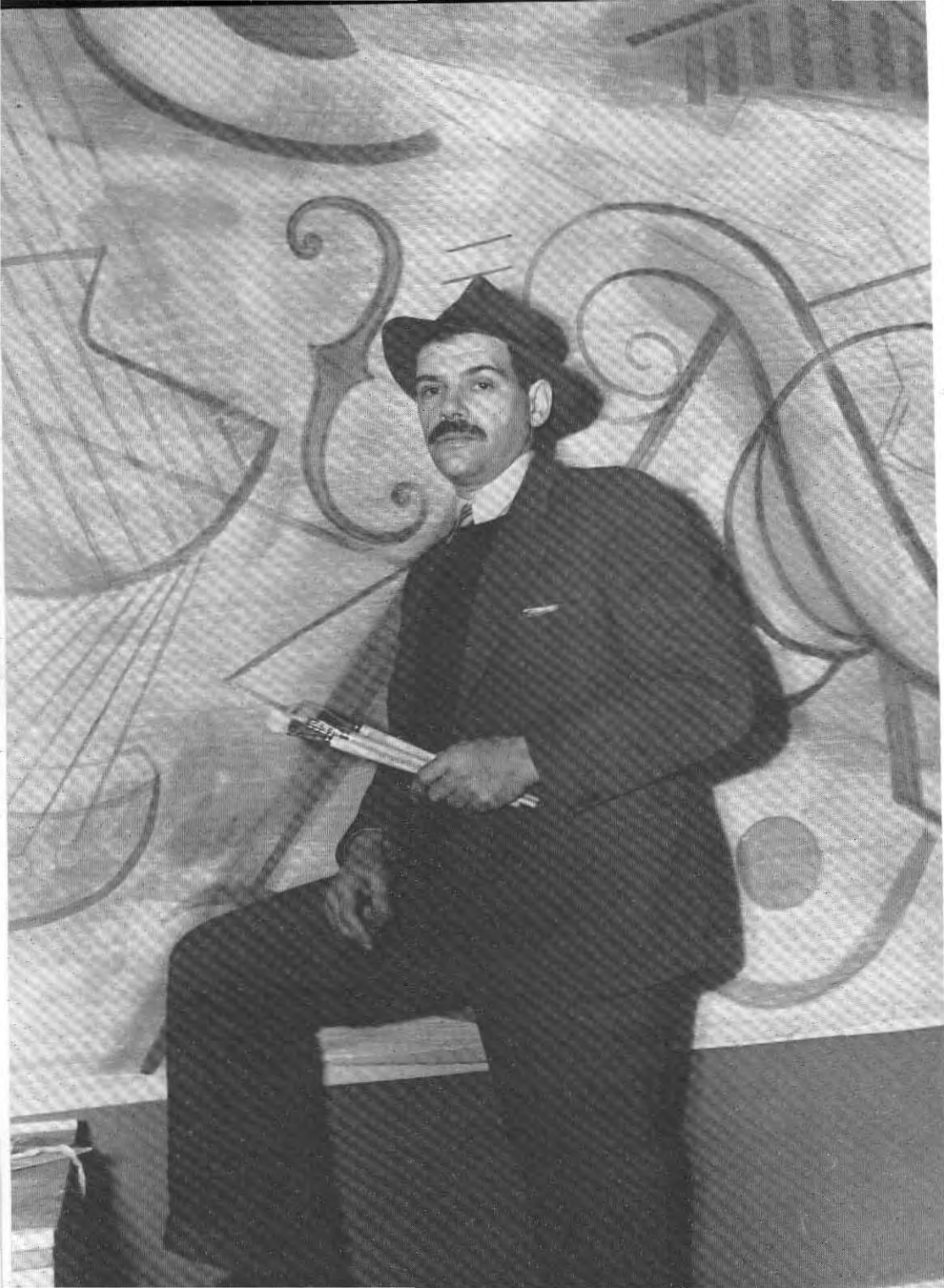
The Ten opposed those who, as they put it in a manifesto which was the catalogue of their 1938

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

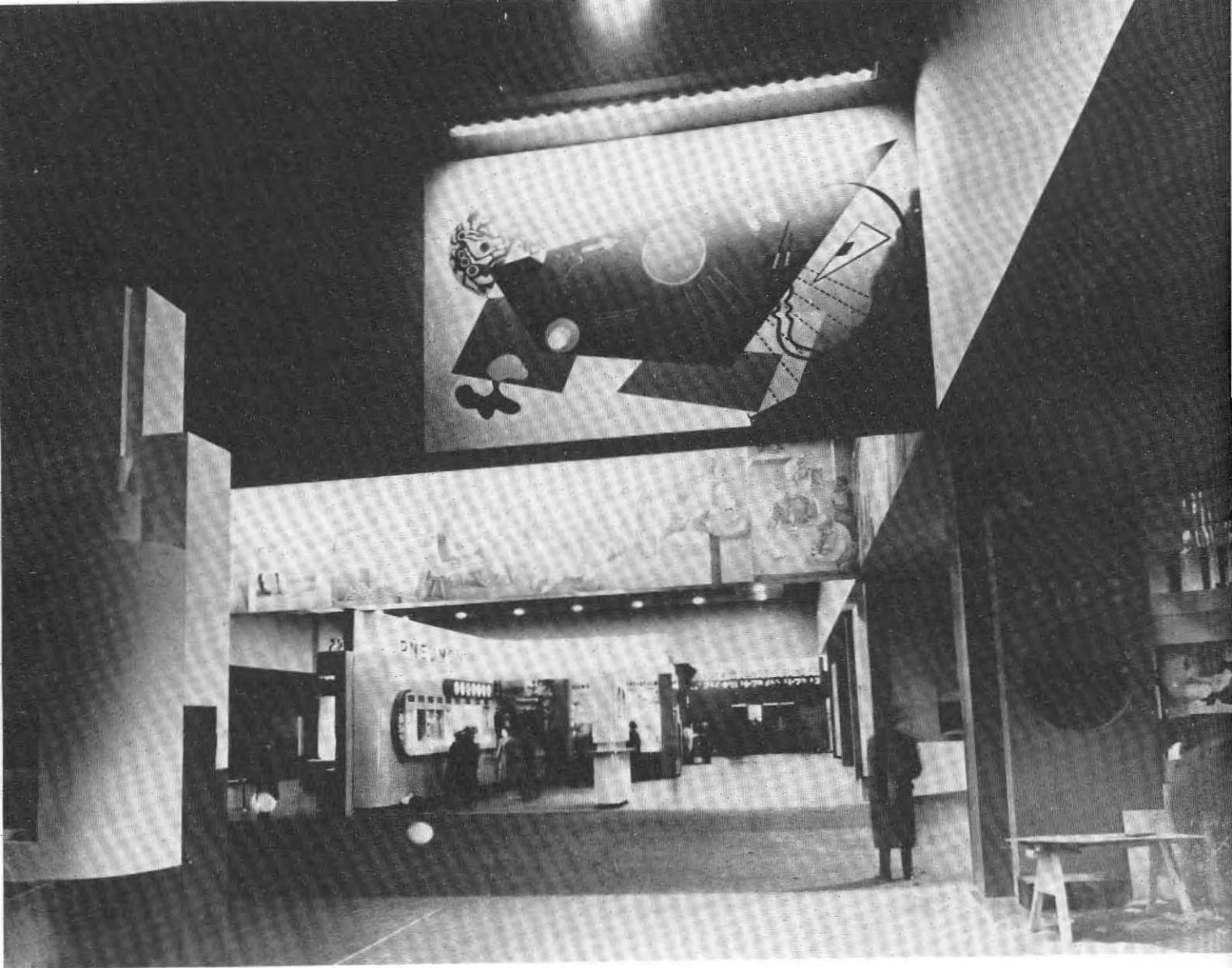
subject and its representation . . . probably will continue to be, the path by which the artist achieves the greatest formal significance . . . abstractionism . . . has denied itself the most profound plastic values."⁵ *The Ten* contested this point of view. They denounced the "symbol of the silo," by which they meant both the farm subjects of Regionalists John Stuart 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 Chaumiere, 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 Cezanne, 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.
coll: 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.
coll: 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

