

Art in America

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NEW BRUNSWICK

Sam Glankoff at Zimmerli Art Museum and A.A.A., New York

Although Sam Glankoff was one of America's most accomplished printmakers, he was almost unknown when he died in 1982. If it had not been for his first and only one-man show at the Graham Gallery a few months before his death, he would not have been known at all. Recently, the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers University mounted a Glankoff retrospective which included 130 works (paintings, woodcuts, prints and monoprints) covering the artist's career, from the 1920s to the last year of his life. The show was curated by Jeffrey Wechsler and the catalogue contained an introduction by Sam Hunter and an essay by Marilyn Kushner. Concurrently, Associated American Artists exhibited 30 woodcuts and monoprints produced from the '20s up through the '60s.

Glankoff's case is not as clearly one of neglected genius as it may seem. He did not wish to be judged by anybody. He expected no rewards for his work in the fine arts. He was content to lead an anonymous existence at the center of a small circle of close friends. He kept this side of his life completely separate from his work as an illustrator of books, advertisements and educational comics. There was also a period of over ten years when he designed stuffed toys for his wife's business.

In his early years Glankoff painted landscapes, still lifes and portraits, which he exhibited in the annual shows of the Whitney Studio Club during the 1920s.



Sam Glankoff: *PP 8006*, 1980, ink and casein on paper, 49 by 77 inches; at Zimmerli Art Museum.

Had he stuck to oil painting (the last of the few paintings in the retrospective is from 1935) he would have been a very good painter, to judge from the quality of *Green Vase*, 1920. His early portraits are less vital in color, but in their psychological perceptiveness they are quite successful.

Glankoff's woodcuts from the 1920s (for instance, *The Artist's Mother*, 1923) resemble engravings in technique. He was an accomplished craftsman at all times. When a history of the woodcut, *Das Holzschnittbuch* by Paul Westheim (published in Potsdam in 1921) came into Glankoff's possession it opened his eyes to the innovative approaches of Gauguin, Munch and the German Expressionists of Die Brücke and other avant-garde groups. His own style and technique changed almost overnight. Although for a time his subjects remained traditional—nudes (sometimes shown twice in the same woodcut), landscapes, people in interiors and people walking on the street (somewhat à la Kirchner)—the Expressionism of his new approach and his technique were his real

subject. He began to emphasize contrasts of black and white. He attacked the wood, cutting only into the plank side, ignoring the grain. He was soon equal to the best graphic artists on this side of the Atlantic.

By the 1940s Glankoff was moving into a quirky, personal kind of abstraction that sometimes suggested intricate machinery. Some of these prints preserve elements of figural imagery as well. He began to use more than one color. His experiments grew more complex and by the 1950s he was pulling prints by hand from surfaces with glued elements—pieces of weatherstripping or lengths of string—like the Norwegian artist Rolf Nesch. Glankoff, however, stuck to a letterpress kind of printing and did not experiment with intaglio.

After his wife's death in 1970, Glankoff retired from all commercial work and followed a regular schedule of printmaking in a rent-controlled apartment in New York. In his work he sought a primitive type of image somewhat like neolithic ideograms, which retained a remote connection with the hu-

man figure. This work has a distant relationship to Baziotes and Gottlieb, and in some sense to Motherwell.

During the last period of his life, faithful to the indirect method of transferring an image from one surface to another, Glankoff invented an original technique, an extension of the monotype, which he called "print-painting." He was seeking more freedom, a feeling of immediacy. He began to paint on plywood surfaces placed edge to edge on a table top. He would then pull prints from each section onto separate sheets of Japanese rice paper. When each surface was transferred he placed the prints together in the original order, usually flush against each other. Although this was essentially a monotype technique, Glankoff printed layer after layer of a mixture of printer's ink and water-based paint. The result is that some of the works when framed are large, up to six feet across. Something about this technique reminds me of the votive glass painting admired by Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, because in glass painting all the normal techniques of painting must be reversed, with the white ground coming last since the painting is seen from the other side of the glass.

To my mind, the strongest, most intriguing aspect of Glankoff's print-paintings is the quality of the color, which varies from bright and intense to a mysterious luminosity like the light of the moon shining on the wall of a cave. —Lawrence Campbell