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ART

A 'Late Bloomer' at Rutgers

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NEW BRUNSWICK

THERE have been quite a few 20th-century artists who were late starters. Stellar examples are Louise Nevelson, who was in her 50's before her sculpture excited serious attention, and Milton Avery, who had his first solo show at 50.

But Sam Glankoff (1894-1982) must hold the record for tardiness, for it was not until 1981, when he was 87 years old, did he have an individual staging. In fact, aside from participating in groups during the 1920's, he did not even try for exposure.

The strange thing is that the very impetus to become an artist was born of Glankoff's youthful realization that the masters he saw in museums were, as he said, "people" like himself; it followed, therefore, that he, "being part of humankind," could do as they had. Moreover, the artist would often speak of trying to communicate with others through his work.

On the other hand, Glankoff initially chose woodcutting as his medium so as to avoid relationships with others. He also spoke of trying to disguise certain elements in his work, lest they reveal his "hidden life."

Why the artist saw greater self-sufficiency in printmaking than, say, painting must remain a mystery, and so must the life he was hiding. In any case, woodcuts led to paintings (of a

kind) and to the retrospective show at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum of Rutgers, the State University, through Nov. 27.

The exhibition, which was organized by Wendy Snyder, Glankoff's sister-in-law and the executor of his estate, and Jeffrey Wechsler, the Zimmerli's assistant director, totals more than 100 works. These include early paintings, such as the smooth, stylized and richly colored still lifes of the 1920's; a 1935 study of trees that presages the Fairfield Porter School of landscape and some strong pencil studies of nudes and landscape, also of the 20's.

Also among the works are figurative watercolors, casein abstractions and examples of the illustrations and cartoons with which Glankoff supported himself for much of his life.

But as befits a museum that is heavy on prints, the bulk of the show comprises woodcuts and the large images that, although not exactly prints, were obtained by transferring pigment from wood blocks to paper (of the latter, more anon).

First, there are the early black-and-white woodcuts owing a good deal to the German Expressionists. Glankoff had a nice feel for the plank and would sometimes leave stretches of it to speak for itself — that is, unengraved. His 1931 self-portrait is a good case in point.

The chronology of the 1940's gets a little hazy, but this was the decade in which the artist turned to abstraction with figural overtones. Picasso and

Klee were among his influences. Glankoff also was experimenting with color, printing the same image in different hues.

In the 1950's, the artist's output declined because he joined his wife in her business, "Impulse Items," designing and making stuffed toys and continuing to do so until Mrs. Glankoff's death in 1970.

Then, financially secure for the first time in his life, Glankoff set about his career in earnest by devising a method for working on a large scale that would not oblige him to move out of his small New York City apartment.

Prompted by large Oriental woodcuts comprising several small blocks fitted together, he began by spreading an image over two blocks installed in a specially designed table.

At first, Glankoff cut shapes into the blocks, inking them and applying a sheet of paper to each. Later, he painted the forms on the planks in a permanent pigment; he then inked them, monotype-style, and applied the paper.

The artist repeated this part of the procedure sometimes as many as six times, or until the desired effect was achieved. Soon, he was pulling from four, six, eight, even nine panels, but always without seeing the overall result until all the prints were joined together.

A technique that almost rivals mezzotint for laboriousness, it seems a perverse invention for someone who, according to the catalogue essay by



"Five Trees," a 1928 woodcut by Sam Glankoff

Marilyn Kushner, valued spontaneity. Still, the idea is of a piece with the artist's history of adjusting to impossible situations; besides, it worked.

These late "printed paintings" — the largest measures 5 feet by 6 feet 2½ inches — are beautiful. The colors have seeped into the Japanese paper, softening the edges of the shapes but never their impact.

In the reviewer's opinion, the best are the total abstractions that, by turns, recall the imagery of Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painters.

There are shapes like oversized Chinese characters; an image consisting of vertical ellipses in different reds, one within another, set on a reddish-ocher ground and enclosing a central sliver of cerulean rimmed in black; arcs that hang in space like aberrant brackets and many more.

However, both Miss Kushner and Sam Hunter indicate in their catalogue essays that non-objectivity was for Glankoff a kind of prison from which he was finally sprung by the friendship and attention of Miss Snyder.

The final, figural works stand for his renewed capacity for expression and, in effect, for his restoration to the human race. And, evocative of the early stick figures and certain of Miró's devices, these shapes, often female, are not unimpressive.

It is to be hoped, though, that the spirit of the gentle, attractive and closemouthed old artist, who figures in a videotape accompanying the show, will not mind if some viewers find the geometric sublimation of his distress more moving than its expression. ■