

# Art in America



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## Rare Gestures

*Various misconceptions about Abstract-Expressionist prints, a long-neglected field, are challenged in a traveling show titled "The Stamp of Impulse."*

BY FAYE HIRSCH

Received wisdom has it that Abstract Expressionism was not a significant movement for prints. With a few exceptions—Gottlieb, Motherwell, Frankenthaler, Francis—Abstract-Expressionist artists have generally been viewed as contributing little to printmaking in terms of quantity or innovation. By contrast, Pop art (so the wisdom goes), with its stake in mechanical processes and mass consumption, not to mention the coincidence of it arising alongside the great collaborative print workshops such as Tatyana Grosman's Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) in West Islip, N.Y. (in 1957), and June Wayne's Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles (in 1960), is more often viewed as the first artistic movement in the second half of the 20th century to fully embrace prints. As the landmark traveling exhibition "The Stamp of Impulse: Abstract-Expressionist Prints" makes clear, however, the received wisdom is only partly correct, for the relative inconsequentiality of prints in Abstract Expressionism has more to do with the history of the print market in America than with any profound antipathy to the medium on the part of mid-century abstract artists. Nobody was buying abstract prints during the early years of the movement, and since there was no demand, artists tended to produce prints as experiments, and only occasionally in editions, which were almost always small. Filed away in studios or tucked deeply in the archives of a few public collections, these prints lapsed from obscurity into oblivion.

This exhibition, more than a decade in the making, disproves the assumption that the oblique and sometimes arcane techniques of the print medium were inimical to the creative spontaneity and immediacy of touch so valued by Abstract-Expressionist artists. It is a refreshing corrective. David Acton, curator of prints, drawings and photographs at the Worcester Art Museum, has selected 100 abstract prints by 100 artists, some famous, others less so. Esthetically lively and diverse in their experimental range, the works emanate from a movement broadly defined to include artists like Nathan Oliveira and Larry Rivers, who might not come to mind, primarily, as Abstract Expressionists; more women and artists of African-American and Asian descent than readily attach themselves to a canonical checklist; and a hefty contingent from California (especially the Bay Area) and places other than New York that are often given scant treatment in narrower overviews.

In example after example, the prints in this exhibition demonstrate the ubiquity and persuasiveness of the abstract vocabulary pioneered in New York during the 1940s, from the surrealist biomorphism of Jerome Kamrowski, working in dry-



*Nell Blaine: Tropical Formation, 1947, soft-ground etching on cream wove paper, 9 by 5 1/2 inches. Estate of the artist.*

point, or of Peter Basa, in screenprint; to moody whorls and swaths of liquid tusche in landscapes by Hans Burkhardt, Edward Dugmore and Adja Yunkers; to radiant atmospheres in prints by Paul Jenkins, James Kelly, George Miyasaki, Anne Ryan and Sylvia Wald. A number of the artists on view here were influential in the movement's early days in New York (John Opper and Kamrowski, for example), but later, driven to take academic positions to support families, they fell by the wayside of critical attention. Like so many in the show (Jackson Pollock, Jacob Kainen, Norman Lewis, Emerson Woelffer, and others), they were supported at one point or another during the 1930s by the Federal Arts Project/Works Progress Administration, though they and their abstractionist colleagues had little interest in pursuing the type of social realism that had come to be associated with the FAP/WPA, especially with the influential graphic-arts division in New York.

Some of the works in this show, two-thirds predating 1960, are quite rare. The Dugmore, for example, is one of only a few lithographs the artist made early in his career, in 1949, at the California School of

Fine Arts (CSFA), later the San Francisco Art Institute, which, under the directorship of Douglas MacAgy, had been transformed from a "sleepy debutantes' craft center into a serious, progressive academy," as Acton writes in the catalogue to the show. (Dugmore abandoned the medium—and graphics, for the most part—shortly afterward.) A dozen or so prints in "The Stamp of Impulse" were made by artists at CSFA; among others, Frank Lobdell, who taught there, and three other members of the so-called Sausalito Six (James Budd Dixon, Walter Kuhlman and George Stillman).

The CSFA printmaking studio was open at all hours and became a gathering place for a bohemian crowd. It was here that Californians began to gain a special skill in lithography, in particular, though a close examination of the shape of CSFA impressions (and it is always worth noticing these, since the artists intended that they be integral to the composition) reveals that there were only a very few stones in the shop and they were used over and over again.<sup>1</sup>

Artists who by nature were given to experimentation were drawn to workshops like that at CSFA and, on the opposite coast, to British-born William Stanley Hayter's Atelier 17. During the Second World War and for a time thereafter, Atelier 17 was transplanted from its home at 17 rue Campagne-Première in Paris to the New School for Social Research in New York. Hayter also did several teaching stints at CSFA; all the more surprising, then, that there are no works by Hayter himself in the show.

Atelier 17 was the one place where young American artists could meet refugees like Roberto Matta and Yves Tanguy as they collaborated with the world's preeminent intaglio master printer. And the Americans themselves began to experiment at Atelier 17; on display in this exhibition are Atelier 17 prints by Nell Blaine, Louise Bourgeois, Herman Cherry and others. Pollock probably worked there after hours (a credible hypothesis on the part of Acton, who punctures the myth that Pollock worked directly with Hayter) to produce a small series of etchings, printed as proofs at the time and only posthumously editioned. He was working with his friend Reuben Kadish, who had a key to the studio (there is an early print here by Kadish, too, whom Acton was able to interview before his death in 1992). Printmaking, Acton surmises, was a pressure-free alternative for Pollock, who at the time was preparing for a show of his paintings at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century.

Circumstances changed with the establishment of workshops such as ULAE and Tamarind. This meant that second-generation Abstract Expressionists were given the opportunity to work in shops



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artists' estates. The Clifford Still is one of only two lithographs by the artist in public collections (this one belongs to the Oakland Museum); they were produced along with 19 others in the mid-'40s when Still was teaching at the Richmond Professional Institute in Virginia, but the others are withheld from view by the artist's estate. And *Litho #2 (Waves #2)*, perhaps the grandest print in the show, a large-scale lithograph (44 by 33 inches) by Willem de Kooning, one of his first, which the artist made by standing on a table and running a mop over the stone, was loaned by the Baltimore Museum of Art

*Apparition* (1945), with its grid of textured pictographs, was produced (as all his earliest works were) in a small edition of 15 on his own etching press. According to the exhibition catalogue, Oppen's *Stone #1* was one of just "a handful" of experimental prints executed by the artist in 1942; it is just this side of abstract (a variant not on view added some figures, transforming it into an identifiable scene, *Quarry*). A couple of the prints were discovered only after the artists' deaths; a unique experiment by Richard Stankiewicz, for example, in which the sculptor torched and pierced a steel plate, creating a rough matrix with a hole in the center which he printed in open bite and, using the marks made by the torch, drypoint. Hans Hofmann's *Composition in Blue*, printed in a large edition (120) in 1945 at the home of a student, is his only screenprint. It shows an abstract figure composed of robust lines and shapes in black and white set against a blue background.<sup>7</sup> Barnett Newman was depressed about the death of his brother when he made one of his first lithographs at the urging of his friend Cleve Gray in 1961; he worked at the Pratt Graphic Arts Center in New York, a shop that was very active at the time. The untitled litho, produced in an edition of 30, consists of two abutting vertical rectangles, one of solid black and the other gray that was printed from a scraped and scumbled surface.



Wolasse Ting: *Black Orpheus*, plate 6 from the suite "Hollywood Honeymoon," 1964, lithograph on cream wove paper, 28 by 38 inches.

that not only made the prints, but also published and marketed them. The show includes, among others, works made by Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler and Rivers during the early years of ULAE, and by Esteban Vicente, Hugo Weber and Yunkers at Tamarind.

The vast majority of prints in the show—85 out of 100—are from the Worcester Art Museum's collection. Some of the rarest works, however, were loaned—Bothko's only print, for example, an untitled etching in a single proof, produced around 1945, probably with the help of Adolph Gottlieb. Like the Pollock etching, this was borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. An untitled linocut in orange and black that Richard Diebenkorn made while still a graduate student at the University of New Mexico in 1950 (the roughly geometric forms look as though they are swimming around trying to find a Diebenkorn) and Nell Blaine's small soft-ground etching *Tropical Formation* (1947), a gangly figure composed of curved and drooping lines, were loaned by the

(it was printed at the University of California at Berkeley in 1960 by Miyasaki and Oliveira).

Such loans make it clear that these prints are to be found in collections all over the country; but rarely are they thought of as a discrete group worthy of special consideration. A work like the de Kooning vividly demonstrates the capacity of printmaking to accommodate the sort of spontaneous invention that interested the Abstract Expressionists. This exhibition foils the assumption that prints limit artistic improvisation. As Hayler once famously said, "If you know what it's going to look like, why bother making it?"

Nearly all the works in Worcester's collection were acquired in the 1990s, and were selected for the show as benchmarks of one sort or another: they are, for the most part, works produced early or uniquely or under special conditions. Gottlieb's own large black-and-white etching and aquatint

James Kelly: *August*, 1952, lithograph on cream wove paper, 24 by 14½ inches.







Edward Dugmore; *Untitled*, 1949, lithograph on cream wove paper, 16 by 12 inches.



Frank Lobdell; *Untitled*, 1948, lithograph on cream wove paper, 11 1/2 by 11 inches.

prints. Heald began collecting them for himself and for the museum; Acton tapped a variety of funds in the museum to acquire other prints. "Almost nobody else really cared," says Acton. "Print scholars and curators just thought the stuff wasn't there—that the process related to printmaking was so antithetical to Abstract Expressionism—and they figured when it was there it wasn't very important." Researching old issues of *Art News* and *Art Digest*, Acton began poking around and asking questions. "I would call up dealers, artists, widows. Then the first guy says you should call so-and-so. I didn't even know about these people. I just went into it and started loving it. The ironic and sad thing was that from the time I started working on the show in 1989, a fifth or more of the artists died. People died within weeks of the opening."

If there is a weakness in the project, it is in the catalogue. The handsomely produced volume offers, on the one hand, a gold mine of information: biographical sketches of artists long-forgotten, facts established and stereotypes demystified. However, most of this information is buried in Acton's catalogue entries, in which each print gets a lengthy text. His introduction is all too brief, and the other two essays have a rather tangential relationship to the material at hand. One is on the Abstract Expressionists and jazz, with barely a mention of prints; a

charming memoir by David Amram, it functions at best as a kind of mise-en-scène. You would think, by contrast, that David Lehman's essay on poetry and Abstract Expressionism would be more germane, since prints are so well suited to collaborations between artists and writers, which did occur with some frequency on the part of those represented here. However, only a scattering of prints in the actual show are either artist/poet collaborations or were produced with literature in mind, and none of them is mentioned in Lehman's essay. There is just one selection from the famous *21 Etchings and Poems* portfolio (1957) begun under Peter Grippe at Atelier 17, a photoetching after some collages that Franz Kline made in response to a poem by Frank O'Hara. Writing about an untitled screenprint from 1956 by Alfred Leslie, Acton observes that the print was made "in conjunction with Leslie's contribution to the Tiber Press Portfolios, one of the era's most remarkable collaborations between poets and printmakers." Alas, the resulting print, titled *Permanently*, a pairing of Leslie with poet Kenneth Koch, was not in Acton's show, though the work on view did use some of the same screens as *Permanently*.

Hartigan created her lithograph *Pallas Athena* at ULAE in 1961, inspired by her friend Barbara Guest, who was writing poetry with Homeric themes. William Majors, in his lovely 1965 collagraph *Genesis*

*II*, looked to the Bible, and Ed Colker, in a 1962 lithograph, to a cycle of Celtic poetry taken from *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves's study of myth and poetry. No right-minded historian would question the importance of interactions among artists, poets and musicians to the development of Abstract Expressionism, but Amram's and Lehman's essays here give the misleading impression that there are not enough general remarks to be made about the prints in the exhibition.

As it turns out, Heald and Acton have not been entirely alone in their collecting efforts: a New Yorker named Charles Dean had seen a print by Kainen in 1987 at Hirsch & Adler Gallery in New York. Under the initial guidance of curator Janet Flint, then of the National Museum of American Art, who had organized the show at Hirsch & Adler, Dean began purchasing Abstract-Expressionist prints. He now has one of the preeminent collections of this material in private or public hands. Some 90 of Dean's prints will go on view May 15 at the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens in Jacksonville, Fla. "Expressive Impressions: Three Decades of American Abstract Prints" will remain on view through Aug. 17. While Acton's bias is clearly toward artists for whom prints are only part of the story, Dean is not similarly restricted. The Cummer

**Helen Frankenthaler has always remained true to the notion—fundamental to Ab-Ex printmaking—that process is everything. In a lucky coincidence, “The Stamp of Impulse” coincides with a survey of her woodcuts.**

exhibition will include works by Hayter as well as Grippe, Fred Becker, Leonard Edmondson and Gabor Peterdi, who were all primarily printmakers.

Viewers who know only the later work of some of these artists may be surprised at just how innovative they were in the late '40s and early '50s. Moreover, a number of the works in Dean's collection—prints by John Grillo, Louise Nevelson and Yunkers, for example—are significantly earlier than prints by the same artists in the Acton show, conveying, perhaps, a more accurate representation of their most influential period in the medium. Much of it comes down to a matter of taste, but viewers can only cheer yet another opportunity, coming so soon on the heels of the first, to see more of this material. While Dean's show will include some of the same prints as the Worcester exhibition (they were multiples, however few in number), there are some nice surprises.

*Richard Stankiewicz: Untitled, 1961, drypoint and open bite on cream rayon-fiber paper, 33% by 14% inches.*



*Helen Frankenthaler: First Stone, 1961, lithograph on white Arches wove paper, 29% by 27% inches. Private collection.*

Underscoring the innovative impulse that drove abstract printmaking are two energetic late 1940s “cellocuts” by the unjustly neglected Boris Margo, for example, who invented the technique, in which he etched sheets of celluloid with acetone to form the matrix. As far as Dean knows, the technique has not been used since, but it produced a very robust, spontaneous line that Margo inked in many colors with emotionally intense results.

Acton's show includes a few artists who came to be known primarily for their prints (Warrington Colescott and Sam Glankoff, for instance) or who made so many prints that their graphic production must be factored into any serious consideration of their work as a whole. Examples of the latter are Bourgeois, Diebenkorn, Francis, Gottlieb, Kalnen, Motherwell, Oliveira and Yunkers. Among the most eminent in this category is Frankenthaler, whose first published print, aptly titled *First Stone*, a lithograph made at ULAE in 1961, is included in “The Stamp of Impulse.” Frankenthaler has returned to prints at many stages in her career, despite the fact that prints would seem to be the medium least sympathetic to her painterly style.

By lucky coincidence, a survey exhibition of her most impressive prints, large woodcuts produced at several shops, most notably ULAE and Tyler Graphics, was recently on view in a traveling exhibition, “Frankenthaler: The Woodcuts,” curated by Judith Goldman under the auspices of the Naples Museum of Art in Florida. The show included not only finished works from the official edition, but preliminary proofs and other preparatory material, as well as a few of the matrices themselves. Frankenthaler has managed, in these prints, to create the miraculous illusion of turning wood into liquid. At once delicate and monumental, the prints seem utterly spontaneous, yet each is

the demonstrable product of a knowledgeable exploitation of wood grains and paper color and texture, along (of course) with accidents in carving and some admittedly serendipitous, even desperate, measures. Process is everything; to this most fundamental concern of Abstract-Expressionist printmaking, Frankenthaler has always remained true. □

1. David Kiehl, curator of prints at the Whitney Museum of American Art, believes that this scarcity of matrices makes the determination of edition sizes especially challenging. Artists might decide to print a certain number, only to discover in returning to the CSFA studio that their stone had already been reworked by someone else. Interview with the author, Dec. 12, 2002.

2. This date is a revision by Tina Dickey, editor of the Hans Hofmann catalogue raisonné currently in preparation. Letter from Dickey to New York collector Charles Dean, dated Dec. 28, 2001. The print is dated 1962 in the Acton catalogue.

*“The Stamp of Impulse: Abstract-Expressionist Prints” debuted at the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass. [Apr. 21–June 17, 2001], before traveling to the Cleveland Museum of Art [Nov. 18, 2001–Jan. 27, 2002], the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth [Mar. 2–May 12, 2002], and the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY [Aug. 3–Oct. 13, 2002]. It can presently be seen at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill. [Jan. 16–Mar. 16]. “Expressive Impressions: Three Decades of American Abstract Prints” will be on view at the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, Fla. [May 15–Aug. 17]. “Frankenthaler: The Woodcuts” opened at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven [May 14–Sept. 9, 2002] and is currently on view at the Naples Museum of Art [Nov. 8, 2002–Mar. 23, 2003]. It is accompanied by a catalogue authored by the show's curator, Judith Goldman.*

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