

ETCHED IN TIME

Artist Sam Glankoff's Lifetime of Solitude

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BY PHYLLIS ORRICK



NOWHERE MAN
Artist Sam Glankoff shunned fame and fortune.

WHEN SAM Glankoff died in 1982 at the age of 87, the artist/printmaker had just been the subject of the first public exhibit of his work in 53 years. Now, nearly a decade later, his huge output of hand-executed "print-paintings," as they've been dubbed, arduously produced works on paper, created by idiosyncratic methods he developed over the years, is just coming on the commercial market, which he deliberately

**ARTIST SAM
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shunned for all but a few years of his nearly seven-decade long career.

His edginess and ambivalence about the so-called "art scene" is characteristic of how Glankoff approached most matters, according to those few surviving people who knew him well. Constantly preoccupied with finding the means to support himself while he pursued his fine art projects, Glankoff spent nearly 15 years, from 1955-70, as a commercial designer and fabricator in the toy company started by Frances

Kornblum, his common law wife of 41 years. During that period, he abandoned his own work entirely, setting aside his explorations of woodcuts, print-making techniques and the uses of color. Instead he turned his energy to first rendering and then designing the methods to reproduce in quantity stuffed animal versions of the likes of Babar the Elephant and the Cat in the Hat (both of whose three-dimensional counterparts were originated in Glankoff's studio).

Earlier in his life, during the 30s and 40s, the artist who shunned any public display of his fine art work, largely oils and woodcuts at the time, earned cash as an illustrator for a host of widely circulated publications and books, among them the *True Comics* line, *The New Yorker*, *Family Circle* and a host of novels published by New York's major houses. After Kornblum's death in 1970, he took up his art to the exclusion of nearly everything else, including most human contacts, leading a monastic existence in a two-room apartment on 33rd St. near Lexington Ave., which also doubled as his studio.

For nine years, he applied himself obsessively to the refinement of a challenging technique of his own devising, wherein he used basic materials, plywood, fine grain Japanese rice paper, printer's ink and acrylic and enamel paints, to singlehandedly produce multipaneled "print-paintings" that have drawn praise from prominent critics and have been likened to the work of Miro and Klee, as well as color field masters like Mark Rothko.

In keeping with his prickly personality, Glankoff limited his circle to his brother Mort (six years his junior, who died in 1986 at the age of 86), his sister Regina, a singer who's now 93, and a handful of friends. Having sold off the toy business and a small property in upstate New York, he lived off the interest from the proceeds, a sum that came to a little more than a few hundred dollars a month, according to a close associate. (The 33rd St. apartment, where he lived for 50-some years, carried a rent of just \$90 a month for years.)

In 1979, he experienced a major turning point, by most accounts, when he allowed himself to be coaxed out of his increasingly claustrophobic existence by Mort's new wife, Wendy Snyder, an art student and classical musician nearly 60 years his junior. Snyder's connection with Sam proved to be long-lived: she is now representing his estate, having established herself as an authoritative source on his personal history, bolstered by a series of tape-recorded interviews she conducted with him in the final years of his life. She is an ardent believer in the value of his artistic vision; his works cover the walls of the modest two-bedroom apartment she once occupied with Mort in the same building she and Mort convinced Sam to relocate to shortly before he died. Under her aegis, his works gradually began to emerge from his closely held grip, a process of "liberation," as he put it in an interview videotaped shortly before his death.

In Snyder's view, both Sam and Mort's lives were "cut short." When they died they were still pursuing a number of ambitious artistic goals; Sam being fueled by the desire to try to make up for the years he'd missed and Mort rediscovering, at age 83, his passion for sculpture. Sam's deliberate spurning of the outside world notwithstanding, Snyder said he was never a "crochety, old, feeble, failing person," a contention borne out by the interview segments she recorded in 1981. Rather, he was an enigma.

During an interview last week, Snyder sat amidst dozens of examples of both brothers' work. Most prominent are Sam's larger (some five ft. by six ft.) paper print-paintings from the latter years—deeply hued abstract circles hovering over throbbing-yet-neutral backgrounds as well as playful exclamatory stick figures poised to crack out of their two-dimensional constraints. They compete with Mort's garish constructs, some nearly life-size robotish forms, fashioned out of styrofoam packing sections painted fluorescent oranges, blues, yellows, greens and reds.

While Snyder has concentrated on promoting Sam and his art, she insists that Mort's works—and what they signify about the relationship between the two men—are compelling as well. On a brief tour of the apartment, she points to other, smaller statues and bas-relief pieces by Mort, including a number of primitive figures concocted of nails, screws, springs and other bits of metal hardware affixed to flat metal plates. "Mort was the hedonist," she said, as she thumbed a bit of spring that served as the penis of one of Mort's playfully sexed little men.

Having founded *Cue* magazine in the late 30s, for which Sam executed cover art and inside illustrations, Mort was an active participant in New York's cultural life. Over the years, he tried to use his contacts to promote his brother's work, Snyder said, though most of his efforts were rebuffed by Sam.

That wasn't the only source of conflict between the two. "They were fiercely intellectual, passionate people, so their disagreements were fierce," Snyder recalled.

Although the brothers and their wives (Mort's first wife died in 1977) lived two blocks apart, she noted, "they didn't speak for 20 years." Not only were they opposites themselves, "each one wanted to be what the other one was," in Snyder's view: the monastic Sam envied Mort for his nights at the theater and his wide circle of friends, while Mort despaired of ever focusing his energy and ambition into a single calling as Sam had managed to do.

The separation, however, was "mostly due to the wives," Snyder said, acknowledging that, since both women were dead by the time she met the brothers, she'd only heard "one side" of the argument. "[Frances Kornblum] died in 1970, and Sam called Mort and said she'd died. Actually, what he said is 'She's dropped dead,'" which Snyder believes to have been the case. "That was the beginning of the rebuilding of the relationship. They saw each other after that every weekend."

Asked to describe Frances Kornblum, Snyder termed her "a powerful personality." The toy business, Snyder said, "was a big deal, though not in the same way it would be today. Again, she was 10 years ahead of her time," just as Mort was with *Cue*, she said. He sold it in the early 70s, horrified at the huge debt it had accumulated, to someone who in turn sold it to *New York* magazine, which incorporated it into its listings section. "He never ever benefited financially at all [from *Cue*], or [Sam from] the toy company.

"The amazing thing is that Sam got sucked into it against his desire. He couldn't get out of it until [Kornblum] died," Snyder said. Kornblum, she ex-



BODY ART

Glankoff's work shadowed Abstract Expressionism.

plained, was “a career woman. Apparently, she’d been the editor of many women’s magazines and girl’s magazines and in the 50s she got this idea of importing stuffed animals from France. Then Sam came in and got this idea of designing them. No one had ever been allowed to produce the Babar family and Frances was able to make a deal with Random House, I think, to make Babar. So all the Babars that our generation grew up with in the 50s—that was all Sam.”

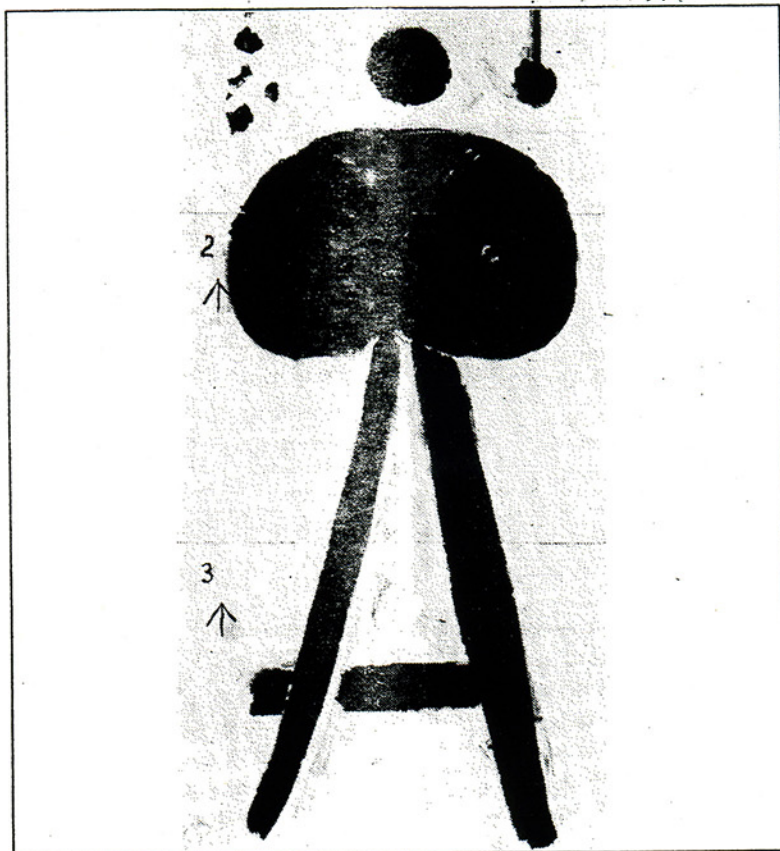
Glankoff’s contribution didn’t stop at creating three-dimensional stuffed models of the figures; he also “made inventions about how the animals’ patterns were cut, shoes, little things that the big companies stole right and left, and there wasn’t anything they could do, because they’d just change the color,” she said.

Snyder, a 37-year-old Detroit native, said she met Mort “at a lunch, and he just pursued me—till I dropped, really. I’d never had anybody court me like that. He’d send me a dozen long-stemmed roses in a vase wrapped in a [manuscript of the work of a well-known transcriber of Chopin].” She said that their mutual interest in classical music represented “a real sharing. He was the most cultivated man I’d ever met. That was what I’d hungered for. When he had a stroke when he was 85, I had to wake up. That was the first time it really hit me that life was fragile. I didn’t really think about it.”

She said that there have been “thoughts of having a museum exhibition of the two brothers,” which coincides with “my personal interest, which is, what it’s possible to produce in a lifetime. When I was 17 I used to cry in my room because I wasn’t going to accomplish anything by the time I was 20. Being with someone like Mort—and everybody who came in contact with me, my contemporaries—we realized that everyone is under tremendous pressure to achieve something by a certain age. And here’s someone [Mort] at 83 producing a body of sculpture and Sam didn’t start at print-painting fulltime until he was 75. These were men of no age.”

By her account, from 1979 until Sam’s death three years later, Snyder spent an increasing amount of time with him, even being allowed to visit him in his studio. In 1981, she and Mort convinced him to move into an apartment two floors below their own on Lexington Ave. just below 27th St. In the meantime, she’d been acting variously as muse and housekeeper to Sam in his cramped, meticulously organized 33rd St. quarters, whose windows “hadn’t been cleaned in 30 years,” as she put it.

The space there was so tight that Sam was forced to devise a complicated system of slats and supports to hold his larger works. Because his drafting table was so small, he wasn’t able to actually see his larger pieces until they’d been completed and were ready for final assembly. The apartment’s amenities were so primitive, Snyder recalled, that there was only one electrical outlet, which meant there was a chronic shortage of light. As a result Sam



PAPER TIGER

The experts are still studying Glankoff’s “print-painting” technique.

restricted his productive time to daylight hours. “He’d start work at dawn,” Snyder said.

In addition to handling the day-to-day aspects of his living and working arrangements, she battled his resistance to showing his work to anyone outside his immediate circle. Her efforts were boosted after “someone had come to dinner” at Mort’s and her house and had seen Sam’s works and “brought a collector.”

Though that didn’t produce any direct result, it made Snyder realize that she had to both document Glankoff’s career and start to publicize it, she said. In keeping with his ambivalent attitude toward the value of what he was doing, Glankoff refused for most of his life to either sign or date his work. In addition, he was cavalier about past pieces that no longer interested him; an entire segment of his oeuvre, his oil paintings from the 20s and 30s, has all but disappeared. “He had no attachment to the past,” she said. She said he was also imbued with “an absolutely solitary” nature. “I knew no one would really meet him,” she recalled. “He just wasn’t interested, so I started to surreptitiously take the work to galleries.”

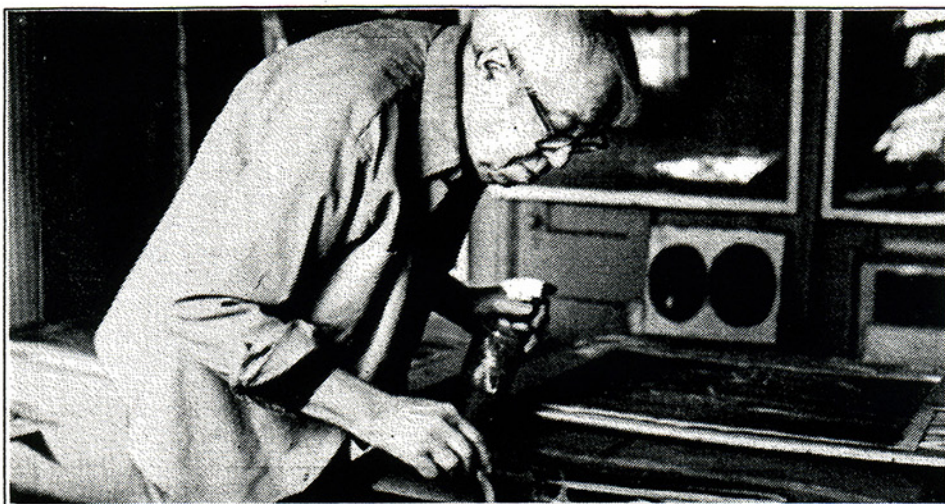
She said that Glankoff’s solitary tendencies also led him to concentrate on his work in an almost “laborious” manner, even as he sought to create images that seemed spontaneous. “Even when he was a painter,” she explained, “he ground his own paints, made his own tubes, stretched his own canvases, made his own frames.”

When he took up what would come to be known as print-painting, his fascination with technical matters grew even greater. “The reason I talk about technique so much,” she said, “is because I know how much focus he put on it.”

The physical steps involved in each of his works has been documented extensively by a handful of scholars who’ve studied Glankoff over the past 10 years or so. Writing in the August ’85 issue of *Print Review 20*, a publication of the Pratt Institute, Marilyn Kushner and Jeffrey Wechsler described the remarkably detailed methods needed to produce the strikingly rich hues and multi-layered backgrounds that are Glankoff’s signature.

He began by drawing numerous small-scale studies in pastel, a chalk-like medium that’s imbued with the deep colors of oils. “It was the studies that enabled him to achieve the spontaneity essential to his art,” they wrote. In addition, Glankoff, a “voracious” reader of various philosophies, according to Snyder, put to practical use his observations of Eastern thought, particularly Zen’s insistence on the acceptance of apparently contradictory impulses in the search for an ultimate peace.

As a result, even as he set up a rigorous method of print-making to assure the highest quality and cleanest images, he permitted, and even encouraged, randomness and accidents to suggest “an energetic freedom,” as Kushner and



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST
Glankoff at work in his tiny studio.

Wechsler put it. His small-scale sketch completed to his satisfaction, Glankoff drew a grid over it, which he used as a guide for the next step: drawing the same design in charcoal on a plywood sheet (19 and a half by 24 ins.). Next, he'd cover the charcoal lines with a water-resistant paint that would serve as the template for the remainder of the process.

Then he applied a mixture of his own devising (conservators are still puzzled by some of the combinations he came up with), consisting of water-based printer's ink and a heavier paint that was still "transparent enough not to hide completely the first color," as he explained in an interview with Snyder. Each section was inked at least three times, prompting him to invent a device to ensure perfect registration. Likewise, he discovered the properties of unusually thin paper, the handmade Japanese type known as "Goyu," which is too delicate for mechanical printing, but which permitted Glankoff to manipulate his inks and the degree of their absorption by the paper. After nearly a decade of experimentation, he'd learned how to coax the paper into accepting up to 10 coats.

Another step in the process that permitted Glankoff to stretch the bounds of the normally mechanistic printing process was his practice of spraying the panel with water as it sat on the freshly inked board, to speed the transfer of the ink to the paper and to slow the drying process. Then, after excess water had been blotted from the paper, Glankoff pushed a roller across the surface, forcing yet more pigment into the paper until it was saturated to the degree he wanted.

When he was completely satisfied with a panel, he'd set it to dry under "layers of felt and chipboard and covered with a glass plate," Kushner and Wechsler wrote. It would take "a few days" for the print to

dry sufficiently, at which point it was joined with its fellows by tape or glue. (Most works were composed of four or six panels, though in later years Glankoff expanded his vision so that six- and eight-section works were the norm. His last piece, Snyder noted, was a nine-panel effort.)

Glankoff's prickly resistance to the lures of the art world is mirrored by the difficulty his work poses for scholars and critics wishing to place it. His self-imposed exile from contemporary influences for more than half a century notwithstanding, his own development has traced the same progression from figurative to expressionistic to abstract that many of the century's leading practitioners underwent.

His late works, some of which are now nearly 20 years old, appeal to the same sensibility that's sustained the popularity of such standbys as Klee, Miro and the abstract expressionists. Snyder is convinced that Glankoff, if he were alive, would approve of putting his work out for display and even sale.

As for the question of actual value, his works are currently priced at upwards of \$15,000 at the Victoria Munroe Gallery, which took on his estate last summer.

Snyder said that, contrary to the macabre pattern evinced by other artists' deaths, wherein their works become more desirable—and valuable—after they're dead, "the fact that he's dead has hindered the mobilization of his work. Because the art world collectors want to go through the artist in his 20s and the East Village" and on up. "Collectors today want that relationship," she said. "Also, this is it, which goes against the grain of the instinct of the collector to get in on the development and the gamble of not knowing where it will end up. Sam mastered something, but this culture doesn't revere a master."