

In The Galleries

By RACHEL MULLEN

Sam Glankoff, Once Overlooked, Gets Recognition He Deserves

Sam Glankoff (1894-1982) is one of those exceptionally talented artists whose work has remained unknown until relatively recently.

For a short period between 1922 and 1928 Glankoff exhibited at the Whitney Studio Club exhibitions, receiving praise for one of his works from a New York Times art critic in 1922. Due to his self-imposed isolation from the rest of the art world, his work was not seen publicly again until October 1981.

Glankoff's discovery or "rediscovery" was largely due to the patience and understanding of his sister-in-law, Wendy Snyder, now director of the Sam Glankoff estate. Snyder broke through Glankoff's barrier of isolation. She convinced him that his art had value to others and persuaded him to show his work to the public. In October 1981 at the venerable age of 87, Glankoff had his first one-man exhibition at the Graham Gallery in New York. He died a few months later.

The first retrospective representing more than 100 works by the artist is on view at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick. "Public recognition is long overdue for this artist," noted Jeffrey Wechsler, assistant director of the Museum. "Glankoff has used traditional printmaking techniques with great skill, and invented 'print-painting,' a new and—in his hands—a highly effective method of image making."

Glankoff's mature work is similar in some respects to paintings by William Bazotes. In both artists' work, color has been applied freely and a sense of spontaneity has been preserved. Edges of color have been broken or blurred, and the primitive figures and abstract images seem to float on an indeterminate ground of color.

Bazotes uses canvas and oil paint to achieve his effect, whereas Glankoff employs a complicated combination print-painting technique with water-based paint. By combining painting with printmaking, Glankoff is able to retain the spontaneity of the brush stroke.

To understand Glankoff's art, however, the viewer must begin chronologically with Glankoff's earliest surviving works, his woodcuts from the 1920s. Snyder discovered many of these works stuffed in envelopes in a

closet in Glankoff's New York apartment. Most were undated and unsigned, because the artist was not aware of their worth. At this point in his career he lacked confidence in his work and shunned crowds.

This isolation may be partly explained by an eight month stint he served in a Cuban jail.

A conscientious objector during World War I, Glankoff went to Cuba, earning his living by riding horseback through Havana and painting portraits. On one sojourn, he was arrested, accused of being a spy, and sent to jail on the Isle of Pines. There he was incarcerated for eight months with 30 other men in a small, filthy jail room, according to Snyder. The event may have accounted for his feelings of isolation and claustrophobia.

When he returned he lived in New York and worked in the woodcut media. Already in the 1920s, Glankoff's energetic chiseling and strong emotive line are evident in his woodcuts.

Influenced by woodcuts created by the German expressionists, Glankoff began chiseling with the grain rather than against the grain, emotionally working through the material. His portrait of "Frances," 1931, is executed with an expressive feeling, the wood chiseled with bold strokes to emphasize the large eyes with their piercing gaze and long, sensitive, aquiline nose.

One can discover many of these early woodcut images in later abstract print-paintings.

Commercial Ventures
Glankoff's commercial work, his means of support from the 20s through the 70s, is also included in the exhibition. His illustrations and woodcuts for book illustrations display the same quality of vitality as his "art" work. A striking example of this is his linocut in art deco style which depicts a female nude riding a unicorn. This piece was probably executed for a book illustration in the 20s.

Glankoff often illustrated historic legends for "True Comics," editorial spots for the "New Yorker," "Family Circle," and other magazines and books. Glankoff's commercial ventures even extended into helping Frances Kornblum, the woman with whom he lived, create and fabricate stuffed animals and toy designs for "Impulse Items," a toy business.

These toys included the original "Babar the Elephant" and Dr. Seuss's "Cat in the Hat." Glankoff made a point, however, of separating his commercial work from his art.

Though isolated from the art world, Glankoff read profusely, and must have been aware of the influence of European abstract art—cubism and surrealism—on America in the 30s and 40s. In the 1950s casein sketches for larger paintings and watercolors of Woodstock, Vt., images have been abstracted to concentrate on the interrelationship of line and color—all of which seem to work together in a harmonious balance.

His watercolor of blueberry pickers executed in Woodstock is abstracted beyond recognition. Painted in primary blue, red and yellow, the painting seems to glow and vibrate with life.

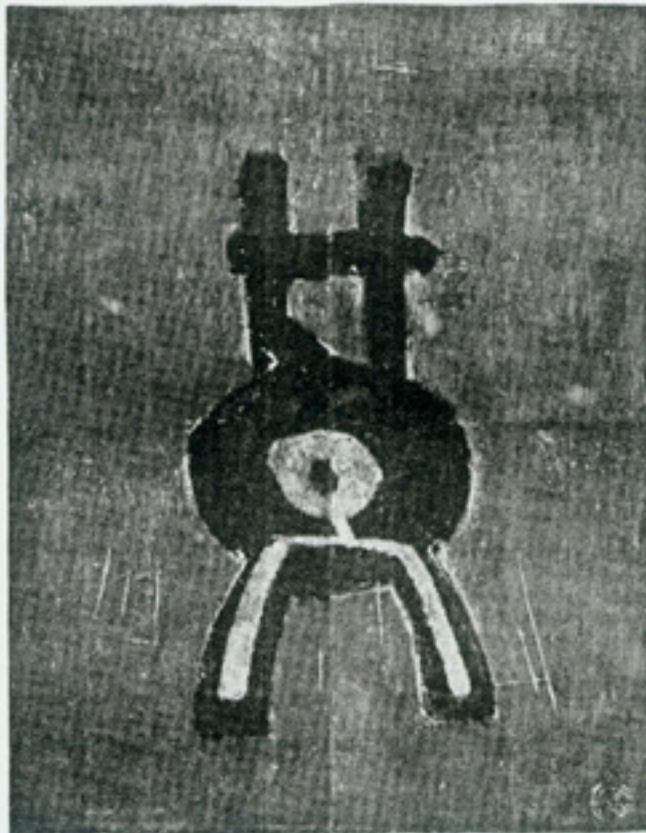
By the 1970s, Glankoff's work changed, became larger, and color assumed greater importance in his compositions. Inspired by contemporary Japanese multi-paneled prints, Glankoff realized that he could produce larger works by pasting four or more printed panels together.

"I had a fascination to make larger things," Glankoff stated. "Big isn't necessarily better," he said, "but it is the contemporary style." (quoted from the exhibition catalogue)

At times he would allow the divisions between the papers to show, thus creating a sense of depth and shifting planes, as in a 4-paneled work of 1971. The circle was another favorite image frequently employed by Glankoff in the late 70s. He chose this image because, for him, it represented tranquility and serenity and was the only true, geometric shape he could hide behind.

In a dramatic circle painting of 1976, a blue vertical line surrounded by black seems to project forward from the blurred ovals of red, hot pink and yellow on an earth-colored ground, as if demanding recognition. Though the circle is an abstract form, Glankoff has imbued it with sexuality. In fact, one can discover similar, curving, oval female shapes in his preliminary sketches of nudes.

In the 1980s after Glankoff's acquaintance with Wendy Snyder, his work became liberated, to use the artist's words. He was more at ease with himself and the public. This new



Masked Allusion

DrPOP-001, seated female, late 1920s-30s, oil on paper. The figural associations of Glankoff's imagery were immersed in private and highly personal meanings. On one level they can be understood as masked allusions to his own sense of isolation, and it may be that a powerful motive for his art, was indeed, the resolution of internal conflict.

confidence is reflected in a renewed interest in figures. They stand erect, their sick shapes containing a new dignity.

The culmination of his work is a joyous work, a 9-paneled piece depicting black stick figures who appear to be dancing against a mottled ground of green, lavender and blue bands of color. The divisions between the pieces are prominently displayed so that one has the allusion of looking through a window. The figures, symbols of joy and hope, seem to float against the luminous color ground.

Glankoff's painting reveals a gentle spirit at struggle with himself and with his own fears, but a *passa* with an abiding faith in the human spirit. The resolution of his struggles are worked out through the painstaking print-painting process, where primitive figures and images add dimension to the luminous color field created by multiple layers of printed colors. The works produced sing with color, light and hope.

This exhibition will remain at the gallery through Nov. 24. Gallery hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. -

4:30 p.m. (closed on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays from noon - 5 p.m.)

An excellent catalogue accompanies the exhibition along with a video tape featuring the late artist and his work. Do not miss the video tape, as it makes one more aware of the spontaneity and warmth of this unusual man.