

SAM GLANKOFF  
(1894-1982)

Sam Glankoff was a New York-based, American artist whose innovative techniques and contributions to the enduring language of abstract expressionism have earned him a distinct place in the history of modern art.

Glankoff (*né* Glanckopf ) was born on October 30, 1894, in New York. Virtually self-taught as an artist, he began his art education by studying and copying miniature paintings on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The solitary nature of these early studies would find echoes in his later lifestyle and in his highly individualistic approach to making art.

Glankoff's mother, Yetta Emerman, had emigrated from Latvia to the United States in the 1880s. At the time of her marriage in New York to Jacob Glanckopf, a salesman of exotic feathers used in hat-making, she was a millinery designer whose creations were popular with well-known Broadway actresses. Ultimately, Yetta Emerman Glanckopf chose to give up her thriving business and instead focus her creative and intellectual energies on her four children. Although she lacked formal education, she revered music and literature, especially the works of the 19th-century German Romantics and Russians. She instilled in her children an abiding interest in culture and a sense of social consciousness. They were taught to play musical instruments and were brought up reading and speaking German.

As a youngster, Sam Glankoff played the violin, an instrument he continued to play throughout his life. Having demonstrated his musical and artistic aptitude at an early age, during his youth he clearly expressed his artistic aspirations. His father, however, took little interest in the rearing of his children and discouraged Sam's artistic pursuits.

As a teenager, Glankoff pursued any job that, as he would later recall, allowed him to use a paintbrush and he regularly visited art museums instead of going to school. When he was 20 years old, he began taking evening classes at New York's Art Students League, but in 1917, as a pacifist—and decidedly *not* a joiner of any kind of club or clique—he left the United States for Cuba as a conscientious objector when the U.S. entered World War I.

In Cuba, Glankoff traveled around on horseback, painting portraits—and at least one mural—in exchange for food. In 1918, his wartime hiatus was abruptly interrupted when he was arrested on charges (that turned out to be false) of having taken part in the earlier bombing of a railway station in Miami. After several months in prison in Cuba, Glankoff was released as the war came to a close. While in jail, he had met one of the German Upmanns of the London-based H. Upmann bank, which in the 1840s had established a cigar factory in Cuba. After Glankoff's release from prison, the businessman hired him to paint his portrait and that of his American girlfriend; with the earnings from those commissions, the young artist was able to return to New York. (Today, only photographs of those early Glankoff portrait paintings still exist.)

Back in New York, in the early 1920s, Glankoff worked as a commercial artist and continued to paint. He lived in Greenwich Village, with his brother Mort. Later, he moved to the Union Square district, which had become an artists' enclave, and then moved again to an artist's studio on East 59th Street. Glankoff frequently sojourned in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and in Woodstock, New York, towns that boasted well-known artists' colonies. Nevertheless, in each setting, even though he was surrounded by communities of fellow artists, Glankoff typically kept to himself.

In 1922, the artists Karoly Fulop and Hans O. Hofman introduced Glankoff to Juliana Force, the director of the Whitney Studio Club (the forerunner of the Whitney Museum of American Art). From that time, until the club disbanded in 1928, it routinely invited Glankoff to show his work and he regularly did so. In fact, the *New York Times*, in one of its reviews of those exhibitions, singled out works by Glankoff, William Glackens, Rockwell Kent and John Sloan for special praise; Glankoff's painting "Solitude," depicting a rocky Gloucester seascape, had caught its critic's eye. Three years later, in the club's annual exhibition, Glankoff showed an example of what would become his preferred art-making medium and the basis for his still-evolving artistic innovations: a simple woodcut.

Indeed, woodcuts and linocuts already had become Glankoff's primary means of expression in his personal artwork and in his commercial work, as well. Inspired by *Das Holzschnittbuch*, a 1921 German book on the history of woodcuts, which cited such German Expressionists as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Glankoff adapted a more brutal manner of carving into the wood blocks' grain. In the German Expressionists' technique, he discovered what he described as "a freedom to be expressive...with the wood by working with it, rather than against it." As a result, the direction of his work changed-dramatically.

As the head artist at numerous commercial-art studios in New York in the 1920s and 1930s, Glankoff used the rough and expressive style that emerged from his woodcut-making experiments in illustrations he created for books and literary magazines, including *St. Nicholas*, *Scribner's* and the *New Yorker*. He also contributed cover designs and the cartoon character "Mr. Petworthy" to his brother Mort's newly founded *Cue Magazine*. Still, during the Depression era Glankoff remained reluctant to allow others to judge his art. He did not submit his work for consideration by the Works Progress Administration, the federal-government agency that tapped the talents of many artists for public-sector projects, helping them to survive a period of extreme hardship.

In 1929, Glankoff moved in with Frances Kornblum, a woman who became his companion and with whom he would live for the next 40 years. During the next two decades, they divided their time between their apartment on East 33rd Street in New York and Woodstock, the small town full of artists north of the city, in the mid-Hudson Valley. After his brief, overseas experience in Cuba, Glankoff never again traveled beyond this home-base region.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Glankoff pursued both his more personal art-making—he was a prolific painter and maker of woodcuts—and a busy career as a commercial illustrator and comic-strip artist. In 1946, he served as the head artist of *True Comics*, a comic-book series whose offerings included historical legends, adventure stories, adaptations of literary classics and science-fiction tales. Glankoff also produced illustrations in comic-strip style for the advertising campaigns of such brands as Westinghouse and Chiquita (including pictures of Chiquita Banana, a United Fruit Company brand mascot). Meanwhile, in his own studio, the artist further refined his woodcut-making technique as his interest in abstract art grew. At the same time, he was becoming intrigued by the properties of water-based paints.

In the mid-1950s, in an effort to ease the struggle of making a living, Glankoff began assisting Kornblum in designing stuffed animals for Impulse Items, a toy company she owned and managed. Glankoff designed and fabricated more than 200 stuffed-animal designs, including the first, three-dimensional versions of Babar the Elephant and Dr. Suess's Cat in the Hat. The toys found international markets, but, financially, Glankoff still found himself struggling. As a result, for many years the artist had little time in which to focus on his personal artistic production.

That situation changed after Kornblum died in 1970. Glankoff then left the toy business to devote himself entirely to his art. He set up a new studio in the small, two-room apartment he and Kornblum had shared in New York and sold the little house they had owned in Woodstock. With the modest earnings he received from the sale of that property, Glankoff was at last able to enjoy a sense of financial security, to easily meet his apartment/studio rent payments and to buy whatever materials he needed for his art-making.

He soon returned to the abstract, collage-monotype woodcuts he had been developing during the 1950s, and after he saw an exhibition of East Asian art in New York—most likely a selection of prints by the Japanese master woodcut-maker, Shiko Munakata (1903-1975)—the scale of his own work began to change. Glankoff became intrigued by the examples he had seen of several printed sheets made from small printing blocks that had been joined together to produce complete, larger works. This approach to art-making appealed to him, considering the limited size of the space in which he both lived and worked.

Thus, in his own printing-based works, Glankoff began to join together several printed panels of uniformly sized paper himself, in the process devising a unique method of transfer-painting or “print-painting,” as it would later come to be called. In effect, the works that resulted from these experiments were variations of and combined different aspects of monotype, woodcut and painting.

In the mid-1970s, curators from the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York visited Glankoff at his studio. By that time, he had come to describe the technique he had developed as that of “using a printing method to make a painting,” and his visitors from the museum referred to the artist’s hybrid creations as “print-paintings,” coining the term. The Whitney’s curators offered to present Glankoff’s work in a solo exhibition at the museum, to which he responded: “I’m not ready yet.”

In fact, it was not until October-1981, at the age of 87, that Glankoff had his first-ever solo exhibition in a commercial gallery. That presentation, at New York’s Graham Gallery, took place only a few months before his death early the following year. Shortly thereafter, the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, at Rutgers University in New Jersey, organized “Sam Glankoff 1894-1982: A Retrospective Exhibition.” Shown in 1984, it was the first comprehensive survey of Glankoff’s oeuvre.

During his lifetime, the artist never made any effort to gain public attention for his art. Today, his works may be found in many public, private and corporate collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

This text was derived from research material used in the production of the catalog of the exhibition “*Sam Glankoff 1894-1982: A Retrospective Exhibition*,” which was organized by the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and presented at that institution in 1984. The catalog bore the title of the exhibition and contained an introduction by Sam Hunter and the essay “*His Life and Art*,” by Marilyn Kushner. This biographical summary is also derived from “*A Late-blooming Loner’s Ground-breaking Art*,” an essay by Edward Madrid Gómez that appeared in “*Sam Glankoff: Print-Paintings*,” the catalog of an exhibition of the same name that was presented at Valerie Carberry Gallery, Chicago, in 2007.