

MAJOR SPRING EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART FOCUSES ON THE ART OF THE BLOCK PRINT

The past ten years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the block print that recalls the renaissance that medium experienced during the late 19th century. Contemporary artists, among them important painters and sculptors, have recently made significant contributions to this age-old art. PRINTS FROM BLOCKS: GAUGUIN TO NOW, opening March 6 at The Museum of Modern Art, presents the products of this new block print revival together with major prints of the 19th and 20th centuries. This timely exhibition of nearly 200 woodcuts and linocuts invites comparisons between today's prints and works of the Modern Masters. The prints on view have been drawn from the Museum's unparalleled collection of works on paper and illuminate the major developments in woodcut and linocut of the past century. Organized by Riva Castleman, Director of the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, the exhibition will include a number of prints found in illustrated books and will be on view in the West Wing Galleries of the Museum through May 15.

Woodcut, the earliest print medium, had its first flowering in Europe in the 14th century. By the 19th century, after several periods of exceptional artistic creation in the medium, prints from wood blocks had become mainly illustrations in books and popular religious broadsides. When a new view of the potentials of woodcut was developed nearly a century ago, the imaginative artist was again able to utilize it for important imagery. Inspired by the flat, uncluttered surfaces of Japanese color woodcuts and the abstract,

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patterned images of European folk prints, artists such as Paul Gauguin "were prepared to extract many levels of inspiration from this material, not the least of which was its basic simplicity," explains Ms. Castleman. Soon, the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch made "the grain of the wood an intrinsic part of his composition," Ms. Castleman notes, and through his "brilliantly innovative techniques" enhanced the intensity of his subject matter.

In the 20th century, artists associated with a number of different movements expressed themselves through prints. Members of the Die Brücke (The Bridge) group, among them Heckel, Nolde, and Kirchner, gouged their blocks with rough, strong strokes. Their "direct, unedited attack upon the wood (or other media in which they worked) conveyed a primal energy that transformed subjects as banal as reclining nudes or street scenes into complex psychodramas," observes Ms. Castleman. At about the same time in France, such Fauve artists as Matisse and Vlaminck were creating works with decorative, repetitive elements that paralleled in black and white the excitement of their brilliantly colored paintings.

Although interest in the block print diminished to some extent after World War I as Neo-Classical, Social-Realist, and Surrealist artists turned to other media for expression, the printmaking form retained a distinct appeal. A school of modernist relief printmakers grew up around Claude Flight and Cyril Power in London in the 1920s, while artists of the early Bauhaus, among them Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy, created block prints. In Mexico, the woodcut continued as a popular medium throughout the 1930s and 1940s as a means of political and social protest.

After World War II, important movements of woodcut production developed in Japan and in the Western Hemisphere. Some artists in Japan, influenced by

European abstraction, produced images that coupled a traditional understanding of the medium with assimilated European forms, while others drew inspiration from Japanese folk art. In the United States, artists such as Leonard Baskin and Carol Summers made large, wall-sized prints on Japanese papers.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, many American artists developed new imagery in lithography and later, in etching, and finally, in the mid-1970s, in woodcut. Among the notable contemporary contributors to the medium are Jasper Johns, who created a print combining lithography, woodcut, and linocut, and Martin Disler, a Swiss artist who has literally expanded the block print's horizons by producing a multi-block linocut that is thirty-one feet long. Some of today's artists, notably the Neo-Expressionists, have been drawn to the block print by the physical involvement required in the carving of the block. The recent renewed interest in figuration has also increased the popularity of the woodcut and linocut. A.R. Penck and Georg Baselitz, two German artists actively exploring the possibilities of these media have "developed styles that are temperamentally allied to energetic gouging from wood and linoleum," notes Ms. Castleman.

PRINTS FROM BLOCKS: GAUGUIN TO NOW will be accompanied by a publication of the same title. The 84-page, paperbound volume features an essay by Ms. Castleman and includes 68 black-and-white and 4 color illustrations. Published and distributed by The Museum of Modern Art, the book is priced at \$8.95.

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