

The Museum of Modern Art

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AMERICAN PRINTS: 1913 - 1963

December 3, 1974 - March 3, 1975

WALL LABEL

This exhibition commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Museum's study room for prints and honors the memory of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, for whom it was named.

American printmaking during the fifty years between 1913 and 1963 reflected, for most of the period, progressive European art and the political and economic tides of the world. Most of all, however, American art in this century was shaped by European refugees and immigrants who changed the balance of the artistic community. Unlike Paris, where formal national assimilation of foreign artists was almost unheard of, New York, and later other American cities, offered them the haven of future citizenship. Idealism and curiosity provided their common bond with the American-born.

In 1913 the Armory Show, largely selected by Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn, brought the most important European and American artistic developments of the previous thirty years to the attention of the American public. It was a meeting ground for American artists of quite disparate persuasions: the realists John Sloan and George Bellows, the more radical Davies and Kuhn, and the modernists of Alfred Stieglitz's "291" gallery, such as John Marin. It is with Marin's dynamic etchings of the Woolworth Building, done in 1913, that this exhibition begins.

The art of the teens and twenties was responsive to Impressionist and Cubist influences but also encompassed the relatively individual styles of Edward Hopper and Charles Sheeler. Even in the agonized years of the thirties artists paid heed to European abstraction as well as the more timely socially conscious work of the Mexicans. Internationalism was firmly implanted in American soil with the immigration in 1931 of Josef Albers, who brought Bauhaus ideas directly to the American art student. Meanwhile, the lively abstractions of Stuart Davis contrasted with the bleak Social Realism of Reginald Marsh, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and his student, Jackson Pollock. The 1930s also saw the establishment of printmaking groups which experimented with new techniques such as silkscreen (serigraphy). Ben Shahn made the most typical use of silkscreen in his first prints, while Robert Gwathmey's flat compositions of strongly contrasting colors foreshadowed the medium's potential.

The influx of most of the major Surrealist artists during World War II not only revised creative thinking but, along with the communication demanded by the war, ended the characteristic isolated and unsynchronized American development of ideas. One of the refugees, Stanley William Hayter, brought his new methods of intaglio printing (engraving, etching, etc.) to America, and most of the etchings of the 1940s and 1950s shown here were done using his techniques. Shortly following the surge of Surrealist influence came a reawakening to the work of the German Expressionists. It took its most provocative form in the gigantic

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woodcuts of Leonard Baskin, in which the directness of chiseled wood was combined with the scale of contemporary painting. The painters of the large Abstract Expressionist canvases of the 1950s, however, were generally unwilling to confine their free, broad actions to copper plate or wood block. Lithography, the medium revived by Picasso, Braque, and Chagall in France after the war, had to be made available to painters. Recognizing this situation almost simultaneously, June Wayne and Tatyana Grosman opened lithography workshops. At Wayne's Tamarind Lithography Workshop printers received advanced training by working with such artists as Louise Nevelson, while at Universal Limited Art Editions Mrs. Grosman introduced two of America's most creative artists of the 1960s, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, to lithography. Rauschenberg won the major European prize for prints in 1963.

While the choice of any fifty-year period is an arbitrary one, beginning a survey of modern printmaking in America in 1913 has some historical precedent. Five decades after the Armory Show American artists had changed the direction of influence: their work was exhibited and sold in Europe, and many European artists had begun to react. Just after 1963 prints found such wide acceptance that large publication projects similar to those undertaken in Paris in the 1890s became common. Time alone will tell if those fifty years were the threshold of an American golden age in prints.

Several of the most interesting artists of the 1913-1963 period are not shown here because of the limitations of space or because they are not adequately represented in the Museum's collection, from which this exhibition is entirely drawn. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Print Room houses thousands more American prints of this period, and is open by appointment Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons between 2:00 and 5:00.

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