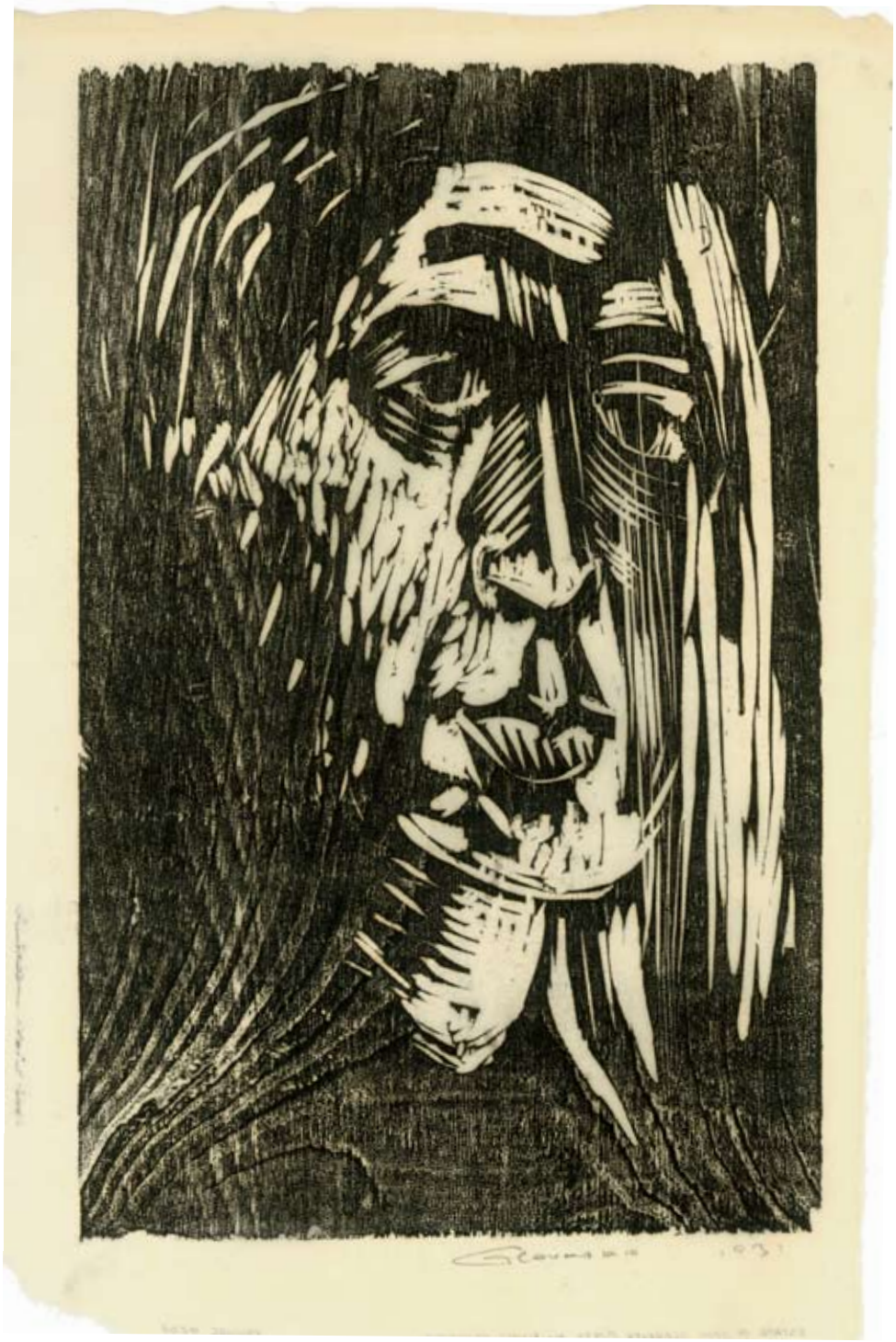
CRSA forum

The Journal of the Catalogue Raisonné Scholars Association
An Affiliated Society of the College Art Association

Fall 2006 ● No 20



In our continuing series on lesser-known artists, Wendy Snyder presents American modernist Sam Glankoff, a brilliant painter and printmaker whose fascinating biography makes for a compelling read.

Sam Glankoff, *Untitled*, 1972. Water Soluble Printers Ink and Casein on Japanese Paper, 29" x 41".

"It is not everyday that an artist of stature makes his debut in New York at the age of 87." Writing of Sam Glankoff in 1981, John Russell, the *New York Times* distinguished senior art critic's evaluation typified the collective critical response to the artist's first and only solo exhibition. Actually, Glankoff had participated in Whitney Studio Club group exhibitions each year from 1922 to 1928, receiving critical attention in *New York Times* reviews of these exhibitions group shows. When the Club disbanded in 1928, he stopped exhibiting his art. In 1974, when he was 80, the Whitney Museum of American Art, offered him an exhibition. His response was: "I'm not ready yet."

When I met Sam Glankoff in 1979, he was living in a small, two-room apartment on E. 33rd Street in New York where he had lived for nearly fifty years. I walked into a quiet, ordered world where making art was his single focus. Sam worked only mornings and afternoons, when the windows provided sufficient natural light. Late day and evenings he spent reading, drawing and in contemplation. Shelves were lined with books on critical theory, poetry, philosophy, Zen Buddhism and science fiction paperbacks. Walls were covered with large-scale works on paper, circles and abstract shapes in brilliant hues. Work was stacked against walls. Large white portfolios, filled with work, rested on top of a small bed that I learned he used as a surface for drying paper panels. Painted plywood boards were neatly stacked in rows to the left of the printing table he had designed and built. A drafting table served as a work surface, as did the baby grand piano. This compact, ordered world is where he developed his unique process called "print-painting," the term invented by Elke Solomon, then curator at the Whitney Museum. When she encountered Glankoff at work in his studio in 1974 she remarked, "These are not prints — these are paintings."

Samuel Glankoff (originally Glanckopf) was born on Grand Street in New York in 1894, the second of four children. His father's millinery business, "Fancy Feathers" was located on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. His mother, a well-known hat designer, had made headwear for the famous Broadway actresses. At her husband's insistence, she gave up her profession to raise their family, becoming the cultural anchor in their Russian Jewish home. Classical music, Goethe, Heine, Schiller, and The Masses (devoted to Socialism and Utopian causes) — all contributed to the family's intellectual life. The children were fluent in German. Sam played the violin. His frequently absent father was uninterested in Sam's clearly expressed early talent, so the moody, distant, brooding child took refuge in his room to paint and to spend his time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There he would commit to memory miniature

paintings that he saw on their walls. As he grew older, he looked for any job where he could hold a paintbrush. These included painting letters at a cement factory and eyes in a doll-making factory. In 1916 he started taking Edward Dufner's evening classes at the Art Students League, but when the US entered World War I in 1917, Glankoff, without telling his family, left for Cuba as a conscientious objector.

There he led the life of an itinerant painter selling his work for the first time. He traveled overland on horseback, offering to paint murals on café walls and portraits in exchange for food. While traveling outside Havana, in the company of another young man, he was caught in an ambush and later tried in front of a military tribunal that wrongly accused him of blowing up the East Coast Railroad and Wireless Station in Miami. At the age of 23 he was incarcerated in a small cell with thirty other men within the dungeon of a sixteenth-century fortress on the Isle of Pines. They were released when the Armistice was signed in November 1918.

In prison, one of his tasks was to empty the chamber pot of a German expatriate who was incarcerated in more comfortable circumstances. Herr Uppmann turned out to be the cigar magnate of famed Uppmann Cigars and, when released from prison, he commissioned Glankoff to paint his portrait and then, the portrait of his American girlfriend. With those fees, $600 per painting, an exorbitant amount for him at that time, Glankoff was able to return to the United States. He never traveled outside the country again.

In 1920 he went to work at Rosenberg's Art Service Studio in New York drawing ads and making woodcut illustrations for numerous ad agencies. He lived on MacDougal Street with his brother, Mortimer (who in 1932 would found *CUE Magazine*). Moving to 7 W. 14th Street he met artists who were friends of Juliana Force, then Director of the Whitney Studio Club. At their urging, Glankoff exhibited his paintings and woodcuts. Glankoff's name can be found listed after William Glackens in group show catalogues in the archives of the Whitney Museum of American Art. *New York Times* reviews from those years single out his work from the list of now well-known artists such as Leon Kroll, Rockwell Kent, John Sloan and Stuart Davis. After the Club disbanded, he never sought to exhibit his work again.

In the political climate of the 1920s, war resisters were called "slackers". They were ridiculed and publicly ostracized. Glankoff had returned home from Cuba with severe claustrophobia due to his imprisonment. His brother Mort said that for many years he could not ride the "elevated" or the subway, ride in an elevator, nor enter any enclosed space. He spent one summer in Gloucester, Maine, and from 1926 until 1970 he often resided year-round in Woodstock, New York, yet few people within these artists' colonies knew him. This solitary existence-childhood loneliness combined with the stigma of war resister–made him uncomfortable in social situations. Reticent to reveal himself or be judged kept him separate from his peers and contribute to the reasons he refused to participate in the Works Progress Administration program.

In the mid-1920s he met Frances Kornblum. With her promise that he could paint full-time, they took up residence together in Woodstock in 1926 in a house bought by her parents. With the stock market crash of 1929, Kornblum's family lost their money, so Glankoff continued to do assignments for various Art Service Studios, living between New York and Woodstock and until the 1970s was never able to devote himself full time to his art. He was adamant about keeping his personal paintings and woodcuts separate from his commercial work. During his Woodstock decades his output of paintings was prolific, yet few survive to this day.

Glankoff had returned home from Cuba with severe claustrophobia due to his imprisonment.

In the late 1920s and 1930s Glankoff produced woodcut book illustrations and jacket covers for books published by Horace Liveright, Alfred A. Knopf, Harcourt Brace, and others. Spots and full-page woodcuts were done for such titles as *Señor Zero* by Henry Justin Smith, *East South East,* by Frank Morely, and *The Romance of Antar* by Eunice Tietjens. Magazines including *St. Nicholas, Scribner's, The New Yorker* and his brother Mort's *CUE* reproduced his woodcut and pen and ink illustrations.

From the late 1930s and into the early 1950s, comic strip-style advertising was predominant, and at this Glankoff excelled. He was hired to draw comic strip advertising campaigns and promotional comic strip-styled pamphlets for companies such as Westinghouse and Billy Brand as well as *Family Circle* magazine. He also drew comic strip advertisements for Popsicle Pete and Chiquita bananas.

Throughout the 1940s Glankoff was one of *True Comics'* head artists. *True Comics* presented educational comic books geared to the boys market that were unique in their time. They featured stories on American and European history, scientific discoveries, and biographical stories of heroic individuals. Glankoff, who only rarely signed his name within the frames, illustrated comic strip stories on such varied figures as Harry Houdini, Leonardo da Vinci, Joe Louis, Ethel Barrymore, and Bob Hope. He also drew a recurring strip titled *Cavalcade of England* (one issue of Henry VIII and the War of the Roses remain in his archive), along with numerous stories of WWII battles under the title Homefront Heroes, and a history of the railroads, amongst others. *Old Ironsides, American Vespucius,* and *Germ Tamer-Louis Pasteur* were three of his one-line strips syndicated weekly in newspapers.

In the 1950s Frances Kornblum formed "Impulse Items," a company initially established to import stuffed animals from France. Glankoff was soon drawn into the fledgling company for which he designed, fabricated, and manufactured over 200 stuffed toys such as the "Greatniks," taken from the name "Sputniks," based on the launch of the Russian satellite. They were sophisticated adult stuffed "toys" that included Einstein, Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Freud, all before the advent of such a "boutique" market. In addition to his own designs, Glankoff was commissioned to design and fabricate the first three-dimensional versions of the "Babar the Elephant" family and Dr. Seuss's "Cat in the Hat."

In 1970, Glankoff walked away from "Impulse Items" when Frances Kornblum died suddenly and set up his studio in his apartment on East Thirty-Third Street. He sold the house in Woodstock and with that little money, he was able to sustain himself

and buy materials. He also walked away from the shed filled with his prolific output of paintings from the 1920s to the 40s that held no interest for him. In his small apartment, there was no room to store canvases. His focus was securely aimed at the future and on what he was envisioning. What interested him were the black-and-white representational German Expressionist woodcuts he had done in the 1920s and 30s and the colored abstract monotypes of the 1940s and 60s with which he had experimented using water-soluble inks.

He soon began to construct a vocabulary of images based on the recurring themes in his earlier drawings, watercolors and woodcuts. He also had over forty years of experience with Japanese paper and hand-printing his woodcuts. The woodcut had always been his preferred medium, but what chiefly interested him was the ability to achieve the spontaneity of painting through an indirect method. Fascinated with the work of Claus Oldenburg – who exaggerated ordinary objects to such a great scale that they took on monumental meaning – he now wanted to work large.

Early on, Glankoff had seen an exhibition of Shiko Munakata's prints and was inspired by the notion that small panels of paper could be pasted together to form a larger whole. He built a table that would enable him to slide paper panels across uniform-sized plywood boards onto which he carved and then later painted with permanently affixed designs. With the boards held in register, he would then paint freely on each with water-soluble inks. He devised a way of drying the color-infused wet paper panels with clothing pins on string across the studio, then he arrived at a simpler technique of laying the paper between felt and glass plates. He experimented with paper size and densities and perfected a method of joining the paper panels together. He combined water-soluble inks with glycerin to control the speed of drying and added casein to harden the inks and extend his color palette. With each year he allowed himself to buy more expensive colors and by the mid-1970s his muted palette began to explode with color. As he was able to control the absorbency of the paper, the panels received layer after layer of color.

By the time of his death, Sam Glankoff had amassed hundreds of one-panel pieces measuring approximately 24 x 20 inches, two-panel pieces at 20 x 30 inches, four-panel pieces at 40 x 50 inches, six-panels at 50 x 60 inches, eight-panels at 50 x 80 inches, and two final nine-panel pieces totaling 5 x 6 feet. Hundreds of "sketches," as he called them, the preparatory drawings of his "print-paintings," are testament to the spontaneity of gesture that Glankoff achieved within this controlled, compartmentalized, multi-layered, indirect method.

In September 1984, a year and a half after his death, the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum mounted a retrospective exhibition of Glankoff's work. Jeffrey Wechsler, curator of the exhibition, lectured on Glankoff's achievement, stating, " 'Print-Painting' is really an invention of Glankoff's. And it's rather remarkable that in the late twentieth century an artist could really come up with an entirely new technique. Certainly it was based on other techniques. But it had specific qualities and characteristics which Glankoff, through his great experience with the medium, realized had to come together in an entirely new form." In Marilyn Kushner's catalogue essay for the exhibition, she quotes David Kiehl, then Assistant Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Met who noted that since the original image was never lost, Glankoff's art transcended monotypes. Kushner states, "Like monotypes, they are unique transfer prints but, as in painting, there is an expressive importance associated with the application of the pigment." Together Wechsler and Kushner collaborated on a cover story for the *Print Review*'s August 1985 issue titled "Sam Glankoff and Print-Painting."

At the age of 87, Sam Glankoff had his first one-person show at the Graham Gallery in NY in October 1981. In the months leading up to that exhibition, Glankoff was willing to sign and date his previously unsigned body of work and went through the arduous process of determining the chronology of sixty years of work on paper. He also agreed to move to a new one-bedroom apartment where, on an enormous table, he was able to join all of his large-scale works together for the first time. Glankoff died in April 1982, six months after his Graham exhibition. Yet he lived to experience his work being exhibited next to Robert Motherwell's and Helen Frankenthaler's at a show curated by Gene Baro for the Brooklyn Museum, to read a review of his work by John Russell, and to participate in a documentary film on his life and art. By the end of his life, his work transformed from archaic elemental shapes and Zen-infused circles to emotive primordial figures. He had reemerged into the world and witnessed its celebration of him.

Glankoff's work is now in museum collections such as The Detroit Institute of Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as well as numerous others. Although there may not have been many solo exhibitions since 1981, each show has received similar acclaim: "Although Sam Glankoff was one of America's most accomplished printmakers, he was almost unknown when he died in 1982." (Lawrence Campbell, *Art in America,* June 1985); "Glankoff's 'print-paintings' are a discovery." (Alan Artner, *Chicago Tribune,* May 1987); "In the fall of 1981 the New York art world was stunned by a solo exhibit of non-objective printed paintings by an unknown artist of advanced years, Sam Glankoff. An impression of timelessness emanates from Glankoff's works, which seem as fresh and provocative as today, yet as old as the dawn of consciousness." (Roger Green, *The Times-Picayune,* March 1989), "Meanwhile, whole bodies of remarkable work have remained relatively unknown for decades. Consider Sam Glankoff's unusual and prolific output of woodcuts and large multi-paneled paintings on Japanese paper…Today it is coming to light and finding a unique place at the center of the tradition of gestural abstraction." (Edward Gomez, *Art & Antiques Magazine,* February 1996).

Since his death in April 1982, Sam Glankoff's entire collection has been archived, catalogued, and photographed and all the data for a catalogue raisonné has been entered into a computerized archival program. Galleries in New York and Chicago are beginning to re-introduce Glankoff's work to the market and the Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida is currently organizing a traveling exhibition scheduled to open in 2008. ●

He also drew comic strip advertisements for Popsicle Pete and Chiquita Bananas.