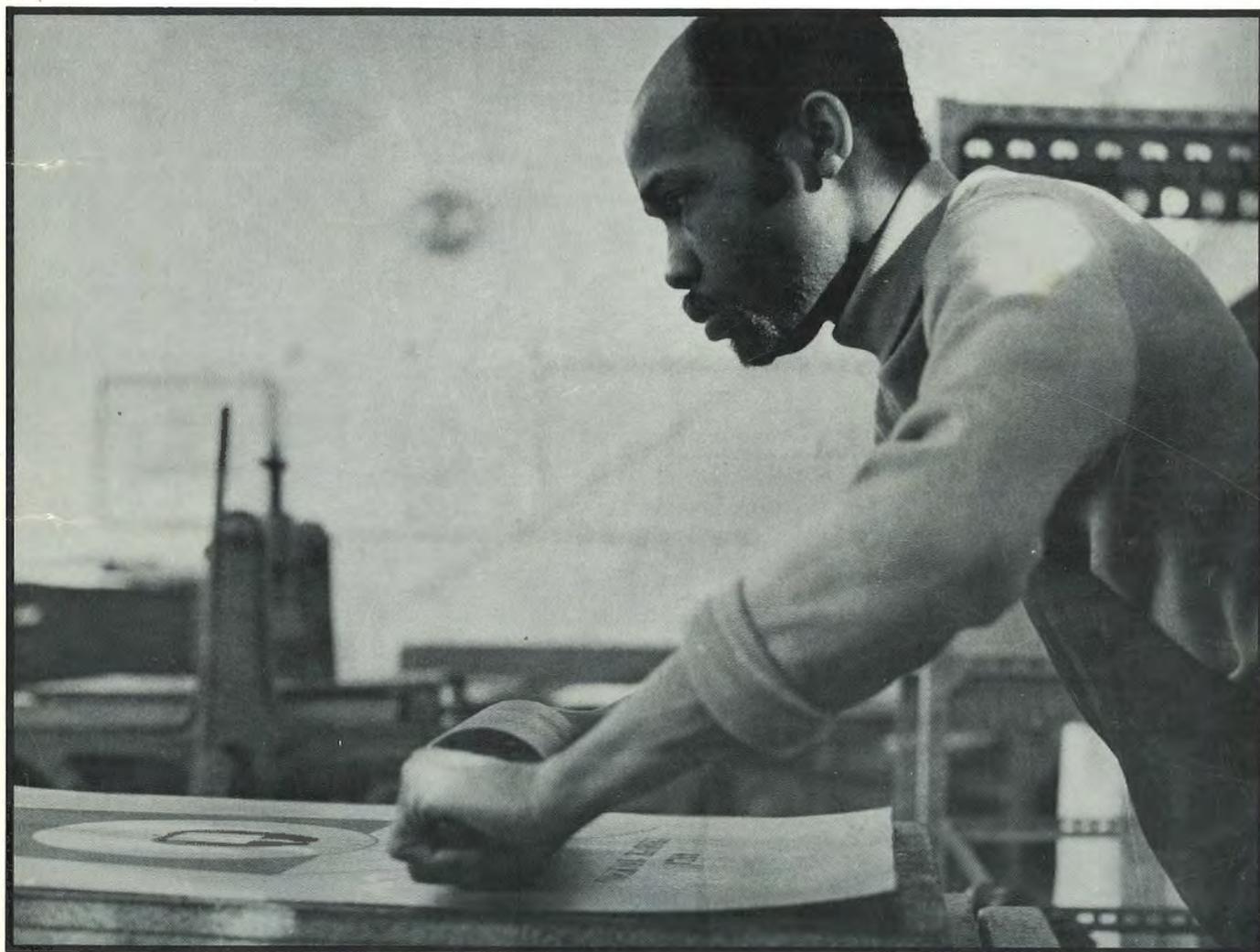


THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF
African American Art



P R I N T M A K I N G

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On the cover: Lev Mills at work

Printmaking

Graphics is a daunting subject, no doubt about it. Its nomenclature is involved and often contradictory—you would think it was all done deliberately to mystify. Its processes are myriad, some requiring a knowledge of historical practices and some requiring sophistication in chemistry and physics in order to understand them fully. And, worst of all, the ability to distinguish an original print from an inexpensive reproduction—that is to say, how not to be taken in by an unscrupulous seller—needs some close study of both nomenclature and processes.

Little wonder that the other forms of art are more widely appreciated. There is so much less room for equivocation. Paintings and sculpture, by their nature, can only be either the real things or forgeries: and if you have two *Banjo Lessons*, you know one is a fake. Yet you can have a thousand copies of the same print that are all genuine. Neither are we terribly concerned by the sculptor's stone or chisels, nor by what kind of brushes and paints the painter used; but a print is always identified by the material used for the plate and the manner in which the ink was transferred.

Yet graphics is the original populist art form. Its very purpose is to make an elegant and eloquent piece of work available to many people. And because it has fulfilled its purpose so well, and for so many centuries, we have now to deal with a complex, highly ramified art form—but one that has also become more rewarding with each ramification, for this is still the art form that is available to everyone.

You would think, by Newton's law of entropy, that things will simplify over time. This has not been true with graphics; even its name is confused. One common definition concerns all two-dimensional works produced from a master, and so includes photography and commercial printing as well as the bewildering range of fine-

arts graphics. The term is also widely used (particularly in Europe) to include the various types of drawing into that already overcrowded first definition. These are both legitimate uses of the word, but are both too broad for what we have in mind. So we will use the third common definition, which restricts graphics to the fine arts: we are concerned with those works, by whatever medium and process, that have been made with a master plate of the artist's own design, and with a press, and under the direct control of the artist. We would even like to concern ourselves in this issue with those artists who perform their own presswork, although we do not intend to restrict our definition that far.

Printmaking began so long ago and among so many different peoples that it is simply an academic exercise to make a hard-and-fast statement about who got there first. The Sumerians impressed clay seals into moist clay tablets—the official signatures of their important men—as early as 2100 B.C. The Olmecs of southeastern Mexico carved repeating patterns in relief on clay tubes and printed them, it is believed, on their bodies and on bark paper around 1000 B.C. But the credit is usually given to the Chinese for several reasons. Ts'ai Lun, a court eunuch, reported the invention of paper to his emperor in A.D. 105. Fêng Tao is credited with using woodblocks and *encre de Chine* to print on that paper, about the same time that Europeans and Egyptians began to use woodblocks to print on textile. Marco Polo was deeply impressed that the Chinese had been printing banknotes since A.D. 1000; European scholars are equally impressed that the Chinese taught the West how to make paper. And, finally, the earliest extant examples of the woodcut are Oriental: Buddhist charms printed in Japan between 764 and 770, and a *Diamond Sutra* printed by Wang Chieh, in Szechwan Province, in 868. But printmaking as an artform is a Western conceit, and that is why we should keep our attention to the European history of printmaking.



Woodcut from the *Diamond Sutra* of Wang Chieh.



A printer and his press in 1520. Woodcut attributed to Albrecht Dürer.

The important milestones were the introduction of paper into Europe, between A.D. 1096 and 1390, and the work of Johann Gutenberg, which culminated in the first book to be printed with movable type around 1452. The importance of Gutenberg was not so much the movable type (for that was in use in Korea two centuries earlier) as it was his invention of the printing press and his improvement of ink. Before Gutenberg, prints were made by burnishing, or rubbing, the paper by hand against the printing block—arduous and sloppy—and the inks were unpredictable. So the single most important date for graphics is 1452: in Arthur Hind's words, Gutenberg's work "contained the essence of progress and large production." We will see that progress and large production are the essence of printmaking.

Initially, the print was the only art form that more than one person could own. Painting and sculpture were—and for the most part still are—owned by those wealthy enough to afford unique works. Graphics thus filled an important need by its ability for large production, and in doing so developed its own very personal voice—one at once intimate and communal, and therefore one frequently given to social comment.

Progress, that is to say adaptability, is how graphics gets its vitality. It seems that every innovation that could make a print in a new or better way is seized upon instantly. Nowadays not only do wood and metal make prints, so do silk and rubber and epoxy and gelatin and granite and a host of photosensitive chemicals. Even now, when photo-offset lithography has underbid woodcuts and etchings for all the available commercial business, still woodcuts and etchings remain the most economical way for artists to express themselves.



Joyce Wellman at her intaglio press.

There are currently four separate techniques used in printmaking. These are called relief, intaglio, planographic, and stencil. When the plate comes in contact with the paper, the ink—that is to say, the design—can be (1) carried by the plate on those surfaces raised above the rest of the plate (like an ordinary rubber stamp), (2) it can be held in the recesses below the rest of the plate, (3) it can be held, isolated by chemical action, on the same plane with the blank areas of the design, or (4) the ink can be squeezed through a stencil. That about exhausts the ways in which ink and non-ink areas can be separated in a print.

Of the four, relief and intaglio are the oldest—and so, in fact, are opposite sides of the same coin. For relief, the ink rides above the blank areas of the plate; for intaglio, it sits in furrows below the blank areas. Consequently they share many of the same media and methods, to the point where the very same plate has been used to print by both techniques. The plate can be of wood, linoleum, plastic, plaster, wax, metal, epoxy, found objects, or even potato—any medium so long as it will hold ink during the process. The plate can be carved, cast, scratched, cut, etched with acid, molded, or glued.

Progress has also given graphics its nomenclature, those bizarre words bristling with murky half-meanings. Even to those people who work in the art field the terms are confusing, for misspellings and misuse are as common as the correct. But the confusion is a simple one; it comes from an elementary principle layered with the accretions of five centuries' use. That principle is that ink rubs off. The accretions are how the ink is to rub off, what it is rub off from, and its own physical properties as ink. And the accretions are manifold. We will not take it all on at once; we will content ourselves here to deal with the historically important techniques and take one cautious step into the present vanguard.

To make an intelligible attribution, then, it is necessary to identify the technique, the medium, and the method. Frequently, one part implies another: the attribution is abbreviated, and this tempts confusion. Thus "copper etching" implies intaglio because copper etchings are most commonly printed by intaglio (even though some of the most famous, William Blake's, were printed by relief). "Woodcut" means relief partly because the illustrations in books were printed by relief woodcut for many centuries and partly because wood gives too variable a furrow to be printed well by intaglio, even though it is occasionally successful as such.

Bernard Upshur. *Brooklyn Bridge*. Woodcut, 15/50.

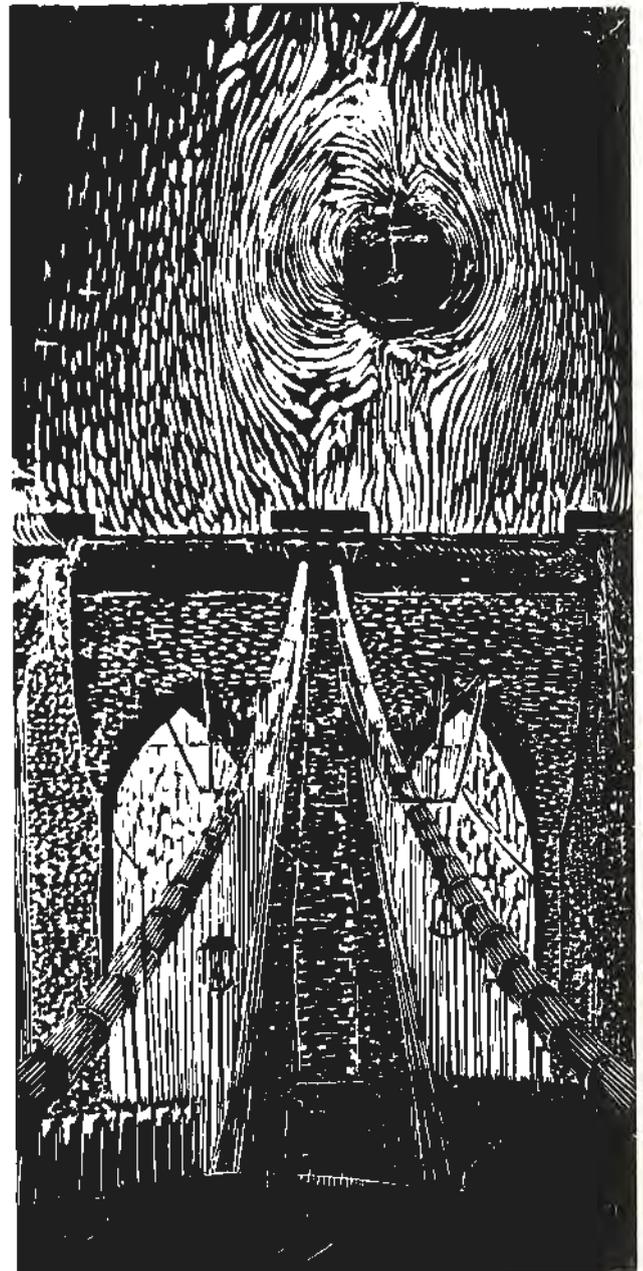
Then, too, clear attributions are strained by unclear language. The drypoint etching, a type of engraving ordinarily printed by intaglio, is not an etching at all. Neither is a wood engraving an engraving, but an adaptation of the woodcut characteristically printed by relief. We hope you will be more amused by these exceptions than daunted, for graphics is not as hard to understand as are the wines of Italy or, say, the intricacies of American breakfast cereals.

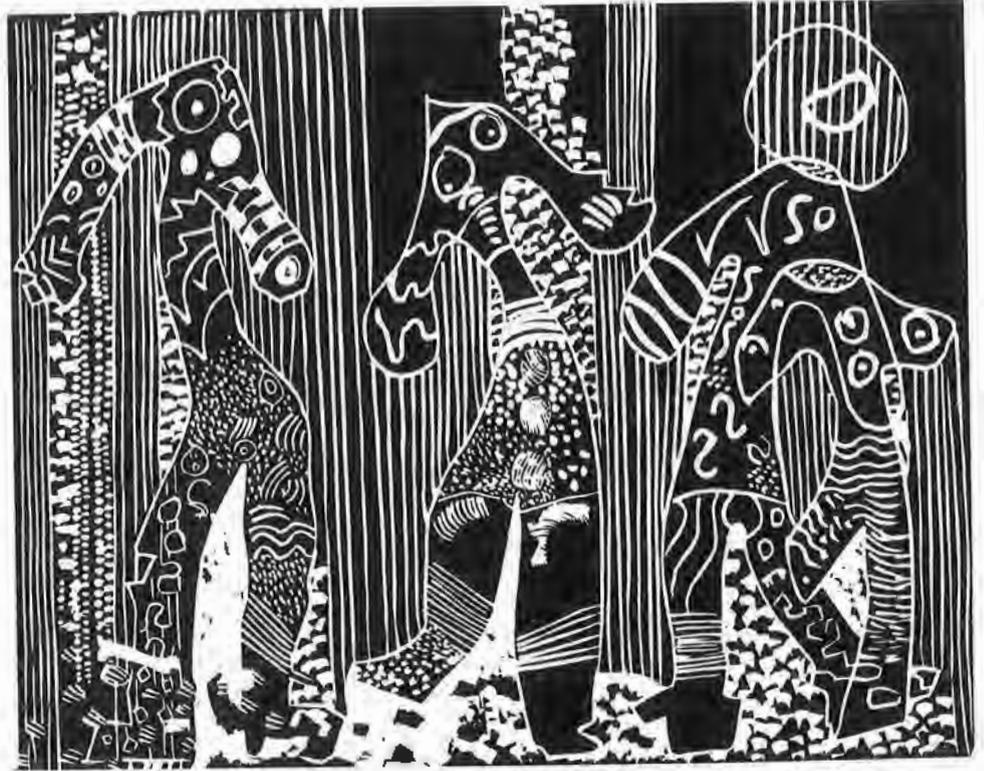
The Woodcut

Relief is the technique of the rubber stamp and the typewriter; it is the oldest technique, having been used by both the Chinese and the Olmecs. It is called a white-line or negative or subtractive process—in this it has something in common with sculpting marble—because the artist's tools leave white areas by removing what is not wanted (rather than adding what is wanted).

The oldest medium in the history of the fine arts is the wood block, carved along the grain. The woodcut was in use in Europe well before the introduction of paper, has been in constant use ever since, and has therefore come to be the patriarch of relief printing. The fairly hard, open-grained woods that are used give the prints their characteristic appearance: a forthrightness from the lack of shading, a simplicity from lack of detail, and a line that follows the wood's grain.

Bernard Upshur's work continues the venerable tradition of the woodcut, as we can see from these examples. Upshur has deliberately chosen planks with knot-holes in them—ordinarily a defect because of their texture—and has achieved an extraordinary eloquence by using those knots as cyphers.





Clockwise from above:
Ken Simpson. *Thinking*. Linocut.

Joyce Wellman. *Pathway Dancers*. Linocut, 41 x 51 cm, 1984.

Tijani Mayakiri. *Female Twins*. Linocut, 14/25, 60 x 51 cm, 1972.

Rufus Ogundele. *Scenery from a Play by Duro Lachino*. Linocut, 41 x 47 cm.





Francisco Mora. *La Paz*. Wood engraving, 31 × 38 cm, 1973.

The Linocut

Closely related to the woodcut is the linoleum cut, commonly called the linocut. It, too, is presumed to be printed by relief. The difference is that linoleum, a modern material, is easier to work. When an artist tries to work against the grain of the wood, his knife is often deflected and the wood splinters. Linoleum, however, has a uniform consistency and a softer texture, allowing the artist a finer and easier control and yielding lines of greater precision. (The wood engraving is capable of finer lines, though, because linoleum tends to crumble.) The effect is still rough-hewn, but with a uniformity.

The linocut is slightly more popular with the artists than the woodcut. We have in this issue eight artists to represent the medium, several of whom print with multiple color-passes. Color is possible in any of the printmaking techniques, and you will generally find it in the more popular mediums; in relief work, however, it is most difficult to control owing to the difficulty of registration—that is, as each successive color is printed by an additional plate, each plate has to touch the paper in exactly the same area. Consequently, color, like line, is treated broadly in these linocuts.

After every period of invention comes a period of consolidation and refinement. The mechanical invention of Gutenberg gave rise ultimately to the intaglio process; the chemical advances of the nineteenth century refined lithography and serigraphy to the point where they are today's reigning techniques. Now, before any newer technique, like laser printing, comes to distract us, we have another period of consolidation to go through. That is what underlies the combination of procedures within serigraphy. It is also evident in the cross-pollenization of techniques.

Color Viscosity Etching

A mixture of intaglio, relief, and the operations of chance, this technique appeals to those artists who would emphasize uniqueness in their graphics. The technique is credited to Krishna Reddy while at Stanley Hayter's workshop. A zinc plate is etched or engraved to roughly two different levels, and its relief surface is either textured or left plain. Then three inks of differing tackiness—three viscosities—are applied: the thickest to the deeper recesses, the thinnest to the upper level of the intaglio, and the ink of middle viscosity to the highest, the relief surface of the plate. These inks are usually of three different colors and, since their viscosities differ, they interact somewhat unpredictably. Since the inks are applied by hand, there is another element of chance present—another reason why no two prints come off the same plate alike. The print is pulled from a single pass through the press.

It is easy to see Hayter's influence in this technique, for it is suited to producing work of abstract form and color. It also challenges the boundaries of printmaking: in this age where commercial printing presses can turn out ten million identical copies, the artist is asking whether it is appropriate to ape that kind of duplication. As a consequence, printmaking—or, rather, a vanguard of printmakers—is withdrawing from graphics' traditional role of supplying expressive art for many, and is valuing uniqueness the way painters and sculptors have.

We suspect that when this period of consolidation is over there will indeed be an invigorated interest in uniqueness, but there will continue to be multiple copies of predictable similarity and with a delicacy of expression that commercial printing cannot achieve: for that is the essence of printmaking, that strength which has given graphics the ability to endure and adapt for as long as it has.

Joyce Wellman. *Jungle Journey*. Color viscosity etching. 51 × 41 cm, 1984.



Joyce Wellman. *Three Pathway Musicians*. Color viscosity etching, 41 × 51 cm, 1983.



Joyce Wellman. *Water Family*. Color viscosity etching, 51 × 41 cm, 1984.





Joyce Wellman. *Journey through Migration*. Color viscosity etching, 51 × 41 cm, 1985.



Joyce Wellman. *Family Walk*. Color viscosity etching, 41 × 51 cm, 1983.

In the areas of art where there is little confusion between originals and copies, the prices are high and the buyers can afford to hire expert opinion. But graphics, our populist form of fine art, is available to all . . . and so, consequently, are its pitfalls. Fortunately, most of the pitfalls can be avoided by a little reading and a magnifying glass.

Every piece of art in this magazine is a copy. Yet we could as truthfully say that the art appearing in this issue is all limited-edition lithography. The problem is one of semantics. And the problem is usually dealt with, as most semantic problems are, by setting up rigid requirements that complicate matters further by their very rigidity.

What Is an Original?

The first requirement that everyone seems to agree on is that the print be made as a direct impression from the original plate. This limits production to the life of a single plate, and it disqualifies offset lithography—commercial printing—because its impressions are necessarily indirect. The second requirement is that the artist approve each print by signing it. Ideally this means that the artist, who understands the processes better than we do, has certified the work as genuine and up to standard. After that come various requirements, that the design be totally that of the artist, that the artist prepare the plate personally and by hand, that the print be pulled on a hand press, preferably by the artist . . . Herr Brunner even requires that “the execution must not be alien to the nature of the technique applied [and] the plate must be prepared in a manner appropriate to the material used and the instrument employed correctly.”

Additional requirements can be found in Brunner’s book and in a concise monograph put out by the Print Council of America, *A Guide to the Collecting and Care of Original Prints*, by Zigrosser and Gaehde. Our concern here is not to add to the existing regulations, nor to encapsulate them. The best we could do is to offer you a rough-and-ready means of recognizing the most popular kind of unoriginal copy, the offset print.

Each printmaking technique has its own characteristic way of putting ink to paper, but their renderings of half-tones—greys—are even more characteristic. In the relief processes, halftones are rendered almost symbolically by coarse hatching. In the intaglio processes the greys are represented by cross-hatching and by textures chemically produced on the plate. In lithography greys are made by the patterns of small dots of black ink: for stone lithography, the dots are the grain of the limestone, random and finely textured; for offset lithography, the dots are produced mechanically by the imposition of a screen. In serigraphy each shade is typically printed solid as a separate pass of that very color.

The most common facsimile print these days, the offset lithograph, is excellent in quality, inexpensive, and widely available. But it is not the artist’s original work if the originals were executed in another medium.



The Printmaking Workshop of New York City

Symbolizing the sum and substance of intercultural exchange and intergenerational communication, the Printmaking Workshop (PMW) of New York City provides a creative environment that involves all manner of artists and technicians in the sensitive, intimate collaboration of ideas, approaches, relationships, and techniques—"sharing a common, creative interest . . . working together for the purpose of producing and exhibiting fine print works." In essence, the PMW is engaged in executing the sixteenth-century concept of the artists' collective, for "the living of these days and for the generations to come."

From its humble beginnings shortly after World War II, in the private workspace of Robert Blackburn, its founder and director, the PMW has evolved into a formidable institution serving a host of artists, researchers, and scholars, as well as its immediate community. In 1949, it was, in fact, the duality of purpose inherent in Blackburn's efforts—to practice his craft as a livelihood while serving as a printer for his fellow artists—that led to the creation of New York's first printmaking workshop, the Creative Graphic Studio.



The Printmaking Workshop brings together printmakers at differing stages of their careers. This special opportunity makes the Workshop a source of 'rich soil' for the growth of new and experimental projects undertaken by artists in all media. Apprenticeship in graphic media is an important stage in an artist's development. It demands a disciplined, professional, and technical approach and affords the student the opportunity to observe the working methods of established professionals—experiences not usually provided in the traditional academic setting. Each year, a Co-op Scholarship sponsors artists from universities, cultural organizations, and foreign countries in joining PMW programs.

Blackburn recalls: "At that time, there were no workshops, either professional or otherwise, in New York. . . . There were only the regular art schools, such as Art Students' League, Pratt Institute, and small print departments at NYU Art Education, Columbia Teachers' College, Hunter College, and the Brooklyn Museum Art School. These were all primarily adequate for art teachers and a few painters and sculptors." In Blackburn's view, the need for a place where professional printmakers could work and where emerging artists of all ages could study at evening classes was indeed apparent. Under his direction until 1952, the Creative Graphic Workshop served as an independent, alternative space for art students and developing artists. It continues to this day, under the aegis of the PMW.

It was not long after the Creative Graphic Workshop was established that it attracted the attention and financial support of Will Barnet, Blackburn's "friend, teacher, advisor, and mentor". Barnet's support was soon joined by that of John Van Wicht, Margot Steigman Robinson, Priscilla Haley, and Dan Suerdloff, among the many who "shared the struggle and the belief that such a workshop was important to serve the creative needs of artists regardless of their esthetic, political, social, economic, or racial persuasion."





The Printmaking Workshop, under the direction of Robert Blackburn since 1949, offers studio space and printmaking facilities for etching, lithography, relief, and photography. Here artists share a common creative interest, working together for the purpose of producing and exhibiting fine print works. The Workshop comprises six thousand square feet of floor space that includes dedicated areas for open workshops, evening classes, private editioning, and photographic work.





Over the years, the Workshop's print collection, now in excess of three thousand prints, has grown in richness and depth, documenting the creative and technical changes in printmaking and representing the international, interracial, and multi-generational constituency of the PMW. The collection is both an educational reference for the artist and a documentation of the history of the contemporary print, graphically depicting the innovative and creative efforts of printmakers. The collection documents technical and esthetic movements in printmaking, and is used extensively by collectors and dealers.





The Workshop maintains an active internship program in cooperation with universities, art schools, and cultural organizations. It has also sponsored, since 1971, a comprehensive community-outreach program. Workshops in etching, screen printing, linoleum block printing, collograph, and monoprint are conducted, for all age groups, at churches, community centers, museums, libraries, schools, and youth facilities.



During these early years, there were only four Black artists who participated in the workshop program: Larry Potter, Ronald Josephs, Thomas Laidman, and Stella Wright, all of whom were among the throng of dedicated supporters. These four worked with many others who had a strong formative influence on the workshop: Gerson Leiber, Clare Romano, Romas Viesulus, Antonio Frascioni, and John Van Wicht. "John was an elder mentor to all of us, spiritually and artistically" said Blackburn.

The years since 1949 have become documented history—a documented history of contemporary American graphics. Over three thousand fine prints, by more than five hundred artists, are contained in the PMW collection, serving, in part, to document changes in techniques and concepts in printmaking.

Since receiving its first funding grant in 1970, the PMW's programs have received the support of such sponsors as the American Broadcasting Company, the Chase Manhattan Bank, the Chemical Bank, the Jerome Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Board of Education, the New York Department of Cultural Affairs, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Emma Amos, Benny Andrews, Betty Blayton, Vivian E. Browne, Eldzier Cortor, John Gerasimchik, Sergio Gonzalez-Tornero, Mohammad Khalil, Arlene Lederman, Norman Lewis, Shreedevi Munshi, Shiguri Narakawa, Mike Nagano, A. J. Smith, and Carlos Suenos are

among the many celebrated artists who have contributed their works to the PMW's collection.

In its expanded role, the PMW maintains an artists' workshop serving numerous young artists "as the locus of their individual maturation to full, realized artistic expression" and serving established artists "as a center of support, exchange, and as a professional base." The Workshop's ongoing efforts include a comprehensive community-outreach program that serves a variety of constituencies (including the very young, the neglected, and the aged), continuous classes in etching, engraving, lithography, woodcut, and photo-mechanical processes, lectures and demonstrations, and major exhibitions.

Remembered as one of the PMW's most prestigious exhibitions is "Prints from New York: Contemporary Images from the Printmaking Workshop", which was held at the Museum of the City of New York between 15 September 1981 and 1 January 1982. Commenting on that exhibition, Steven Miller, the curator of paintings, prints, and photography for the Museum, accurately summarized the importance of the PMW. "As an umbrella to a great variety of people and ideas, the Workshop is reflective of New York City. In a field of considerable innovation and activity, the Workshop serves as a funnel, repository, and catalyst, passing on the know-how of one generation to the next."

—Maudra Jones

Maudra Jones is Program Coördinator for the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles, California.