PRINTMAKING DISCIPLINE RESEARCH PAPER

American Printmakers and

Their Homage to the New York Crowd

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The vitality of New York's crowded streets during the early decades of the 20th Century was captured in prints by a stimulated group of artists. From the glitter of Broadway to the slums of the east side there was an atmosphere of anticipation as a new century dawned on New York. Industrialization brought scores of people to the city from all over the United States, as well as from other countries. New York during the first decade was a city of change, activity, and noise. Public attractions such as Central Park and Coney Island Beach were the places to go if you wanted to watch the cast of characters that made up the city's population. Artists enjoyed these public places also because the crowds of people that flocked to New York's hot spots became an endless source of subject matter for their drawings, paintings, and prints.

George Bellows and John Sloan were two of these artists who saw New York's teeming populace as representing a lifestyle that was uniquely American. Sloan and Bellows were the founders of a loose organization of artists who discovered that the gathering of people was the stimulus for creating prints that contained energy and humor.

Images of New York genre faded with the advent of modernism and the 1913 armory show. During the 1930s the Depression and the threat of World War II squelched most of the excitement for modern art in this country and pushed artists to once again look at their own society.[1] Artists like Reginald Marsh picked up where Bellows and Sloan left off and captured the Gotham crowd in prints that were both electric and ugly.

The art of masses became as complicated as the society it depicted. Peggy Bacon, Raphael Soyer and Paul Cadmus were all motivated by New York's

[1]Milton W. Brown, et al, American Art (New York: Abrams, 1979), p. 444.

street and social activities, but each found his or her own form of conten-
tion when illustrating the foibles of New Yorkers. Many of these prints do
not contain the excitement or tenacity of a Reginald Marsh or John Sloan, but
they do maintain their own merit because of the way figures are orchestrated
in a confined space.

Many artists turned to printmaking in America during the early 1900s
because it made their work affordable or because of the efforts of the
Federal Art project administrators who pushed artists to attend the govern-
ment funded print workshops. A select few created prints because the medium
was as engaging as the life they led in urban American, especially the kind
of life that one led in the bustling city of New York.

In 1904 the first load of New York subway riders took a trip to Grand
Central, Times Square, and down to 145th Street - end of the line.[2] The
horseless carriage was a common sight in New York streets by 1908, and the
city was in a chronic state of tearing down old buildings and putting up sky
scrapers. New York was the number one city in manufacturing in the United
States and also led the nation in commerce and finance.[3] Immigrants from
Ireland, Germany, Poland and Russia came to America in that first decade and
settled in New York because of the city's international reputation for being
the fastest growing metropolis in the world.

Many of those immigrants did not find New York the city they imagined.
Most jobs that were available were in the sweatshops for low wages. They
were forced to live in dilapidated tenement buildings where the ratio of

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[2]Stephen Longstreet, City on Two Rivers (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1975), p. 118.

[3]Stephen Longstreet, p. 117.

people to a square acre was 1,000 to 1.[4] Conditions like this that took place in Manhattan and the lower east side slums, contrasted to the wealth that was enjoyed in the high rise buildings of Fifth and Park Avenues, caused a cry or protest by citizens who believed the inequities were caused by the underhanded dealings of big business.[5]

Artists also shared the plea for reform in the nation's largest city. The late 1800s was a period when romanticism and fantasy paintings dominated the American art scene. When 1900 arrived there was a revolt against this art of the rich which appeared contrived and prudish.[6] Critics and artists alike were looking for art that could capture the ordinary people in large cities and show the casualties of industrialization with sympathy.[7] A group of artists that sought to depict the realities of city life were "The Eight", or also known as "The Ashcan School". Led by Robert Henri, these artists rebelled against the traditional European-style academicism and portrayed their social protest through images of the common people at work and play.

John Sloan was one of "The Eight" and throughout his artistic career he never lost his excitement for capturing the scenes of New York. To look at John Sloan's work is to imagine that he was blind to the so-called "casualties of industrialization" and saw the city dwellers living an entertaining and exhilarating life. From his attic studio window, Sloan could see the constant movement of people in the streets and in the surrounding apartments.

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[4]Bayrd Still, Mirror for Gotham (New York: New York University Press, 1956), p. 267.

[5]Still, p. 267.

[6]Brown, p. 350.

[7]Brown, p. 351.

It was unusual for him to see so many people concentrated in such a small area ignore the crowded conditions and pursue their day's activities with great vigor. John Sloan understood the problems New York was having in 1904, but he was inspired by the perseverance of many as he set out to "select bits of joy in human life."[8]

The "select bits of joy" that Sloan depicted in his works could also be interpreted as his way of showing the irony of the city's welfare. Every city has its share of doomsayers that spread the word that the evil that corrupts politicians will force the collapse of the entire community. They see progress and change as signs of impending danger for defenseless city residents. This prevailing pessimism may have troubled Sloan while he lived in New York because he observed quite the contrary -- people enjoyed the confines of the big city. Progress for most people meant excited anticipation for what the future could bring. With his images of gaiety and trouble free men and women, Sloan may have been revealing the incongruity that existed between the negative reputation of the city, and how good people felt about living in New York. Realist artists often find the best way to spurn negative hearsay is to create images of humor and mirth because it exposes these rumors as ridiculous propaganda. When humor and art are used in conjunction there is a lasting effect because they both represent pleasurable experiences. Sloan may have felt that the use of irony in his works was his way of expressing his social views in terms everyone could understand.

The problem Sloan had with his scenes of New York's common people was that they were considered vulgar by gallery owners and art connoisseurs.[9] A

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[8]Helen Farr Sloan, John Sloan New York Etchings (1905-1949) (New York: Dover, 1978), p. vii.

[9]Sloan, p. vi.

preference for foreign masters prevailed in the collector circles during the early 1900s and American artists were ignored by the finer New York galleries.[10] The few American artists who were accepted by the collectors created conservative works that resembled paintings by established artists such as James Whistler.[11] Sloan's images of New York slums were considered indecent by many because art was supposed to capture the ideal, but he maintained his works depicted a "segment of life",[12] and he continued to fight the prejudices of the art world.

One of the reasons Sloan became so driven to get his work shown in galleries was because he felt very strong about his chosen medium - prints. Sloan was self-educated in the field of printmaking and he had a special fondness for the etching technique. He completed 300 prints in his lifetime and he even held positions with newspapers where his prints were used to supplement leading articles.[13] Etchings had gone out of favor with American artists during the early 1900s, so John Sloan had trouble convincing potential buyers that the medium was still a valid art form. Gradually the public began to recognize that there was something genuinely American about Sloan's prints, and they saw his complicated network of etched lines as an accurate way of describing the complexity of New York's social scene.

Sloan did not draw numerous study sketches before attempting an etching, rather he relied on his imagination to recapture the events he witnessed on the streets of New York. Some may think this approach was, and still is, a

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[10]James Watrous, A Century of American Printmaking 1880-1980 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 44.

[11]Watrous, p. 40.

[12]Sloan, p. viii.

[13]Sloan, p. vii.

disadvantage because the artist starts to rely on stereotypical notions about the figure and objects, and does not capture the integrity of the source. Someone with the ability to form strong mental images, however, at times feels constrained by the limitations of the source material, and believes a more pleasing pictorial arrangement can be arrived at if he or she improvises on the original inspiration. Sloan witnessed many public displays of affection and socializing, and took the memory of these events back to his studio. There he crafted an etching that carried the mood of the street activities, but was filled with invented characters who acted out Sloan's light themes. Some artists find gratification in seeing figures or objects form on a page knowing those figures or objects were the result of the joining of one's imagination and drawing skills.

A large part of New York's charisma for John Sloan was its crowds. Sunday gatherings in the park, speakeasies, and pedestrian traffic all held a charm for him that he illustrated endlessly in his paintings and prints. Sloan became one of the first modern day American artists to realize the power of a group of figures. The crowds he depicted were not rows of soldiers standing at attention, but people in motion caught up in an activity that they enjoyed sharing with others. An example of this can be found in Sloan's etching titled "Return from Toil" (Fig. 2). The scene shows seven girls walking down a crowded street after working a full day's shift. Sloan arranged the composition to emphasize the shared silliness these girls were enjoying upon the completion of a long day. The way these girls are linked together arm in arm expresses one emotional outpouring among a set of individuals. This compositional wedge was a joining of parts that Sloan used in numerous crowd images.

To look at John Sloan's prints is to understand that the liveliness of New York's masses was best described with the stroke of the printmakers stylus. Managing the complexities of detail in a mob takes an understanding of how line creates form. John Sloan talked about the etching process as a way of creating "things" through calculated linework. He admired Rembrandt not for his psychological insight, but for his realization of a "...descriptive 'talking' line and use of hatchwork that gives a feeling of light and shade enveloping and focussing on the forms."[14] "Copyist at the Metropolitan Museum" (Fig. 3) shows Sloan's appreciation of Rembrandt's method of line etching to describe light and form. In this conglomeration of figures, what distinguishes the depth of each figure is the middle row of women who are described with a minimum amount of linework, and their brightness seems to set them apart from the back row of gentlemen and the foreground figures. Sloan has used a network of lines to define figures but has not created an image of confusion or congestion. The energy of the line strokes enhances the notion of the spectators meandering through a crowded gallery. This meticulous hatching approach became a benchmark for younger American printmakers to emulate.

It may be said that Sloan's use of satire was not a preoccupation, but that there were occurrences related to urban living that he needed to expose as follies of a civilized generation. The nightlife scene in clubs and bars is an example of a segment of city life where outrageous behavior was the accepted norm. Under the influence of alcohol, women became giddy, men became brave enough to pursue strange women (Fig. 12, "Sixth Avenue, Greenwich Village"), and the carousing done during the wee hours of the night was

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[14]Sloan, p. x.

performed by the rich and poor. Sloan also took lighthearted stabs at New York that showed the universal weaknesses of people such as their inquisitive nature as depicted in the "Copyist at the Metropolitan Museum" (Fig. 3). All of these forms of satire may have been Sloan's attempt at showing how urbanites dealt with the every day stress of their environment. Although some of these methods of coping seemed ludicrous, Sloan may have felt this was still an important aspect of living in the city. One needed to counteract the frenzy of a fast-paced society. It is ironic that some of the vices that Sloan depicted in his prints of the 1900s are still the subject of paintings and prints of present-day artists. Even today, artists question the methods of some people who seek out pleasure in order to forget their day-to-day responsibilities.

While John Sloan was revitalizing interest in etching during the early 1900s, George Bellows was doing his best to resurrect lithography as an artist's medium. Cursed as the medium that was too technical for its own good, and used by artisan draughtsmen to redraw famous paintings for mass consumption, lithography was thought of as a commercial way of duplicating that had little possibility for the fine artist. George Bellows did not share this opinion and saw the medium as a way of achieving a pervasive chiaroscuro of atmospheric lights and darks.[15] Lithography suited his aggressive personality for he could start a drawing on a stone, absorb himself into the creation process without interruption, and then, upon completion of the drawing, dedicate all of his attention to the printing of the image.[16] George Bellows' prints of New York differed from John Sloan's

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[15]Watrous, p. 56.

[16]George Bellows often had master printers like George C. Miller come to his lithography studio to help him print his proofs and editions.

images in that Bellows' work depicted a broader slice of the life of his times.[17] Where John Sloan's etchings captured the intimate moments of New York citizens, Bellows' prints fastened on to current events that involved a wide spectrum of New Yorkers. Whether it was a boxing match or cocktails at a famous night spot, Bellows was intrigued with the spectacle of numerous participants at a single big city function.

Each person depicted in Bellows' lithographs appears preoccupied with his own situation or activity. Unlike John Sloan's gatherings where people interact and share their experiences, George Bellows' crowds are "huddled individuals" that play a secondary role to the main action in the print. An example of this can be found in "River Front" (Fig. 4). The image is of thousands of bathers enjoying themselves near the Brooklyn Bridge. The first impression is of the crowded conditions that occurred along New York's waterways during the summer. Little attention is directed to any individual for they appear to be interlocking pieces that make up the crowd. The figures are frozen in dynamic poses, but they serve the purpose as props to convey an overall condition.

Sometimes artists feel compelled to capture the events of their society on paper like a news reporter would describe happenings for his daily newspaper. The urge to draw scenes of gala events or public gatherings often comes from a feeling of responsibility to the rest of society to provide them with a visual account of a one time affair. The immensity of public gather-ings is inspiring, and the excitement that is generated at these public displays pushes the artist to generate the same fervor in his drawings. Sometimes however, just the realization that these gatherings are about a

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[17]Watrous, p. 50.

period and a place is enough inspiration to drive artists to try to capture a passage of time. Where the reporter finds it necessary to stay objective in his reporting, artists understand staying objective would be a disservice to his audience. The artist as reporter needs to recreate on paper the characteristics of the spectacle that heightened his senses at the moment of confrontation. When the artist is able to do this, he offers the public the chance to be a part of the spectacle; the artist-reporter becomes a reliable communicator.

The images of Bellows' New York explain a lot about his life experiences and his attitudes. Being a midwestern boy moving to the urban environment of New York was very intimidating, and he realized from that point on that he was a small figure in a large city and he should never take himself too seriously. At the same time, George Bellows drove himself to be the best student in Henri's class, the best draughtsman of the female figure, and pushed himself to enjoy New York and his own life to the fullest. He saw himself as a man who could side with many varieties of men from radicals to conservatives, and he saw his role as an artist to be a romantic as well as a classicist. He always refused to be "typed" and he once stated "Join no creed, but respect all for the truth that is in them."[18] Some who knew Bellows thought he was full of contradictions. Bellows himself did not consider his contradictory tendencies to be a hindrance but an asset when composing his images of New York.

Looking at Bellows' 16 lithographs of fight scenes, one realizes how he used his opposites attract philosophy to make an engaging image. George Bellows enjoyed the atmosphere of a crowded boxing arena. From the vicious

[18]Lauris Mason, The Lithographs of George Bellows (New York: KTO Press, 1977), p. 11.

action in the ring to the frenzy that occurred in the audience, Bellows saw the event as a celebration of manly virtue. The smoke, loud shouts, and crowded seating arrangements were all part of the ambience that made Bellows realize the audience was as much a part of the fight as the boxers. In contrast to the power and brutality of the boxers and crowd, Bellows drew each component of the scene with a very sensitive modulation of tone. With the lithographic crayon Bellows managed to take the bite out of the horrific occurrence in the ring by softening edges and drawing with a sensitive line. "A Knock-Out" (Fig. 5), shows a relentless boxer being held back by the referee. The blood-thirsty crowd approaches the ring voicing their approval or disappointment. Bellows captured the violent nature of men, but at the same time the subtle shifts of gray throughout the composition softens the impact of the ferociousness. Bellows was able to take these opposing elements and combine them for a series of successful prints.

Admirers of George Bellows' lithographs could all probably agree the treatment of the figure in his prints is what makes them appealing. Looking closely at Bellows' work, it appears he pulled his figures out from their surroundings and bathed them with sensitive tones that describe every muscle and bone structure with extreme care. His figures are furnished with a background that is either a muddled battleship grey or a velvet black (Figs. 13 & 5). These backdrops provide each figure the chance to emerge from a chasm and present themselves as vital men and women. Sometimes it looks as if Bellows restricted his early drawing of the lithograph to the background, saving the intricacies of the figure to be his final touches and final crescendo. The result is figures that command the viewer's attention because of their illuminated projection and strong presence.

George Bellows had a sense of humor and he sometimes let it show in his lithographs. Not overly preoccupied with including strong moral statements in his prints, Bellows sometimes made an attempt at mild satire. He rarely painted with witty notions in mind, but found the print medium the logical place for visual humor because of the tradition that went back to the lithographs of Daumier and others. His criticism of social attitudes was most obvious when he was depicting gatherings of the city's pretentious elite. Bellows made lithographs that mocked events like a roomful of arrogant artists, and a tennis tournament for the rich and snobbish.

"Shower-Bath" (Fig. 6) shows Bellows' satire of sedentary businessmen trying hopelessly to achieve physical fitness. This group scene shows men at various stages of the workout and post workout caught up in their daily ritual. Contemporary critics of Bellows once said that his portrayal of society was "neither rancor nor criticism of society itself."[19] Bellows' lithographs must have escaped their reviews.

Bellows offered a New York that was one big passing show. His lithographs named people and places and gave them the publicity they richly deserved. The commoners he portrayed were pleasant and earthy, and they always were depicted in the middle of a burst of activity; very natural for citizens of a bustling city.

To look at Bellows' work it can never be conceived that it was created for the exclusive purpose of telling a story about New York's residents. Laymen have enjoyed his work through the years because they were able to discern a literal plot in his work. Narrative art has been looked down upon by some art historians because they believe the sole purpose of artists who

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[19]Mason, p. 11.

create people caught up in activities is to create a documentary. Describing a slice of life is only one objective of the narrative artist, there are other aesthetic qualities that are of equal or greater importance. Color, texture, value and compositional concerns are all factors that mesh with the subject of the print. Bellows himself at one point in his career, believed in a scientific approach to composing whereby the arrangement of his figures and cityscapes were formed around a series of rectangular shapes.[20] To rely totally on story telling with one's artwork is to create an image with no visual impact. George Bellows could orchestrate complex hordes of people in an orderly, pleasing fashion and portray an interesting turn of events at the same time.

The "New Realism" that took over the art world and described the works of George Bellows and John Sloan was basically about the sites and sounds of New York. It was not until the third decade of this century that artists recovered from other distractions to once again capture the potential of the city's masses.

The 1913 armory show was the new enlightenment for many American artists. Modernism was what this country needed after living so many years with the "official art" of the provincial American art establishment.[21] Paintings by Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse made young impressionable artists realize innovation was a commendable attribute. There was excitement about Europe's avant-garde movement, and with many artists coming to the United States because of the onset of World War I, it appeared that New York was

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[20]Mason, p. 27.

[21]Brown, p. 366.

going to become the aesthetic outpost of Paris, and the city that would host the new modernistic spirit.[22]

The effects of World War I on the nation dampened the enthusiasm for modern art in the United States. Poverty, radical politics and national despair caused many artists to think less of European trends and more of the problems that frustrated their countrymen.[23] The nationalism that started during the first World War extended into the 1930s when the Depression and the threat of World War II caused a great deal of hardship for all classes of society. Artists became part of that nationalism and created images that showed the strength and endurance of Americans during the difficult times. Realism had resurfaced as the dominant expression during the 1930s, but the fascination with progress and change that was so evident in the works of the Ashcan members was no longer the prevailing concept.[24]

Reginald Marsh was an artist of the Depression who thrived on the character of the people he observed on the streets of New York. The stock market crash ruined millions of Americans, and many artists of the 1930s felt compelled to show the plight of the less fortunate by making paintings and prints that were filled with social protest, or suggested solutions to the nation's problems.[25] Reginald Marsh was unique for his time because it seems even though he believed that realism was the key to showing America's substance, he also believed that idealized messages did not address the need for the experience of art.

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[22]Brown, p. 366.

[23]Brown, p. 367.

[24]Brown, p. 367.

[25]Norman Sasowsky, The Prints of Reginald Marsh (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976), p. 9.

The people that frequent Marsh's works of art are headstrong individuals that go through life with a purpose. They hold energy, health, and sexual attraction, but yet they are common pedestrians who Marsh observed in the streets of New York. Even the bums, who were a constant subject in Marsh's paintings and prints, were not bums requiring sympathy, but portraits of men anxious to get on with their lives (Fig. 7). Reginald Marsh was a chronicler who gathered information from sections of New York and represented people with a zeal he truly felt they projected.

When one first looks at Marsh's prints he or she is immediately struck with the impression that Marsh was turned on by the collection of oddballs and misfits that roamed the streets of New York. However, a closer examination reveals these oddballs were average people with an assortment of strange expressions on their faces. Caricaturists enjoy imitating people by distorting their features for comic effect. It seems Marsh's portraits of New Yorkers were not distortions intended to be humorous for humor's sake, but to emphasize emotions and a frame of mind. Marsh's men and women on the beach, or walking down the street are very normal but their faces reveal anxieties, happiness and confusion. Marsh might have used slight exaggerations in their facial features and posture to reveal the individualism that existed in an apparent faceless crowd. Artists who draw inspiration from capturing people on paper realize once they start drawing the eyes, nose, mouth, and face of an individual, repeating those shapes and forms are not enough. The artist must reveal the personality, temperament and state of mind of the individual to give those facial features life. To push the expressions on the faces of his subjects to near hilarious overtones may have been Marsh's way of showing that New York's crowds were made up of warm, thinking, feeling human beings.

Marsh realized all his ideas for works of art in terms of the print medium. He learned etching through reading printmaking books and experimentation. Some of the major paintings were first accomplished as an etching, and frequently a painting and etching with a similar subject were worked on simultaneously.[26] Marsh saw his potential materialize when he was able to let his draughtsmanship take over in the etching process. He became dedicated to the use of linework so much so that during the 1930s he abandoned the traditional oil painting methods for egg tempera which allowed him to draw with the tempera to set up a linear framework and lay on subsequent transparent layers.[27] Reginald Marsh experimented with linoleum cuts and completed approximately 40 lithographs[28] during his career, but it was the etching and engraving techniques of printmaking that best suited his love of the sophisticated line.

The linework in Marsh's etchings and engravings take on different personalities from print to print. Edward Laning, a noted author and expert on Marsh's work, described Marsh's line as "nervous and jittery."[29] This is true if you look at works like the "Bowery" (Fig. 7), where restless lines seem to scatter in every direction, but Marsh altered his line according to the subject and the mood he wished to set. "Coney Island Beach" (Fig. 8) is an example of Marsh using a long curvlinear line to accentuate the gracefulness of each figure's pose. Within the longer lines that make up each figure, there are shorter "definition lines" that run with the figure rather

[26]Sasowsky, p. 35.

[27]Sasowsky, p. 36.

[28]Some critics believed they best resembled his paintings, thus were better efforts than his etchings.

[29]Sasowsky, p. 41.

than obstructing the fluidity of motion. This constant treatment of the figure throughout makes for an overall composition that has the same fluid character. Marsh wished to express the struggles of a crowded beach and the baroque rhythms he witnessed while being surrounded by half-naked men and women accentuated these struggles.

Etching pushed Marsh to explore other characteristics of line, especially darkness and thickness, a result of various biting times. Later in his career with the help of Stanley William Hayter, Marsh discovered engraving and he settled on the technique that let him create a line that was more discrete and well-defined.[30]

When Reginald Marsh engraved a figure into a copper plate he was carving a three-dimensional relief. The swelling of human flesh that appears to thrust forward in a Marsh engraving is the result of a calculated line that undulates around the classical features of men and women. Marsh used tricks like using a solid line to outline a figure so that it would stand out from other forms and reveal its three-dimensional qualities. "Coney Island Beach" (Fig. 9) is an engraving Marsh accomplished later in his career that focusses on the energy of the human figure. Thighs, shoulders and back muscles are displayed as luscious parts of the anatomy because of the many sleek engraved lines that act as a foundation for these raised features. Missing from earlier prints is the close attention to detail and the diverse group of individuals that have their very own body type and facial expression (Fig. 8). Marsh felt more compelled during his later years to concentrate on engraving, a method he believed to be a pure technique, and use the burin to create the form that symbolizes pure vitality - the human body.

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[30]Sasowsky, p. 42.

Drawing the female form was the ultimate tribute to the body beautiful and he satisfied his need to refine the figure by attending many New York burlesque theaters. Actually, there were many features of the burlesque houses that attracted Reginald Marsh to the daily shows. Marsh remarked about the atmosphere in a burlesque house, "the whole thing is extremely pictorial...you get a woman in the spotlight, the gilt architecture of the place, plenty of humanity...everything is nice and intimate."[31] "Striptease at New Gotham" (Fig. 10) shows all the elements that intrigued Marsh. The female stripper is bathed in the spotlight and the light line treatment defines the female form sensually, but it also suggests the angelic aura of this working woman. The architecture of the Gilded Age was often used by Marsh to contrast the warm shapeliness of the stripper with the harsh angles of the structure, but at the same time show the similar rhythms that occur in architecture and women.

The congested mob of men that Marsh referred to as "humanity" are almost always the subject of his satire. All of them have their eyes focussed on the dancer but it is the variety of expressions on the faces of these men that is humorous. From cross-eyed men of passion to stern, calculating faces, Marsh takes some attention away from the stripper by displaying the unusual collection of paying customers. The burlesque theater was the subject of over 100 paintings, prints and drawings, and it was just one segment of Marsh's constant theme of public pursuit of pleasure.

Artists sometimes use their art to make a statement about their culture because they are proud to be part of that system. The world is filled with visual artists who create works that contain political and social messages.

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[31]Sasowsky, p. 10.

Usually these messages are about reform, and are solemn in their tone. Other artists reveal in their work an irreverent look at their culture hoping change will come about because people will realize how silly they look. Satire should not be connected to cynicism for the creator of satire may be completely satisfied with his society. These artists are even great supporters of the beliefs and social customs of a particular culture. Their main target with satire is the quirks and bad habits that keep the society from being a great society.

One human figure in motion on a page was electric for Reginald Marsh, a group of figures became an explosion. The tempo of a crowded Marsh print is hectic and jazzy, and the observer's eye never stops moving because of the meshing and condensation of figures (Fig. 11). One might wonder how an artist could draw with such an exhilarating flair when surely his subjects were affected by the somber realities of the depression. Marsh did not draw out of a reaction to the depression; he sustained what was vital in human beings. Marsh sometimes credited New York for bringing out the best in people because of its fabulous attractions and ever-present profusion.[32] From his apartment window with binoculars in hand, Marsh collected information on men and women, poor and rich, the oddballs and conformists. When this strange assortment of people were shuffled and arranged in a drawing, Marsh presented the mobs of New York as a thriving, unified congregation.

Reginald Marsh, John Sloan and George Bellows developed a kinship because of their methods, materials and love of New York. These three men knew each other, knew of each others' work, and each respected the gains the others had made in his individual expression. There was no need for jealou-

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[32]Sasowsky, p. 11.

sies because even though their prints appeared very similar, they each pictured New York in a different light. John Sloan's drawings of the city were authentic and carried movement and characterization (Fig. 12). George Bellows' New York was as authentic as Sloan's, but he had a polarity in his work which described popular life as either static formations of people or violent movements of participants. Marsh's work portrayed a New York that was magical, and sometimes his less than desirable mobs appear unreal. All of the images produced by these men show a zest for city living. They offer a new understanding about man's relationship with the structures he builds. The huge skyscrapers were nothing to cower from because they embodied the bigness of the city's urban life.

Marsh, Bellows and Sloan developed a need to portray the events of New York in prints. All of these men started off in the newspaper business as illustrators or graphic artists. They were required to use the etching process to make black and white images that ran along side of an article. There was probably more to their dedication to the printmaking medium than a vehicle to make illustrations for publications. More likely, the exhilaration they felt while quickly drawing on a plate or stone paralleled the constant activity they witnessed on the streets. The groups of people became a complex puzzle that they had to solve with a stylus or crayon on a very small format. The black and white simplicity of the medium also tamed the chaotic nature of a teeming metropolis.

Making a print requires a lot of time, hard physical work and a dedication. There is a lot of frustration that goes along with working on a reversed image, to say nothing about the problems of printing a plate on paper and making it turn out properly. These kinds of hassles cause many artists experimenting with printmaking to give up and turn to a medium that

is less resistant to their creative process. Marsh, Bellows, and Sloan were not the type to let the medium get the best of them so they went through the trials and errors until they reached success. It seems their efforts characterized the times they lived in when people did not give up easily. When a goal was in sight people worked hard to achieve that goal. Marsh, Bellows, and Sloan's goal was the finished state of a print. Once one reaches that goal all the hard work leading up to the final image is easily forgotten.

Another thread that connects these artists is the passion they had for the act of drawing. This may be the single factor that makes their work rise above the work of other artists of that time period. To look at their images it appears they never grew tired of drawing on a particular plate; the only question that seemed to come up was when to stop. A blank piece of paper for many means finding a way to fill it up. There is a driving force for some to draw line after line organizing and redrawing until this network of lines borders on confusion. There is an excitement that goes with complex compositions and always somewhat of a letdown when the opportunities to include more has dwindled. This is why printmaking was so conducive to the drawing methodology of Marsh, Bellows and Sloan. They could draw on a plate or stone, print a proof, see what they needed to add, and then experiment with alternatives by drawing on their many proofs. Once a person etches a line or draws is on a stone, they can rely on that line to always be there, to act as a foundation for more lines, and always maintain its original integrity. The New York crowds could always be counted on to give these artists abundant information for their sketch pads, but it seems sometimes the chaotic features of the crowd were just an excuse to draw.

Printmaking made them see things about their subject that their painting never revealed. George Bellows saw humor in his subjects (Fig. 13), Reginald Marsh saw the magnetic power of women. Their studies done in oils were accomplished in a traditional and conservative vein. Their prints became personal diaries in which they explored pictorial possibilities with a wandering fine line. While some painters looked down on etching and lithography because of graphic ties, Marsh, Sloan and Bellows realized the techniques made them better painters and better artists.

The actual costs for producing a print in the early 1900s was very low, therefore, many middle and low income families could afford a Bellows lithograph or a Marsh or Sloan etching. This may have been another reason why these three artists turned to printmaking so that they could give something back to the people of New York. Working artists are always grateful to their subject matter for kindling ideas and generating a creative surge. When artists draw the people around them they feel a closeness to that subject which goes beyond any form of friendship. Printmakers have always shared an intimacy with their audience because of the size and sincerity of their printed image. When the public grew to appreciate the humor and artistry that was put into the prints of Sloan, Marsh, and Bellows, that was when these three artists found the inspiration to continue making prints.

There were other artists of the 1920s and 1930s who tried mastering both printmaking and painting, and like Sloan, Bellows and Marsh, used the crowds of New York as their inspiration. Peggy Bacon, who studied under John Sloan and George Bellows at the Art Students League, became popular with many New York collectors because of her humorous depictions of the city's socialites. She became very interested in drypoint while at the Art Students League, and

managed to learn this printmaking process through trial and error. In 1929 she got involved with the etching process, and in the 1930s accomplished several lithographs,[33] but it was her mechanical method of drawing flat figures with a drypoint needle that brought her immediate recognition.

Bacon was interested in John Sloan's way of reporting New York life, however, she reported on New York life like a gossip columnist would report on Hollywood celebrities. She was preoccupied in showing what personal quirks made up the eccentrics of New York's art and political communities. She showed people busily trying to be stereotypes and dressing to fit the fashions. Her figures were caricatures of people she knew and sometimes her portrayals were biting, but always insightful. She claimed she never "faked a figure",[34] but if she would have faked a few of her figures, maybe her prints would have an air of mystery to them instead of reading like a "who's who" of New York socialites.

Peggy Bacon's crowded prints became a collection of unique individuals with no common denominator. What she gained from studying Bellows' and Sloan's prints was not the overall impression a crowd of people could convey, but what a checklist of strange characters might look like in a common setting (Fig. 14). She said of her subjects, "I enjoyed crowding them in and everyone of the people was a portrait of a particular individual."[35]

What is missing in Bacon's work is a feeling of unity among its members. The individual satirical treatment of each figure isolates the person from adjacent figures. Any suggested fluidity in the composition is broken up by

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[33]Roberta K. Tarbell, <u>Peggy Bacon Personalities and Places</u> (Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975), p. 44.

[34]Tarbell, p. 45.

[35]Tarbell, p. 11.

her itemized caricatures. Her desire to be humorous supercedes the composi-
tional potential of her subjects. Bacon did not stick with the images of New
York for her entire career, and she also gave up on printmaking in 1950.[36]
She never saw New York as a source of human energy, but saw it as a place
where the foibles of men and women were at their worst.

Paul Cadmus was a painter-printmaker who also drew pleasure from
satirizing traditional American values. Deemed a social realist during the
1930s, Cadmus accomplished only seven etchings that showed the New York crowd
in a jaundiced light. His most famous print and proposed mural, "The Fleet's
In", brought the wrath of the U.S. Navy because it depicted the sailors of a
recently docked ship involved in drunken shenanigans with prostitutes in a
New York park. The vociferous response he received on a national level with
this print prompted him to make five subsequent prints that had similar shock
value.[37]

The quiet, retiring Cadmus was an excellent draughtsman who had a flair
for extravaganza in his images. Cadmus studied under Joseph Pennell at the
Students Art League, and spent some time in Europe studying the Renaissance
printmakers very closely. He started dabbling in printmaking at school, but
it was his European trip that got him excited about the techniques of etching
and drypoint.[38] Cadmus had a unique way of approaching the etching process
whereby he drew a cold, calculating line that resembled the forced line of an
engraver. The engravings of Dürer and Schongauer so impressed him he set out
to construct etchings that had the same overall strength of form. Unfortu-

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[36]Tarbell, p. 50.

[37]Una Johnson, Paul Cadmus/Prints and Drawings (Brooklyn Museum: Brooklyn, NY, 1968), p. 12.

[38]Johnson, p. 13.

nately, he adopted some of the scenes of glory from the heavens that were often incorporated into these images of the masters. This weakness may be seen in his etchings of the polo grounds where he bathes the main figures in contrived rays of light.

"Coney Island" (Fig. 15) contains the same energy of tangled humanity that was portrayed in Reginald Marsh's prints (Figs. 8 & 9), but it is a little too well orchestrated. The pylon of people in the center of the composition peaks with what resembles a steeple - a woman with outstretched arms. All the figures on the bottom and sides support this column because of a calculated motion that sweeps them under the pile of bathers. Cadmus also seemed preoccupied with showing his virtuosity by posing his figures in all sorts of configurations, no two are alike. With these poses he displays his command of anatomical delineations and his ability to interweave foreground and background with foreshortened figures. Instead of isolating mankind, he depicted soft, sensual bodies that were strung together with classical motifs. His human altars lack the flexibility of a Reginald Marsh beach scene.

Similar to Marsh's pursuit of capturing the female form, Cadmus continued his analysis of the male form. He tried in later works to show the sensual side of the male figure. He dropped his sometimes over-dramatic satire and used the male figure in surrealist-inspired images. The New York images he drew briefly in the 1930s were never a sincere mode of expression, but a way to approach his fondness for drawing the figure in the Renaissance vernacular.

Another artist of the Depression who was raised in New York after emigrating with his family from Russia was Raphael Soyer. Soyer was brought up in the worst of the tenement buildings in the city and shared a room with

his twin brother Moses, and his younger brother Isaac, two siblings who also became renowned artists.[39] Raphael Soyer did not see New York as a glamourous city, so he refrained from creating prints and paintings that showed city life as a joyous existence, something that was prevalent in works of his compatriots like Reginald Marsh and William Gropper. He did, however, share their interest in drawing the crowds that lined the streets because the spectacle of thousands of people scurrying off to their homes or work made him forget his impoverished past.

He particularly liked to draw the shopgirls who crowded the streets after the 5:00 p.m. shift ended. Their colorful clothing, brisk walk and streaming long hair was a scene on Union Square that attracted everyone's attention. The lithograph "Working Girls Going Home" (Fig. 16) shows Soyer's way of depicting the daily retreat of this horde of women. Unlike John Sloan's interpretation of women united in mutual glee (Fig. 2), Soyer focused on the eloquent but reserved appearance of the women who graced the streets. He seems more inspired by the way light draped the soft clothing and soft features of the women. In the 1940s and 1950s, Soyer completed hundreds of portraits of women that showed them in poses or acts that were distinctly feminine.[40]

Lithography permitted Soyer to attain the subtle tones that described the reserved people of his prints. The medium was attractive because he could feature a strong light which modeled his forms roundly, and work with a wide range of finely modulated grays that shifted into the deep black shadowed portions of his figures. When his black areas became too dominant,

[39]Lloyd Goodrich, Raphael Soyer (New York: Praeger Inc., 1967), p. 10.

[40]Goodrich, p. 12.

he would scratch back into the stone's surface to recover important light areas, another advantage he appreciated about the process. Soyer started his printmaking career with an etching press in a room in his parents' small tenement building. His first etchings off of that press were somber portraits of his parents and brother Isaac, prophetic images of his scenes of somber New York residents.[41]

The setting of New York as an environment for his crowds never became an important issue for Soyer. Deep down he believed the melancholy he witnessed was the most important element to express in his work, so he developed his compositions with isolated figures consumed with introspection. The moon faces with round black eyes were objects of an urban cruelty that was not indigenous to New York. It was an outside world that alienated the less fortunate and this reality could not be frosted over with positive images of New York.

To conclude, the torrential pace of the city was the subject of many artists' work. Some saw city life as a popularity contest and mocked the individuals who participated, and some artists saw the city as serving the rich and leaving the less fortunate in its wake. These were views of artists who came to the city with an established personal perspective, and art history is richer for their contributions. They chose to ignore, however, the most obvious feature of New York's streets, and that was the vitality of the people who called New York their home.

H.G. Wells commented on his impressions of New York after visiting the city for the first time in 1906, "Individuals count for nothing...the distinctive effect is the mass...the unprecedented multitudinousness of the

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[41]Goodrich, p. 12.

thing."[42]   This view of New York was shared by many foreigners who felt insignificant when walking among the throng during the city's rise to prosperity.   It took a resident of the city to remove the notion that one appears as a speck in a giant universe, and admire the crowds for what they were.   Coney Island was picturesque with its sensuous stretches of human flesh, the elevated train's underpasses were scenes of tumultuous mass movement, and the city streets were alive with the spectacle of teeming humanity.   The city dwellers grew to appreciate these sites because they represented the appeal of American growth and sovereignty.

John Sloan, George Bellows and Reginald Marsh recognized the visual power of a group of people turned on by their environment.   Through direct observation these men put down on paper the variety and candor of popular life in New York City.   Sloan showed the wholesome qualities of ordinary citizens while 25 years later Marsh described his more complicated society with ingenious wonder.   These men drew the historical developments of a city, but were more inspired with the grace of the human figure amid the steadfast architecture.   The more figures that were introduced in a composition the more these artists felt they were achieving the actual sensation of bustling activity of their immediate surroundings.

Printmaking was more than an alternative media approach for these turn-of-the-century artists that I have discussed in this paper.   The marks they used to draw their living subjects whirled and moved with city-like intensity.   The cross-hatching of John Sloan's etchings and the texture of George Bellows' lithographs describe a complex society in a complex manner.   They were rediscovering mediums that were considered outdated and useless.   The

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[42]Still, p. 277.

excitement they had for the print medium paralleled the excitement they witnessed in the streets of New York. Soon they grew to understand the intertwined relationship of the prints, the art and the city.

Figure 1. John Sloan, *Roofs, Summer Night*, 1906, Etching, 5-1/4" x 7", photograph from <u>John Sloan New York Etchings (1905-1949)</u>.

Figure 2. John Sloan, *Return from Toil*, 1915, Etching, 4-1/4" x 6", photograph from <u>John Sloan New York Etchings (1905-1949)</u>.

Figure 3. John Sloan, *Copyist at the Metropolitan Museum*, 1908, Etching, 7-1/2" x 9", photograph from John Sloan New York Etchings (1905-1949).

Figure 4. George Bellows, *River-Front*, 1923-24, Lithograph, 15" x 20-7/8", photograph from The Lithographs of George Bellows.
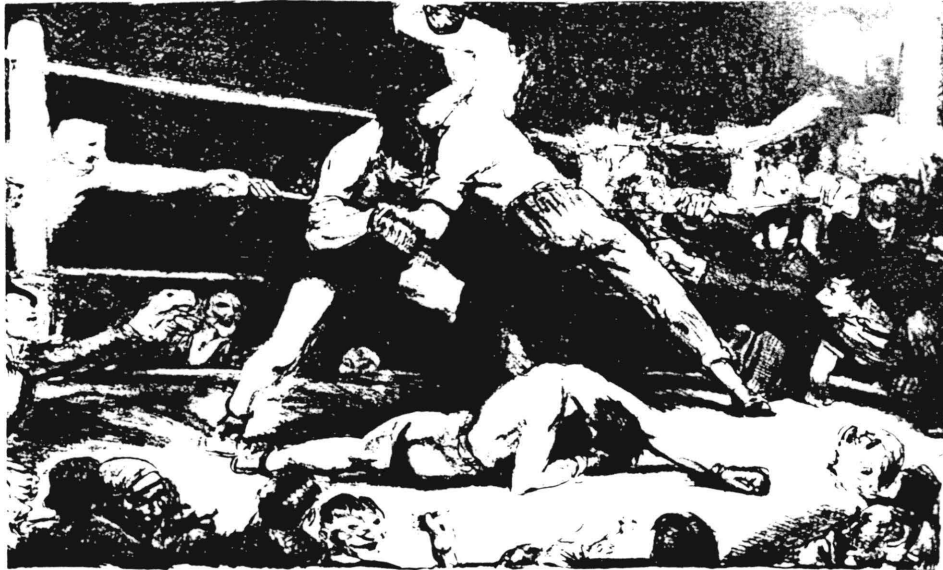
Figure 5. George Bellows, *A Knock-Out, First State (Incident of the Ring)*, 1921, Lithograph, 15-1/4" x 25-3/4", photograph from <u>The Lithographs of George Bellows</u>.
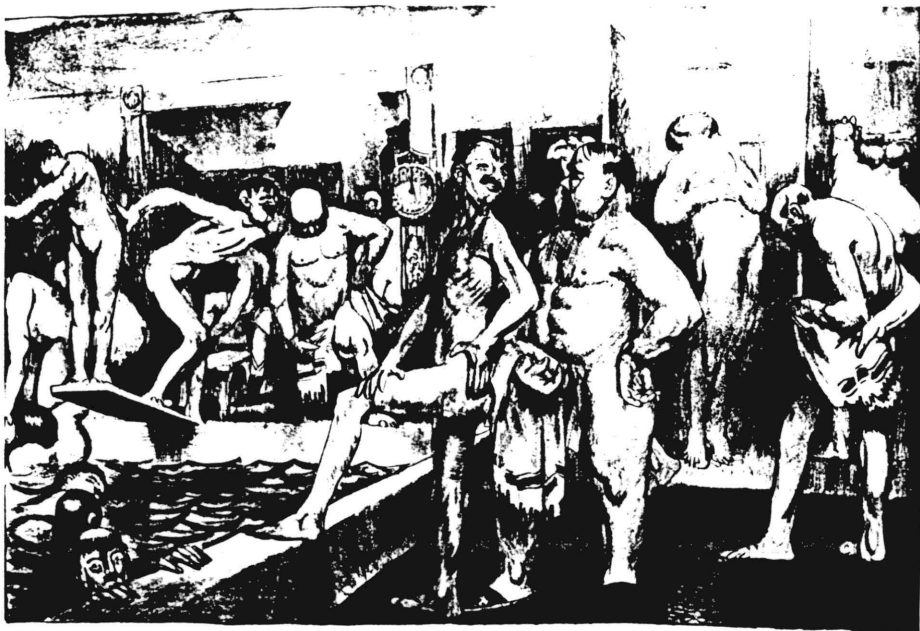

Figure 6. George Bellows, *Shower-Bath, First State*, Lithograph, 15-7/8" x 23-3/4", photograph from <u>The Lithographs of George Bellows</u>.

Figure 7. Reginald Marsh, *Bowery*, 1928, Etching, 6-1/4" x 4-3/4", photograph from <u>The Prints of Reginald Marsh</u>.

Figure 8. Reginald Marsh, *Coney Island Beach*, 1935, Etching, 9" x 12", photograph from <u>The Prints of Reginald Marsh</u>.

Figure 9. Reginald Marsh, *Coney Island Beach*, 1940, Engraving, 10" x 12". photograph from <u>The Prints of Reginald Marsh</u>.
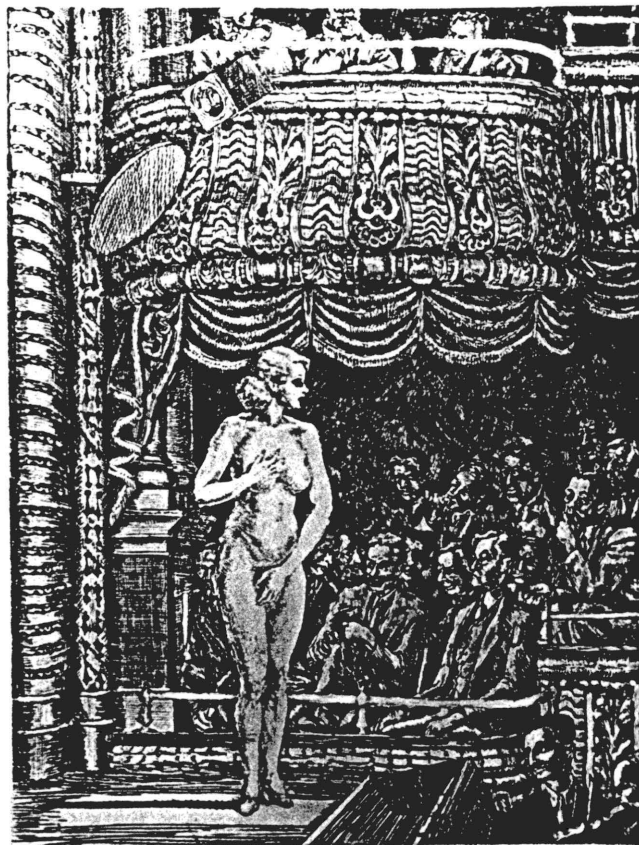

Figure 10. Reginald Marsh, *Striptease at New Gotham*, 1935, Etching, 12" x 9", photograph from <u>The Prints of Reginald Marsh</u>.

Figure 11. Reginald Marsh, *The Barker*, 1931, Etching, 10" x 8", photograph from <u>The Prints of Reginald Marsh</u>.

Figure 12. John Sloan, *Sixth Avenue, Greenwich Village*, 1923, Etching, 5" x 7", photograph from <u>John Sloan New York Etchings 1905-1949</u>.
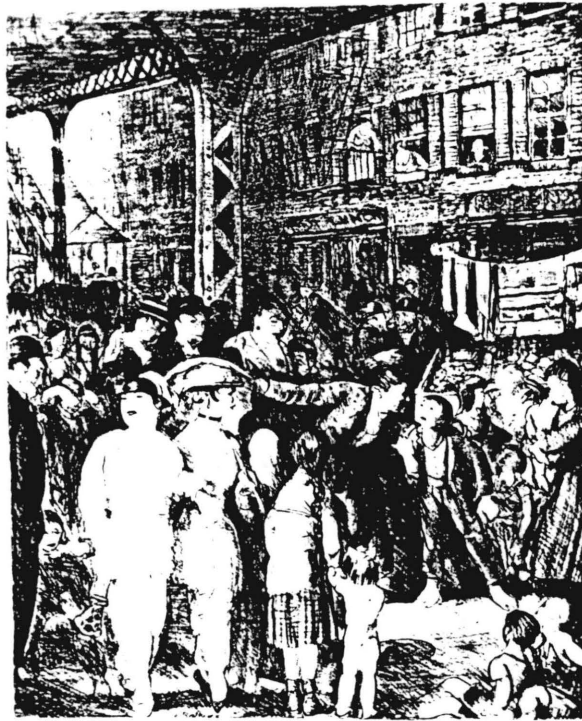
Figure 13. George Bellows, *The Street*, 1917, Lithograph, 19" x 15-1/4", photograph from <u>The Lithographs of George Bellows</u>.

Figure 14. Peggy Bacon, *The Social Graces*, 1935, Drypoint, 12" x 6", photograph from <u>A Treasury of American Prints</u>.

Figure 15. Paul Cadmus, *Coney Island*, 1935, Etching, 8" x 11-1/4", photograph from Paul Cadmus Prints and Drawings 1922-1967.

Figure 16. Raphael Soyer, *Working Girls Going Home*, 1937, Lithograph, 11-1/4" x 9-3/8", photograph from A Century of American Printmaking 1880-1980.

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