



California
Society of
Printmakers

THE CALIFORNIA PRINTMAKER

THE JOURNAL OF THE CALIFORNIA SOCIETY OF PRINTMAKERS | 2006

Storytelling and Printmaking



Acknowledgments

“‘Men work together,’ I told him from the heart,
‘Whether they work together or apart.’”

These two lines from a poem by Robert Frost speaks best to my belief that I do not work in isolation and that anything that I do always involves the hands of others. This was especially true with this project. I would like to extend my thanks to the following individuals involved with the publication of this journal.

- First and foremost, I wish to extend my deepest appreciation to Jan Baetens, Norma S. Steinberg, and Sarina Rodrigues Wyant for working so closely with me on such a tight schedule.
- Art Hazelwood, who initially suggested that I guest edit this issue.
- CSP President Benny Alba and Margaret-Ann Clemente for their initial advice and words of encouragement.
- Rose E. O’Brien for her proofreading and valuable insight.
- 13² Studio for their design and production.



The Journal 2006

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13² Studio, San Francisco, CA

PRINTING
Inkworks, Berkeley, CA ♻️

FRONT COVER IMAGES

William Gropper, *The Speaker*, 1938-41
from a series of ten lithographs “The Senate.”
Lithograph, 11³/₄”x 15³/₄”. Printer: Gene Gropper.

Olivier Duprez, *Le Château de Kafka*,
Brussels: Frémok, 2003. Woodcut, 9¹/₄”x 7”.

Fritz Eichenberg, *St. Francis and the Fishes*,
WPA 1935-36, artist proof. Wood engraving 7³/₄”x 6”.

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Editor's Note

Storytelling and Printmaking

When I was a child, my father read stories to me at bedtime. Although these stories entertained me, I enjoyed more the picture books without words when my father created the stories himself. I learned to read pictures from my father and began reading pictures to my younger sisters as I grew older. I discovered the secrets of storytelling in pictures in libraries and developed an imagination that found sustenance in the graphic works of Heinrich Kley, Alfred Kubin, Odilon Redon, and Max Klinger, particularly his "Glove" series. Each picture unraveled an imaginative storyline leading to the event displayed by the artist on the page. Like a private detective, I visually scrutinized each print to discover more information that would spark another avenue of entertainment or enlightenment in my imagination.

Pictorial storytelling holds a special magic in everyone's lives, regardless of age, race, language or religion, confirmed throughout history from prehistoric cave paintings to digitized images on the internet. Not only do stories entertain us but they may be the best means that enable us to rise above our individual differences, identify with others, and feel less alone—whether crouching in a cave or sitting with our laptop in an internet cafe. The invention that brought the power of storytelling to its greatest potential was the printing press with its potential of circulating images in vast quantities and making the print the ideal vehicle for the democratic dissemination of ideas, instruction, and entertainment.

In this issue, I wanted to look at this marriage of prints and storytelling from the perspective of a few scholars who will examine the work of three printmakers both here in the United States and one from Europe. Norma S. Steinberg examines the etchings of William Gropper, who used his storytelling skills and caricatures to uncover social injustices in the United States. The Belgium, Jan Baetens, looks closely at a graphic novel by Olivier Deprez and how his woodcuts not only illustrate a book written by Kafka but, more importantly, visually shows us Kafka "writing" the work. And in the last essay, Sarina Rodrigues Wyant examines Fritz Eichenberg's homage to Saint Francis and how elements in the stand alone print symbolize ideas and beg the viewer to construct an internal narrative.

My enjoyment from storytelling in prints has never left my life and I hope that these scholars will fortify the element of storytelling in your ongoing work as printmakers for the next generation.

David A. Beronä

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Storytelling in Gropper's Late Etchings

B

ecause prints are reproducible, they have been used by artists through the centuries to tell stories of myths, history, or religion. Since the late Renaissance, and especially since the nineteenth century, artists have added political, satirical, or social messages in their prints. William Gropper (1897-

1977), an American artist active from the 1920s through the 1970s, depicted in prints, book illustrations, caricatures, and paintings, the whole gamut of social and political concerns. Gropper was proud of his chosen subject matter—humanity and social justice—and this theme is particularly noticeable in his graphic output. From the earliest caricatures of laborers, capitalists, and workers of all sorts, to the lithographic senators, judges, lawyers, and folk heroes, Gropper continually expanded his repertoire. During the aftermath of his personal brush with censorship, he changed the meaning of his figures. Portrayed initially as workers, the men and women became metaphors for informers, the cynical press, and the blacklist itself. In the 1960s, given an opportunity to create intaglios in collaboration with a master printer, Gropper's storytelling became more challenging and fantastic.

During the 1940s Gropper was censured by Congress as a dissident, blacklisted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1953, and victimized by many former friends in the early 1960s as a "Fifth Amendment communist." In the intensely anti-socialist climate



Figure. 1. William Gropper, *The Speaker*, 1938-41 from a series of ten lithographs "The Senate." Lithograph, 11³/₄" x 15³/₄". Printer: Gene Gropper.

of the Cold War, his figurative, narrative imagery was considered propaganda, even subversive, and certainly not fine art. In response to McCarthy's blacklisting, Gropper published a portfolio of fifty lithographs, *Capriccios*¹. This group of prints, his indictment against what he called "American inquisitions," was inspired by Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos*, which Gropper said "exposed the brutal Inquisitions of his time."²

Gropper's reputation began to rise in the sixties. The American Contemporary Art (A.C.A.) Gallery, patron of Gropper's first one-person show in 1936, held an exhibition of his paintings and drawings in 1961. It was reviewed positively by *Time* magazine. Ending the piece, the reviewer wrote, "[Gropper's] work is in a durable tradition: A Gropper senator does not date any more than a Daumier judge or a Prussian officer by George Grosz. In Gropper the 'old guard' seems amazingly young."³

Soon after, Sylvan Cole of Associated American Artists gallery (AAA) invited Gropper to create a suite of etchings under the gallery's aegis. AAA, until recently a well-known publisher primarily of lithographs, had published Gropper's lithographs in the forties and early fifties, but his association with the gallery was negatively affected by the subpoena to appear at the McCarthy hearings.⁴

For this etching commission, *Twelve Etchings* (1965), Gropper collaborated with Emiliano Sorini, master intaglio and lithographic printer for AAA. He used the opportunity to experiment with materials, methods, and figuration. Gropper worked directly on the plates with a variety of intaglio media: hard, lift, and soft ground, sandpaper, electric needle, baby comb, engraving, roulette.

While several images incorporate new concepts, most of the images in *Twelve Etchings* modify early ideas with more sophisticated line-work, fully realized settings, and colored inks. Each of the individual titles – *Rembrandt Lady*, *Fisherman*, *Gourmet*, *Duchess*, *Hassidim*, *Coffee Break*, *Fantasy*, *Dream*, *Market on 38th Street*, *Check*, *Tomorrow's Saint*, and *Catastrophe* – was printed in an edition of 100 with ten artist's proofs. Each was printed in a single dark tone: green-brown, dark raw umber, ivory black, olive-green, with a few proofs lightly colored.⁵

Cole organized a number of exhibitions around the

country and introduced the set with an essay by Alan Fern, then a well-known print dealer, and later director of the National Portrait Gallery. John Canaday, in the *New York Times*, acknowledged Gropper's social concerns in a positive review under the banner "Gropper as an etcher is still in Good Form; Old Social Criticisms Haven't Lost Punch."⁶

The motif of Congressional imagery, in particular, proved an enduring one that Gropper pursued in a variety of media. A. Conger Goodyear purchased Gropper's oil painting, *The Senate* (1935) and donated it to the Museum of Modern Art. When Lewis Mumford in the *New Yorker* reviewed the painting as "the condensation of a hundred Congressional Records," his comment reflected Gropper's skepticism about government.⁷

The Speaker, a lithograph printed in an edition of twelve by Gropper's son Gene⁸ in the late 1930s to early 1940s, is another representation of this subject (**Fig. 1**). Gropper admired Daumier, and like many a Daumier caricature, Gropper's round-bellied, loudly gesturing Speaker stands before colleagues who benefit more from personal conversations, napping, or reading the newspaper than from his rhetoric.⁹ All Gropper's images of government officials – judges, lawyers, and capitalists – symbolize contempt. The type has a large drooping belly, a suit and tie, often a top hat or spectacles, always a scowl. Two of the *Twelve Etchings* are similarly rotund figures without a specific congressional association. *Gourmet*, sometimes called *Le Gourmand* (S.49),¹⁰ shows a bloated figure at a table with a line of waiters bringing him one course after another. In the context of Gropper's oeuvre, the overindulgent Senator is a personification of bureaucratic hubris.

Coffee Break (S.52) is more sympathetic, blending Gropper's capacity for both overstatement and tenderness (**Fig. 2**). A tired Congressman slouches in one chair with his feet on another. Instead of coffee he is fondling a small glass (a short nip of alcohol?), and a sheet of paper rests near his right hand. His suit is rumpled, his brow furled, his shoulders slumped. Not by coincidence, the resting Congressman bears Gropper's generous mouth, girth, and nose, although not Gropper's smile.

The Senatorial type continues, along with subjects like fishermen and dancing Hassidism, consistent with his



Figure 2. William Gropper, *Coffee Break*, 1965 from "Twelve Etchings." Etching, sheet 38"x23". Printer: Emiliano Sorini. Publisher: AAA.

early social imagery. The *Twelve Etchings* suite also includes new subjects drawn from the lessons of Goya, Grosz, and Bosch – fantastic, imaginative, and poetic. *Tomorrow's Saint* (S.57) shows three Goyesque "witches"¹¹ flying through the air, pointing, and throwing darts at a somber man with his right hand raised to swear an oath of truth. The books in his left arm signal educational accomplishment, while the stigmata call attention to his martyrdom. The witches refer to Gropper's questioning before McCarthy's committee; their faces represent the gesticulating, angry Senator and his

lying informers. Flying figures as witches occur in Gropper's lithographic series, *Capriccios*, but not with such explicit bitterness.

Fantasy (S.53), also a new concept, continues his dream-like imagination (**Fig. 3**). A suited man wearing a fedora enters right and is faced with all manner of inexplicable activities and figures. In the foreground an academic in mortarboard and sleeveless gown carries a basket of alphabet letters, while a bearded tailor behind him shears off his coat-tails. The tailor's cranium is sawed open, as in Bosch, Goya,

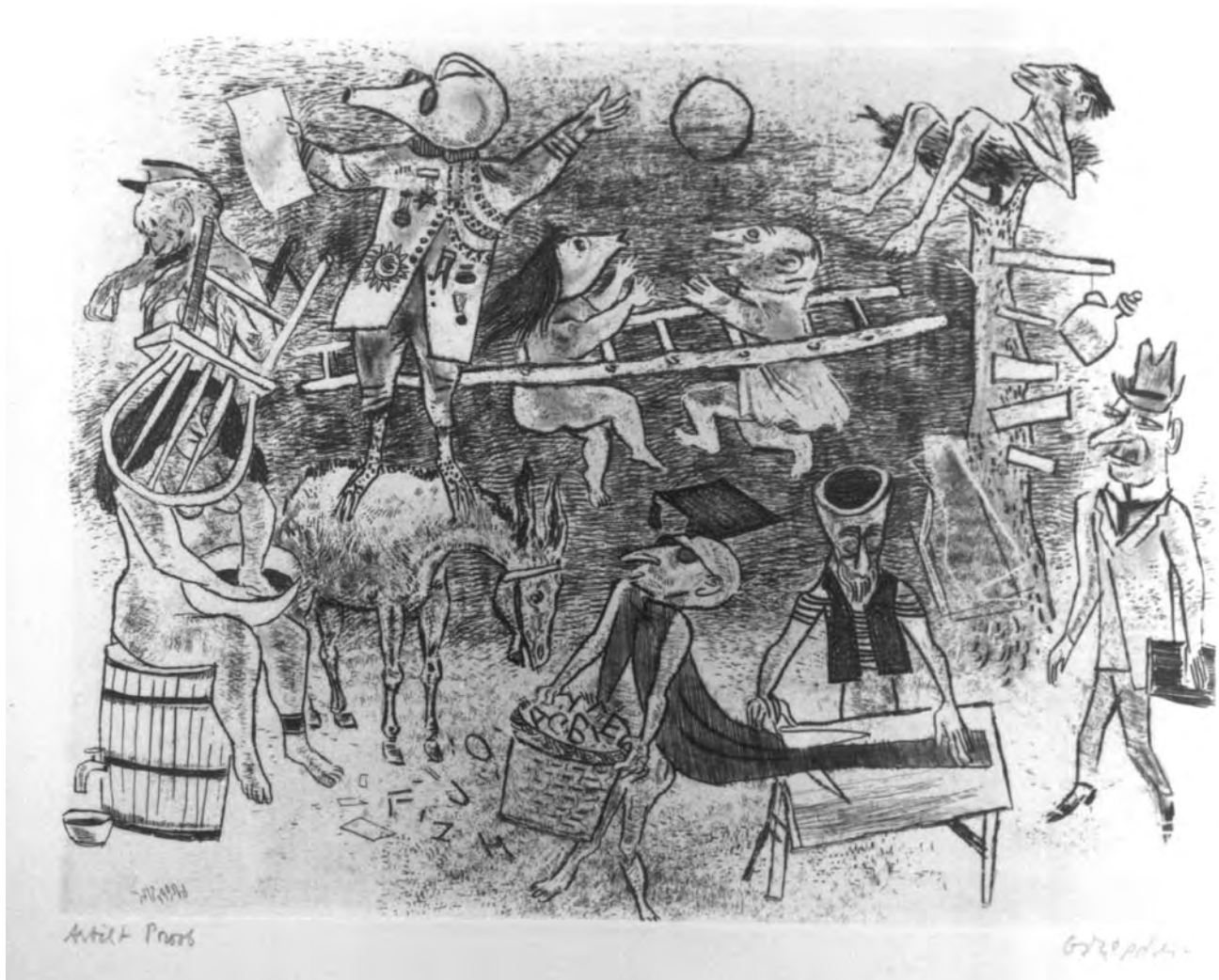


Figure 3. William Gropper, *Fantasy*, 1965 from "Twelve Etchings." Etching, sheet 38"x23". Printer: Emiliano Sorini. Publisher: AAA.

and Grosz, to signify its hollowness. Wherever it was used in the work of these three artists the opened head represents stupidity and irrationality.

The composition, drawn with combined seriousness and satire, is crowded with detail. Three figures with pig-like faces appear in the background. One, dressed in a military coat and sunglasses, stands on a goat and addresses an invisible audience. Two others, caught in the rungs of an elevated but unsupported ladder, are engaged in a mysterious form of mating foreplay. In the foreground, a nude woman seated

on a barrel has an upturned chair on her head like the ladies' of the night in Goya's *Caprichos*. Caught within the rungs of the chair is an animal, possibly a monkey, which is another sign of the stupidity of existence. She has her hands buried in the dark fluid of a round bowl. A full moon, repeating the bowl's circular form and the head's cavity, forms a dark circle in the sky.

This print is neither funny nor satirical. It is the story of a world turned upside down, an allegory of the incongruities and inconsistencies in society. Gropper incorporated ideas

from a number of sources, including his own earlier imagery, to produce symbols and personifications that direct the audience's attention. He hoped to entertain with his seemingly light-hearted imagery, and to teach viewers about the world's randomness and unpredictability.

In the following months, Gropper continued working with Sorini, and they collaborated on a number of intaglio works in small or unique editions. Most of these images reprise memories of trips to Russia, New York's East End, or his family. Only a few, like *Academy*, 1965 (S.101), return to the ambiguous allegory of *Fantasy*. This time the empty-headed figure is a rotund general, who is crowned with a laurel wreath by an academic, a metaphor for the thoughtless and insensitive. A beribboned man with an empty sleeve stands on top of a podium with his honors. Another flies downward, while two other figures, one with a pitch fork, sit astride a large fish flying through the air. Pieces of paper, some shaped like parts of a clothing pattern, float throughout the picture space – a reference to the tailor of the earlier etching. Pattern pieces and tailor alike signify the Lower East Side needle trades, an iconography familiar to Gropper. Both Gropper and his parents toiled long hours in the garment industry.

Because of the many exhibitions arranged by Cole, the *Twelve Etchings* proved popular and AAA commissioned a suite of images in 1968, also in editions of 100. Gropper continued his collaboration with Sorini. Ten of the fourteen of these smaller etchings, each $3\frac{3}{4}$ " by $5\frac{3}{4}$ ", were created in soft ground, and look like pencil drawings including a pencil's sooty smudges. All of these soft ground prints have political content. A young frightened Gropper is the model for

Witness (S.109). The other subjects in this group are Gropper's arrogant contentious enemies in the Senate and similar dilettante politicians.

Gropper had been invited to become a fellow at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in 1967, and there, working with master printmakers, created a number of color lithographs.¹² Gropper's involvement with printmaking in intaglio and color lithography animated his performance and rehabilitated his artistic and personal reputation. Printmaking expanded his popular base from caricature into fine art. Fresh and earlier audiences were intrigued by his new and renewed stories.

Gropper saw a society ubiquitous with inconsistent justice, uprooted citizenry, and a alienated underclass. His earliest work, mainly caricatures, portrayed the brutality of Nazism and Fascism, the indifference of the United States to the war, venal politicians, and unscrupulous slumlords. The *Twelve Etchings* of 1965, and the etched suite of 1968, interweave material and themes from earlier drawings and paintings, allegories from *Capriccios*, and flights of imagination and fantasy, all fashioned into a more refined format. The etchings incorporate a number of intaglio media, and the soft-ground technique of the 1968 etchings, with blurred lines, further reduces the tension and indignation. The hysterical pitch is reduced, the iconography is more complex, and the storytelling remains potent. Gropper maintained an active, unequivocal role in the social and political fight for compassion, equality, and liberty.

NOTES

¹ The lithographs were printed in editions of 50 impressions by George Miller, 1953-1956.

² Gropper's appreciation of Goya's work was included as an artist's statement with the portfolio.

³ *Time*, December 8, 1961, p. 72.

⁴ Gropper and Rockwell Kent were the only visual artists called before McCarthy's committee.

⁵ Emiliano Sorini. *Gropper: Catalogue Raisonné of the Etchings*, San Francisco, Wofsy, 1998, nos. 47-58.

⁶ May 22, 1965.

⁷ February 15, 1936.

⁸ Gropper's elder son Gene, then eleven to fourteen years of age, acted as pressman for his father's early lithographs, c. 1938-1941.

⁹ Honoré Daumier, *Legislative Belly*, 1834, lithograph for *l'Association Mensuelle*.

¹⁰ These numbers refer to Sorini's items in *Catalogue Raisonné of the Etchings*.

¹¹ Francisco Goya y Lucientes, *Los Caprichos*, 1799, etchings with aquatint.

¹² June Wayne founded Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles in 1960; Gropper was an early contributor.

Olivier Deprez's
Storytelling in
Le Château
de Kafka

BY JAN BAETENS

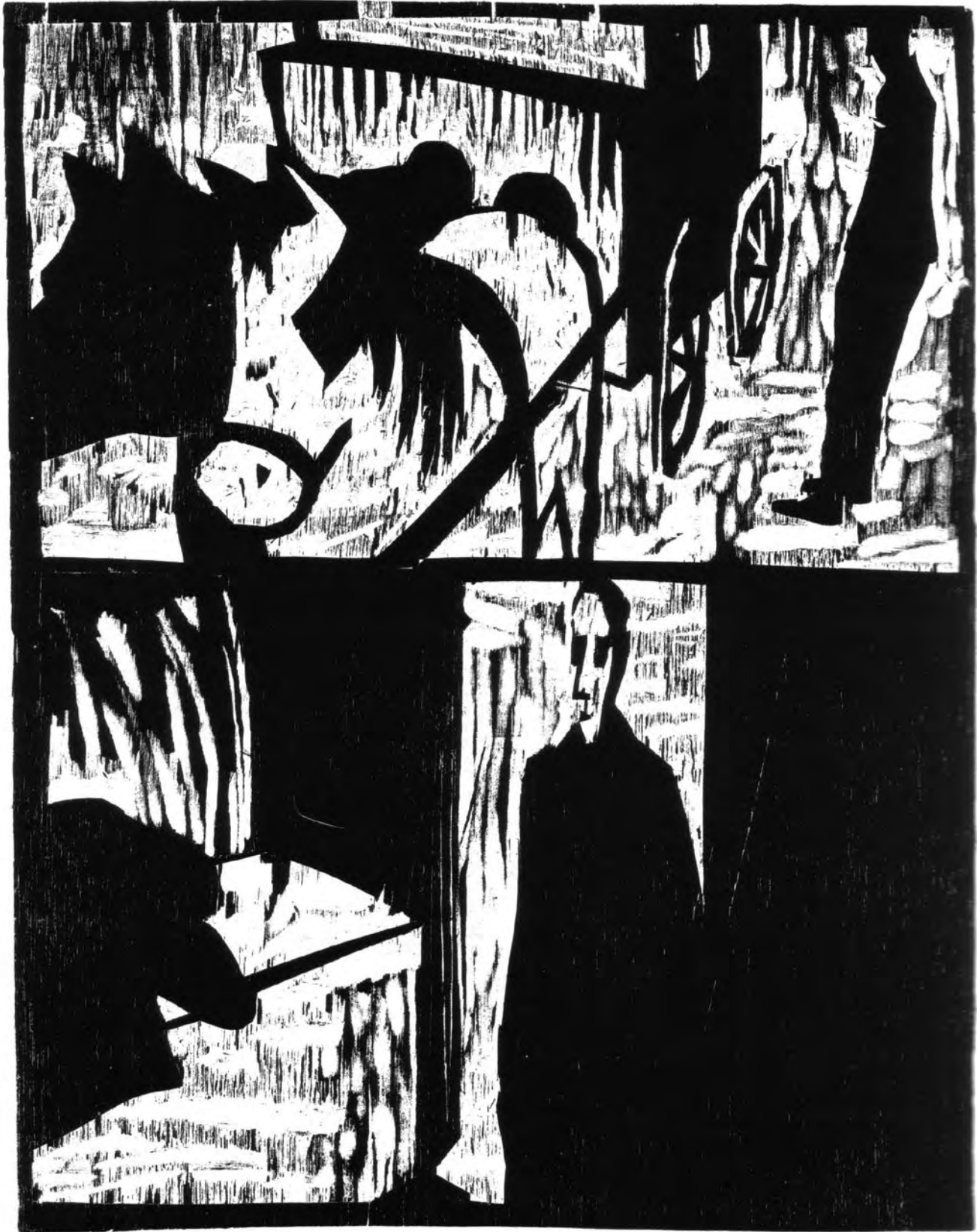


Figure 4. Olivier Deprez , *Le Château de Kafka*. Brussels: Frémok, 2003. Woodcut, 9¼"x7".



Figure 5. Olivier Deprez , *Le Château de Kafka*. Brussels: Frémok, 2003. Woodcut, 9¼" x 7".

Prints, whatever their specific form or genre, can tell stories in two different, but not necessarily incompatible ways. Either the print, or the series of prints, is connected to a story already known by the reader like a biblical parable, or it encourages the reader to invent a new story. In the former case, it suffices that the reader recognizes the story behind the print. In the latter, the image has to be interpreted in order to give meaning to the story. From a cultural and historical point of view, the former is considered traditional, relying on a shared knowledge of cultural heritage, whereas the latter is seen as typically postmodern, emphasizing the role of the reader or viewer.

THE SPECIFIC CASE OF WOODCUTTING

A paradigmatic example of the Franco-Belgian “New Wave” of the 1990s is a group of avant-garde artists doing away with the academism of the Clear Line³ aesthetics launched by the cartoonist Hergé. The work by the young Belgian draughtsman Olivier Deprez will help us clarify the problems and opportunities of narrative printmaking today. Given the importance of the woodcutting technique in traditional printmaking, it may come as a surprise that a typically modernist artist such as Deprez turns to this technique and moreover does so in order to tell stories. Neither the woodcut technique nor its use for storytelling is self-evident. On the contrary, the very repurposing of an old-fashioned technique in an age of general-

ized computer hybridization and the decision to explore not the illustrative but the constructive possibilities of the medium go against the grain of many contemporary art practices. The decision to explore, not the illustrative nature of woodcuts but its storytelling possibilities, is a tribute to Deprez’s innovation and begs two questions. Why is Deprez making woodcuts? And why has Deprez chosen a narrative bias?

In order to answer the first question, one should stress in the first place the artist’s rebellion against the mechanization and standardization of the division of labor that

has sterilized the work of the Clear Line artists, or rather of their studios, since few artists work on an individual basis. Woodcutting is of course not the only possible answer to this frustrating standardization of the artistic endeavor. The 1990s had also witnessed the emergence of the so-called “direct color” aesthetics, which was a movement within graphic novel production that fostered the blurring of boundaries between drawing, etching, and coloring—three aspects sharply divided in the classic studio.⁴ It undoubtedly is the most radical one, for the woodcut technique has a kind of directness and brutality—even primitivism—that

the direct color practitioners completely avoid. This is even more the case when one takes into account Deprez’s chosen technique that follows the example of the great German expressionists. Deprez cuts the wood for his prints with the grain rather than across the grain, achieving a cut that is rougher and less detailed (Fig 4-6).

The answer to the second question on Deprez’s narra-



Figure 6. Olivier Deprez, *Le Château de Kafka*. Brussels: Frémok, 2003. Woodcut, 9¼" x 7".

tive bias is closely tied to his choice of the woodcut technique itself. The woodcut has always been recognized as an illustrative print. In their traditional form they illustrate a story, moral, lesson, or idea which is given *in absentia*. In their contemporary form they often illustrate a text given *in praesentia*.⁵ The very decision to use the woodcut in a very different, narrative framework compensates for what might be called the utterly classic underpinnings of the woodcut. In other words, if the woodcut technique enables the artist to express a revolt against contemporary standardization, this narrative stance that is taken helps him avoid the temptations of nostalgia and forces him to reinvent the medium he is working in. It is important to stress the difference between the use of the woodcut technique and the use of direct color. Contrary to artists using woodcuts, who were in a sense obliged to reinvent the narrative to avoid the technique's possible obsolescence, were artists who preferred the charms of the direct color technique. These artists fall prey to the temptation to exchange their socially unaccepted identities as graphic novelists for the more legitimate identity of a painter. In one sense they exchange the space of the book for that of the art gallery.

Woodcuts are the ideal solution to the difficulties raised by both the sterilization of traditional comics and the attempts to innovate graphic storytelling by way of an artistic upgrade.⁶ On the one hand, thanks to the labor involved in the process of cutting woodcuts, it prevents the artist from falling back on the classic way of drawing a graphic novel either in the clear line approach or a more fashionable escape using color.

BEYOND EKPHRASIS⁷

As argued in the introductory lines of this essay, the decision to make woodcut narratives can go in two directions. Either the artist is an illustrator, in which the drawings are just there to provoke, in a very seducing and economic way, the remembrance of an already existing story, or he is taking the constructivist position in which the drawings produce a story in the mind of the reader.

In the light of this distinction, it is perfectly logical that a modernist storyteller such as Deprez does not reject completely the illustrative stance. On the contrary, he reuses

in his work a book by Kafka, namely *Le Château* (*The Castle*), while revisiting some of the creative ideas established by Frans Masereel, the Belgian artist who is the recognized creator of the "novel in pictures." In one sense, Deprez illustrates Masereel as much as he illustrates Kafka. Deprez is not visually completing the text by Kafka. In this case, his work would belong to the realm of ekphrasis. In this work, Deprez has accomplished something very unique and innovative because he uses the woodcut technique as a counterpart to Kafka's visual writing. Deprez's images do not compete with Kafka's words, descriptions, evocations, or allusions but attempt



Figure 7. Olivier Deprez, *Le Château de Kafka*. Brussels: Frémok, 2003. Woodcut, 9 1/4" x 7".

to show the actual process of Kafka at work (Fig 7). The very process of woodcutting that Deprez presents is not a representation of Kafka's plot or the visual culture surrounding him in his lifetime like the silent cinema or the ancient Yiddish theater. Rather, Deprez's woodcuts are a reenactment of the very dynamics of Kafka's covering of the page. In other words, by looking at Deprez's images, one gets the feeling

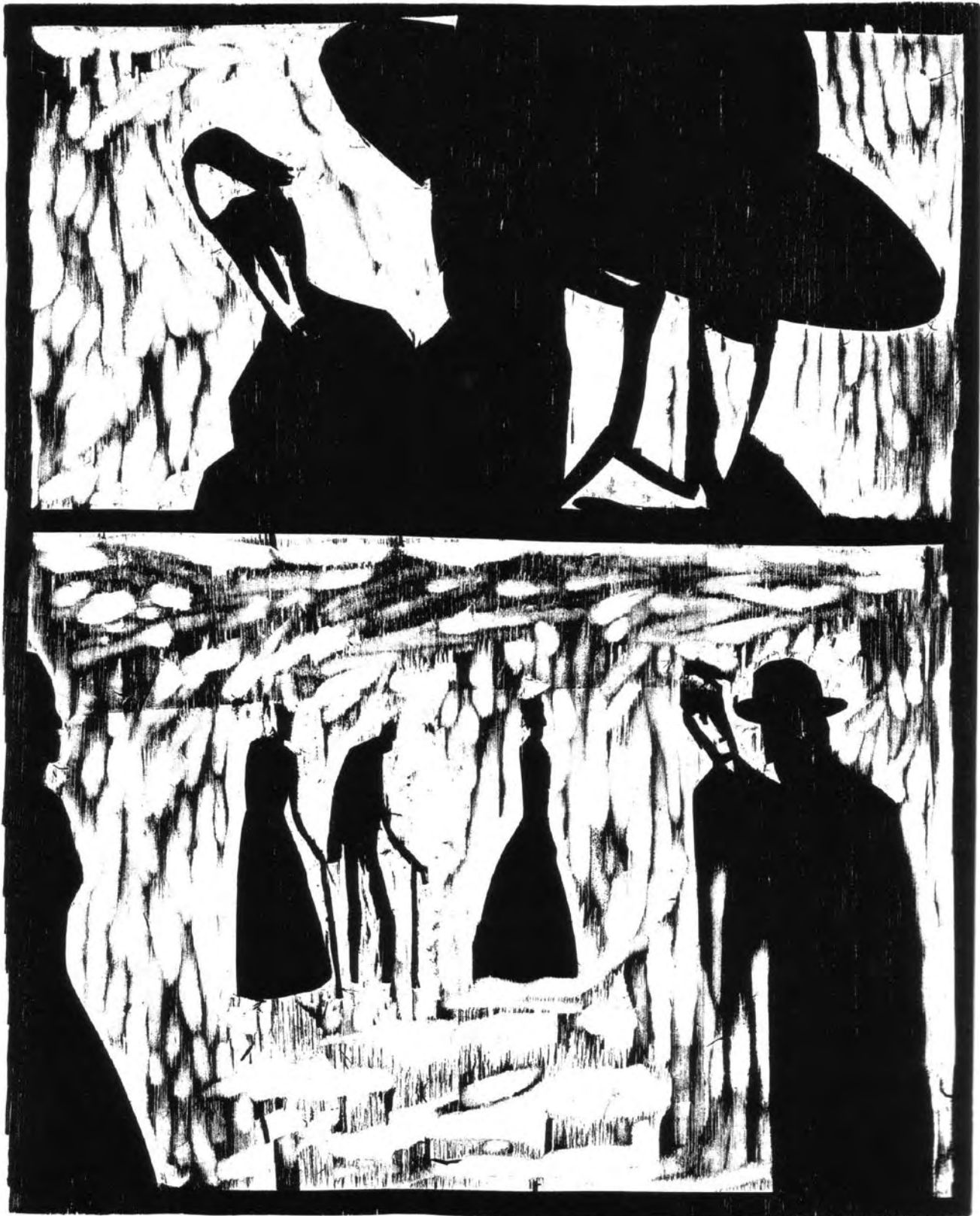


Figure 8. Olivier Deprez , *Le Château de Kafka*. Brussels: Frémok, 2003. Woodcut, 9 1/4" x 7".



Figure 9. Olivier Deprez, *Le Château de Kafka*. Brussels: Frémok, 2003. Woodcut, 9¼" x 7".

of what Kafka was doing while actually writing his book (Fig 8). This is displayed in two ways. The first way is the process of cutting the woodcuts that literally takes away instead of adding elements. The second way is in the printmaking process, with its strong emphasis on the appearance and disappearance of the woodblock's grain and texture. These two processes can be compared to Kafka's work on the sentence, which suggests more by hiding than by displaying.

AFTER MASEREEL

The relationship with Masereel's work, as exemplified most brilliantly in wordless novels such as *The Sun*, follows analogous lines as discussed above with Kafka. Deprez does not copy Masereel's carving and printing style but he shares similarities with his storytelling technique. At the level of isolated prints, the resemblance between Deprez and Masereel is unnoticeable. With his storytelling devices, though, the similarities become blatant, though not to the extent that Deprez's work is only a carbon copy of Masereel's work. The great innovation of Masereel was his reconciliation of the overall narrative as told in extended sequences while retaining the autonomy of each print. In Masereel's work, the single print was never just part of a larger action spread over various pages. This is customary in comics and graphic novels, where the action may occupy a set of successive panels, each panel highly dependent on the next panel in the sequence. In Masereel's work, the print always remained a fully independent narrative kernel because it represents an action that did not need to be linked with what had come before or what followed, in order

to achieve its own unique narrative identity.

Taking as his primary model Masereel's sequential art of independent images, while at the same time contesting his ideal of clarity by putting forward his own savage style, Deprez manages to produce works of narrative that can be labeled "second degree Masereel." Indeed, Deprez combines, as Masereel does, both the internal complexity of the image and its alignment within a series.

Hence the many precautions taken by Deprez, who struggles to keep the materiality of his prints as prominent as possible, by emphasizing the independence of each image and actively resisting the absorption of the non-narrative part by the narrative whole. Although each image makes a contribution to the overall story of the book, it also offers a wide range of visual details that the reader is invited to look at for themselves, instead of neglecting them as secondary elements with no use for the global narrative. An important role in this regard is played by the organization of the pages in *Le Château de Kafka*, which display throughout the book the same pattern: a horizontal split-screen (Fig 9) with two strongly interrelated and intertwined panels, whose paradoxical unity contrasts very strongly with the gaps between each of the pages.

Storytelling is not the ultimate aim of Olivier Deprez's work but it is one of its more exciting side-effects. Yet it is crucial to keep in mind that one should not disconnect the story and the visual display and that it is in this exciting conflict of these two features that resides the starting as well as the ending point of Deprez's skillful printmaking.

NOTES

¹ Olivier Deprez (olivier_deprez@tele2.fr) is one of the founders of the Belgian graphic artists collective Fréon, which merged some years ago with the French group Amok into Fremok <<http://www.fremok.org>>. Like other avant-garde artists of this Franco-Belgian New Wave, Deprez emphasizes traditional drawing techniques, which he reinvents in works that have a strong narrative and literary dimension. He has published one book-length graphic novel, *Le Château de Kafka* (Brussels: Fremok, 2003), which has been exhibited in 2005 at the Arts of the Book Center, Yale University. He is also the author of various critical and theoretical texts on the visual in literature, and a regular contributor to the journal *Formules*.

² Editor's note. Jan Baetens and Olivier Deprez have collaborated on two creative projects. They include *Construction d'une ligne TGV*, Paris, éd. *Maisonneuve & Larose*, 2003; and *Ecrire comme à Lisbonne*, 2005.

³ Editor's note. "Ligne claire, literally meaning the clear line, is a style of drawing pioneered by Hergé (creator of *Tintin*). The name was coined by Joost Swarte in 1977. It is a style of drawing which uses clear strong lines, strong colours and a combination of cartoonish characters against a realistic background. The use of shadows is sparse and all elements of a panel are delineated with clear black lines." <http://experts.about.com/e/l/li/Ligne_claire.htm>. [Accessed July 1, 2006].

⁴ For further details, see the trilingual (French, English, German) catalogue of an exhibit curated by Thierry Groensteen: *COULEUR DIRECTE* (Ausstellungen- Katalog zum 1. Internationalen Comic Salon Hamburg 27.05-30.05.1993), Thurn: Kunst der Comics, 1993.

⁵ Editor's note. "In *praesentia* vs. *absentia* signs. At the core of semiotic theory is the distinction between *praesentia* and *absentia*, provided by Saussure. Given a meaningful linguistic chunk—a word, a phrase, a morpheme, a sentence—which he called *sign*, such a sign could be *in praesentia* if it is considered as part of an actual text we are dealing with, while it could be *in absentia* if it is a relevant part of possible texts that can be associated to another *in praesentia* sign." <<http://ksi.cpsc.ucalgary.ca/KAW/KAW96/steve/meaning.html>>. [Accessed July 1, 2006].

⁶ A similar suspicion towards the danger of the artistic (and social) upgrading of popular forms is expressed by Charles Hatfield in his book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

⁷ Editor's note. "Ekphrasis, alternately spelled ecphrasis, is a term used to denote poetry or poetic writing concerning itself with the visual arts, artistic objects, and/or highly visual scenes." <<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~clark9/ekphrasis/definition.htm>>. [Accessed July 1, 2006].



Figure 10. Fritz Eichenberg, *St. Francis and the Fishes*, WPA 1935-36, artist proof. Wood engraving 7³/₄ x 6".

Fritz Eichenberg's Saint Francis: Showing Humanity's Duality

*"... the artist conjures out of a small square of wood a microcosm of life: an amalgam of joy and of suffering, of good and evil."*¹

—FRITZ EICHENBERG

In *The Wood and the Graver*, Fritz Eichenberg (1901-1990) relates that the association with wood in his life has been a strong one, almost a fatalistic one, since he discovered the artistic medium of wood engraving as an art student in Leipzig.

Raised in an open minded household, Eichenberg was exposed to Eastern philosophies. He later converted to Quakerism. He was a humanist and a pacifist, influenced early in life by bearing witness to the destruction of his country during World War I. A quiet man, he was passionate and uncompromising in his views which he expressed powerfully through his art. He felt that the strong desire to express himself through wood engraving connected him spiritually to the earth and, ultimately, to God.² This passion

BY **SARINA RODRIGUES WYANT**



Figure 11. Fritz Eichenberg, *Untitled* from "The Francis Book," p. 137. Wood engraving, 6 1/4" x 10".

shines brilliantly in many of his wood engravings, evidenced by the many books he illustrated throughout his career. Eichenberg's striking illustrations, full of humanistic expression, enhance the power of authors like Emily Bronte, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allen Poe, and others.

In 1933, Eichenberg immigrated to the United States from Germany. Although the United States was in the midst of the Depression, he relished the freedom of thought and artistic expression that life-abounding New York offered. He taught at The New School and had some work published in *The Nation*. It was the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists' program that ultimately provided the needed income for Eichenberg to work and feed his family during that period. Many of his engravings during this time were influenced by his surroundings and his travels. His portrayals of people in everyday life are rich and multifaceted.

And I, a new immigrant raised on the writings of Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, try to interpret their messages on wood in my own way combined with new impressions gained on trips through Latin America with a few of my favorite saints like Saint Francis thrown in for balance—or perhaps good luck!³

The image of St. Francis and his associated themes of peace and love became a recurring subject throughout his life. Eichenberg's philosophy might have come directly from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "When you love every creature you will understand the mystery of God in created things." It is not surprising that Eichenberg would identify with St. Francis, *Il Poverello*, the 13th century mystic (1181-1226) whose simple but tenacious message of God's love for all living creatures inspired the religious order of the Franciscans.

In his introduction to *The Wood and the Graver*, Alan Fern, Director of the National Portrait Gallery wrote:

Every print of Eichenberg's delivers its meaning instantly and with great impact at first glance at least

on a very basic level. But in each there is a reserve of hidden meaning, complex detail, composition and a remarkable use of the technique of printmaking that combine to ensure that beyond the immediate response the attentive viewer will be rewarded by longer acquaintance with these prints.⁴

As Eichenberg's book illustration flourished, he treasured the time he used to engrave images that held a special meaning for him. Small print runs from these blocks were pulled and sent to friends for holiday greetings and other special occasions. "Sending out my paper missives into the world...has remained a completely fulfilling almost mystical experience undiminished by the passage of time," wrote Eichenberg.⁵

I have chosen three images of St. Francis to exemplify Eichenberg's expressive "paper missives." I was intrigued by the spiritual affinity that Eichenberg, who was raised in a non religious environment from a German Jewish heritage, had for a Catholic hermit. Most of his engravings of St. Francis are the typical images of the saint preaching to the animals, and assuming a Christ-like pose. The first image, produced for the WPA in 1935-36, is entitled *St. Francis Preaches to the Fishes*.

In this print (**Fig. 10**) St. Francis is shown in a diving suit as he preaches the word of God to a watery congregation. Eichenberg's sense of whimsy and humor is evident and reflects his early career as a cartoonist of political satire in Germany. The congregation of sea creatures appears surprised and amused as they look attentively on the earnest saint. The reverence for his saintly status is evidenced by the halo surrounding his diving helmet. Light and dark contrast in this engraving to deliver the message of St. Francis: "Come into the light of God's love." The fishes move toward St. Francis from the darkness to the light. In the lower left-hand corner, a skull symbolizes the mortality of all living things. The skull is also associated with St. Francis, and other penitent saints. In this print, Eichenberg implies that St. Francis is willing to go and preach his message anywhere. In another print commissioned by the WPA called *Preaching to the Birds*, St. Francis is displayed in a hot air balloon preaching to a flock of birds.

The second print (**Fig. 11**) exemplifies St. Francis' unconditional love of all creatures, both deserving and undeserving. The anthropomorphized animals in this print are dressed in military clothing and weapons. Through this visual device, St. Francis bestows his unconditional blessing on all God's creatures, including humans who sometimes behave beastly. This type of imagery is used in many of Eichenberg's antiwar prints. The lamb, a symbol of the weak and innocent, is held in St. Francis's arm as he looks down accusingly at the sinister creatures that grovel at his feet. An eagle, a symbol of military power, and not a traditional dove, carries an olive branch. The eagle flies toward St. Francis with a look of eagerness in his offer: "Military might brings peace." The creatures gather around, kneeling in penitence, seeking not just redemption from Francis but his acceptance. The moon is darkened in the sky as St. Francis emerges from the light. His outstretched hand is placed on the head of the wolf. St. Francis looks haggard and sad. An owl, the symbol of wisdom, is perched on his left shoulder. It shares Francis' expression of fatigue and sadness. Seeking wisdom and preaching peace are both hard work. A crow sits on St. Francis' right shoulder. I wonder what he sings in the saint's ear. In this image I see the contrasts of hope and despair, good and evil. This untitled engraving was used to accompany a reprint of an article by journalist Anne O'Hare McCormick, "Fascism Takes Francis as Patron Saint; Ascetic Virtues of Little Poor Man of Assisi Are Highly Revered in Italy," first published in the *New York Times* in September, 1926 and reissued in *The Francis Book*. In her article, McCormick describes Mussolini's fu-

tile attempt to usurp St. Francis as a symbol for his "New Italy."⁶

Although illustrating the evil of another time, Eichenberg's engraving was produced in 1979, a year of tumultuous world events when United States citizens were held hostages in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini who declared the United States "The Great Satan." It was also the year Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Stigmata of St. Francis (**Fig. 12**) is one of Eichenberg's more striking prints. It was printed in 1973 in an edition of 50. St. Francis's hands are pierced by flowers, perhaps a play on the title *Fioretti Di Santo Francesco d'Ascesi*, which was a book of stories about St. Francis compiled and written in ca. 1250. A lightning bolt and the sun are in juxtaposition to each other. Lightning represents divine goodness. The sun is a symbol of hope and spirituality.⁷ The lightning bolt seems to pierce St. Francis from behind. Flames, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, not only surround him but also emanate from him. The earth at his feet seems scorched, devoid of vegetation even as grass and flowers are in the periphery. It is the facial expression of St. Francis that makes this print so arresting. St. Francis appears in ecstasy even as he bleeds from the wounds of the stigmata. His upturned face gazes up at the sun through the heavy lidded eyes of a man spiritually intoxicated—suffering, yet joyous.

Eichenberg defined life as "an amalgam of joy and of suffering, of good and evil" and wood is a powerful medium "for telling a story in images."⁸ Through his visual storytelling in the St. Francis engravings, Eichenberg expresses with grace and power the duality of our humanity.

NOTES

¹ Fritz Eichenberg, *The Wood and the Graver The Work of Fritz Eichenberg*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1977. p. 178.

² See his anthropomorphized "The Peaceable Tree" in which a tree proudly bears the graver's tool like a badge of honor. I ask: do you see a bit of Fritz in the profile of the tree?

³ Eichenberg, p. 23.

⁴ Eichenberg, p. 9.

⁵ Eichenberg, p. 13.

⁶ Roy M. Gasnick, O.F.M., *The Francis Book*. New York: Collier Books, 1980. p. 136-138.

⁷ It is interesting to note that both the sun and lightning symbols were usurped by the Nazi regime as a swastika and the symbol for the SS (Schutzstaffel), respectively.

⁸ Eichenberg, p. 13.



Figure 12. Fritz Eichenberg, *The Stigmata of St. Francis*, 1973, edition of 50. Wood engraving, 14" x 12"

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