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Review Essay

Reflections on The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock, British Museum, London; Djanogly Art Gallery, Nottingham; Brighton Museum and Art Gallery; Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, April 2008–December 2009

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It is tempting to regard the remarkable success of this exhibition of works from the British Museum's American prints collection, as it toured England, as a response to the demise of the Bush Administration and the election of Barack Obama. However, George W. Bush was in the White House throughout the period when these prints were on display at the British Museum from April to September 2008.

Next to Tutankhamen in 1972, with over a million visitors, and the Terracotta Warriors in 2007–8 with 850,000, The American Scene is logged as the third most popular British Museum exhibition with 413,000 viewers. The continuing success, at the University of Nottingham's Djanogly Art Gallery, the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, and, finally, the Whitworth Art Gallery of Manchester University at the end of 2009 turned The American Scene into a considerable achievement, not least because it is an exhibition of prints.

Blockbuster shows, such as those I have instanced, or the regular exhibitions of Monets or Abstract Expressionists are invariably huge and feature very large objects and paintings. But The American Scene is an exhibition of prints, and, while there

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are a few exceptions, James McNeil Whistler's propositions in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890) hold, at least until the period of Pop Art:

> II. That the space to be covered should always be in proper relation to the means used for covering it.
> III. That in etching, the means used, or instrument employed, being the finest possible point, the space to be covered should be small in proportion …
> V. That the huge plate, therefore, is an offence.[1]

Prints that are inscribed do tend to be modest and intricate, and even when the style changes, as it does over the years covered by this exhibition, prints tend to remain small and appropriate to the process used. Perhaps, with all the excess around (including in the art world), we have become more discriminating and attentive, and, in large numbers, have been taken by the detail in many of the prints on show, and by the austere display in all four of the exhibition venues. A respect for craft and for process is encouraged by this exhibition and by the authoritative catalogue by Stephen Coppel, the curator of the modern collection of prints and drawings at the British Museum.[2]

Leonard Pytlak's *Uptown* of 1939 (see Figure 1) highlights the medium. In the top left-hand corner and using a lithographic crayon, Pytlak drew the "HOTEL" sign the right way round, in order to print it in mirror writing so that we then see it from the back. Similarly, the first three letters of a word in the window, bottom right, would have been drawn in mirror writing in order that they could be read the right way round, to guide the shopper successfully towards the meat or whatever was being sold.

Just to labour the point, some prints of New York City by Joseph Pennell, an American artist a little too early to have figured in the themes of this exhibition, would be a confusing guide to Lower Manhattan, the area depicted, because they are the wrong way round, with buildings on the opposite side of the street. In an effort to follow his great hero, Whistler, and also the Impressionists, Pennell took his prepared plate with him and etched on the streets of New York City. His plates were then inked back in his studio ready for printing – and the results were back to front. This peculiarity of prints is really quite logical and is a reminder that representation (of an uptown Manhattan scene, in the case of Leonard Pytlak) and reproduction are intimately associated in a print, and that this association or economy, encompassing style, form, reproduction and, in some instances, meaning as well, varies in degree from that in other visual media.

Thinking back to the welcome speech given by Anthony Gormley at the British Museum opening of the American Prints exhibition, his phrase "the trace of the moment" asserts a relationship between prints and paintings. Using the names of the artists highlighted in the subtitle of this exhibition, this would be the moment that Edward Hopper applied that shocking off-white oil paint to represent the old couple's skin in his painting *Hotel by a Railroad*, or, more dramatically, when Jackson

[1] James McNeil Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (Project Gutenberg, 2008), 30, http://www.gutenberg.net/dirs/2/4/6/5/24650/24650-h.zip.

[2] Stephen Coppel, with Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock* (London: British Museum Press, 2008). Online collection at www.britishmuseum.org.

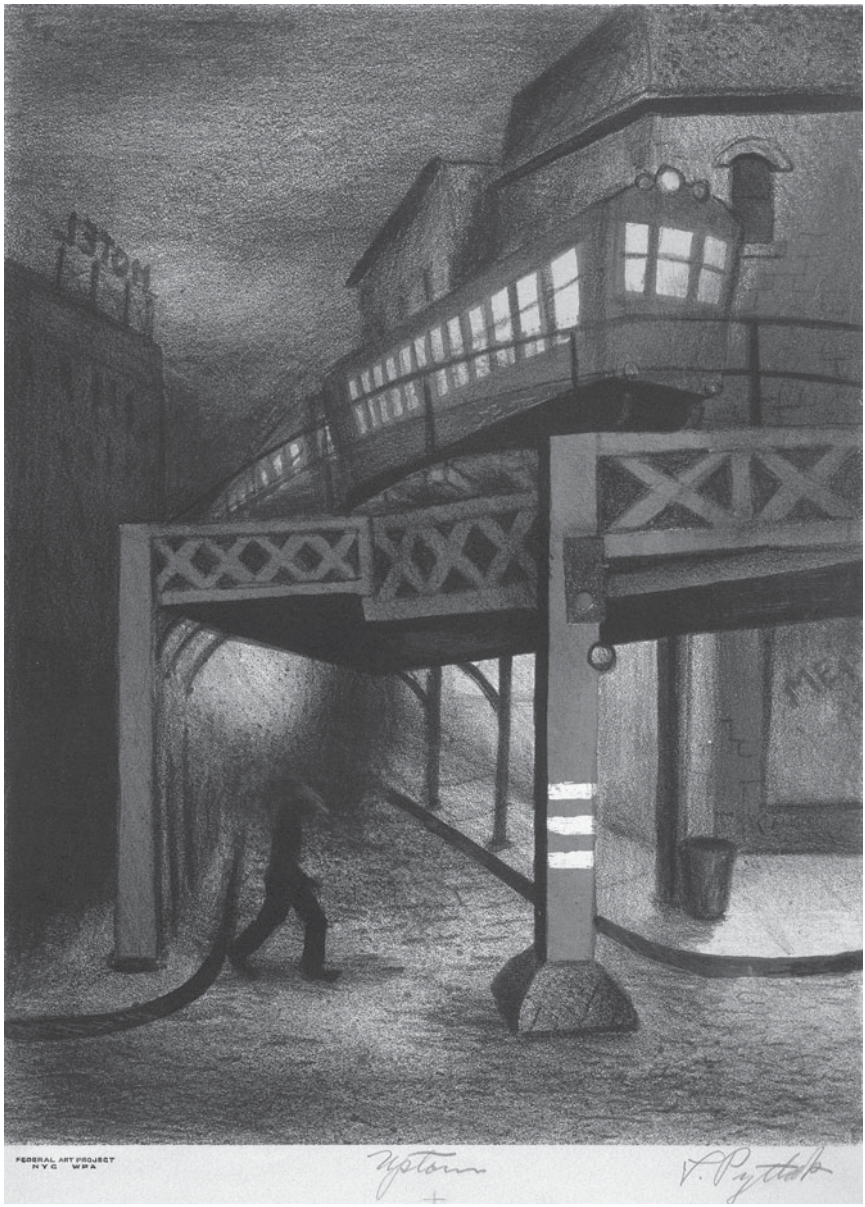

Figure 1. Leonard Pytlak, *Uptown* (colour lithograph, 331 × 248 mm, 1939). All reproductions in this article are copyright Trustees of the British Museum.

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Pollock splashed and dripped paint onto a canvas on the floor of his garage in Long Island. In prints, however, the "the trace of the moment" is apparent not in opaque surfaces or encrusted marks, but, rather, in the effects of the printing process: from the action of the engraving tool on a plate, through the subsequent wash and cleaning up of the ink or whatever printing process is used or the use of wax relief techniques, or the techniques that produced drypoints, mezzotints, lithographs and so on.

The point of this printing process – of this pointed technology, as it is in many cases – is, of course, to enable reproduction, and therefore to increase accessibility and availability. To that extent, while a print has something of "the trace of the moment," a print also anticipates another common designation, the notion of a democratic art. This quality is more commonly attributed to photography, the visual form that is located at the other end of the spectrum from painting on which prints may be conveniently located. But prints, too, have a democratic trajectory built into them, and the captions make one aware that there are other prints of the prints, elsewhere in the world; and in the case of prints from the Depression era of the 1930s which feature strongly in the exhibition, those locations often had a deliberate political significance. Prints were exhibited in post offices, in workplaces and in halls to accompany political protests. Their meanings could change when exhibited in places of work or as part of a protest event, an insight memorably explored in John Berger's book and television series of the early 1970s, *Ways of Seeing*.

Prints, then, both exemplify and resist the now familiar phrase, from Walter Benjamin, "the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction." Once reproductions of famous paintings could be made, then something of the aura of the original is lost; on the other hand, prints could enter into relationships with their surroundings, and the exhibition catalogue is good on this aspect of prints. Yet prints are usually not indefinitely reproducible. Print reproduction, while often quite industrial (involving acids, metals, presses and so on), stops short of being a mass-produced art, suggesting a tension between mass reproduction and the idea of a democratic art. Prints retain an individuality, even a craft ethos, and usually on a small and intimate scale. To position prints more precisely still, the idea of the "trace of the moment" can be found in photography as well. But although there is a technological process in photography that continues after the photograph is taken, the "moment" is, above all, the moment when the photograph was taken. Photography captures that moment in a most uncanny way – as we sometimes painfully know from a family photograph of someone who has since died or disappeared from our lives or, more routinely, has grown up. Prints lack that shock of recognition and distance, though there are compensations. Prints have much more to do with the process, as Leonard Pytlak's *Uptown* usefully reminds us. The white marks, the catalogue informs us, were scratched by the artist in the specialist paint with a razor blade.[3]

In *Connoisseurs of Prints* (1905) (see Figure 2) John Sloan marks out the more democratic trajectory of a print in social terms by, metaphorically, taking prints off the wall of an exhibition in the titular theme of the work. He pokes fun at those

[3] Ibid., 68.

Figure 2. John Sloan, *Connoisseurs of Prints* (etching, 127 × 176 mm, 1905).

who seek to corral the medium within the sphere of a social elite. Sloan uses a freewheeling style of etching, common also in many of his drawings for the radical magazine *The Masses*, to draw attention to the spectators and away from the prints on the wall of the gallery. We cannot make out much in those prints but might reasonably assume that they are portraits or representations of buildings and landscapes; that is, static scenes, quite different from the social busy-ness in the gallery.

In Sloan and his Ashcan contemporaries the democratic ethos is also evident in depictions of everyday life in New York City. George Bellows's *A Stag at Sharkey's* is an exhibition of quite brutal boxing, but, as in the Sloan print of art connoisseurs, Bellows is also interested in the spectators, and in using a freewheeling style to catch movement inside and outside the ring. Interestingly, the common print-to-painting sequence is reversed. Bellows's earlier, very successful oil painting led him to capitalize on it and engage with the market. He also made some small changes to the later print. On the assumption that he did not simply forget to include the nearside ropes of the ring, the print brings the even more active crowd even more into the action than in the painting, suggesting a breakdown of the hierarchy between the object and the audience that is analogous to the relationship between a reproducible print and those who look at it.

An important connection between Sloan's prints and paintings is that he, like most of the Ashcan artists, was a newspaper reporter. He knew city locations: inside, for example, Wallace's bar in Greenwich Village in *Hell Hole* (1917); and outside, in *Roofs, Summer Night* (1906). He, and many of the artists in the first half of the

exhibition, sketched in those locations, before working up sketches into paintings or prints. The activity of reporting, through note-taking and sketching, is one way to appreciate what is going on in many prints. The crosshatching that we can see in almost any Sloan print, but also in Peggy Bacon's *Lunch Room at the League* (1918), Bellows's *Business Men's Bath* (1923), and all four of Edward Hopper's prints, is a speedy, sketchy form of representation. Whereas an oil painting tends to favour colour and mass, an etching, such as Hopper's *East Side Interior – New York* (1922), favours an intricate web of detail, draughtsmanship and control of line. To etch is only a stage further on from drawing, and drawing is a more purposeful activity than mere doodling, allowing artists to start shaping space. And not just artists, in the strict sense of the word. If newspaper reporting and the print medium intersect in some circumstances, so, too, does printing overlap with the work of archaeologists, architects and architectural renderers, and designers, and even with the diagrammatic planning of activities that we all do. The drawing that is so important to printmaking can slide into diagrams and back again.

For the mid- to late nineteenth-century printmakers who preceded those exhibited in The American Scene, the arrival and popularity of photography and even of lithographic printing, with its potential for mass production of images, took on the mythology of the Fall into a modern world of mechanized reproduction. "The line of beauty" (a phrase from William Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753), was only to be found in its true state in intaglio engraving, in the line that the craftsman–artist engraved in a copper plate to follow the form of an object, person or scene. A survival of this largely pre-twentieth-century conviction, that following a line, rather than seeing an all-over picture or composition, informs many of the prints in the exhibition, especially in the first chronological half, including Sloan's *Hell Hole*, which was directly influenced by Hogarth. It is quite possible to find oneself in the position of the man with the magnifying glass in Sloan's *Connoisseurs of Prints*, closely inspecting the lines that either bring detail to us, sometimes a detail that would be easy to overlook, or, as often as not, carefully following the lines that outline the scene.

However, if the artist–printmaker's dedication to the engraved line may be discerned in some of the prints on view, but with a perceptible shift towards more rapid sketching, there is none of the ethos of a lost world, or the attachment between intaglio engraving and beauty that seems to have characterized much printmaking before the onset of a fully urban age. The world depicted in Sloan's *Hell Hole* or Bellows's *A Stag at Sharkey's* or Edward Hopper's 1918 etching *Night on the El Train* might not be attractive, and might not have the approval of the artist, but it is too fascinating, even appalling, to be overlooked, either by a nostalgic gaze or by an unwillingness to embrace the voyeurism that runs through so many of the more intimate representations.

This exhibition of prints insistently depicts the social, political and everyday life of "the American scene," and, on this count, at least, prints gravitate towards the photographic end of the spectrum of representation: a speedier response than painting, an on-the-spotness (in some forms of print, at least), and an affinity for changes in the immediate environment, and for passing scenes, such as the establishment in Reginald Marsh's *Tattoo-Shave-Haircut* (1932), where one could as easily end up with a tattoo as a haircut, or the anonymous, but now unforgettable, rooftop

in Martin Lewis's *Little Penthouse* (1931). In *Little Penthouse* – and this is common in many of the prints – Lewis brings together a mundane scene and a famous one. Without insisting on the documentary character of the print medium, he introduces a historical reference. Only twenty years ago, the skyline in *Little Penthouse* would not have been so startling, both because certain skyscrapers had not been built and because it could not have been lit up quite so spectacularly. In Leonard Pitlak's *Uptown*, progress is referenced in the near-obsolescence of the train. Thirty to forty years earlier, around the turn of the century, the elevated railroad would have been the height of urban transportation, but, at the end of the Great Depression, the El train is almost an American version of the Reverend Audrey's trains in the Thomas the Tank Engine series, as British viewers of a certain generation might see it.

The phrase in the title of the exhibition, "the American scene," is usually taken back to the novelist Henry James, who, in 1904, at the time of the first of the prints in this exhibition, paid a visit to the United States. It was his first visit for twenty years, since, indeed, he had decided that he could never be a novelist in a society that had so little society. James was shocked when he came back at the sheer urban-ness of New York, in particular, and at the pace of change. In *The American Scene*, published in 1907, he grumbles that during the three weeks between arriving in New York from Europe and then coming back after a tour to other regions, his old house in Washington Square had been pulled down and a skyscraper was on its way up, amputating him – as he famously put it – of half his history. The pulling down and building up of cities that New York exemplifies is the historical backdrop to many of the prints, except that, often, the backdrop comes to the foreground. By the early twentieth century and his visit to the United States, James was well into what is called his late style, and his social criticism of rural and urban sights is at the other extreme from the language of representational prints, at least. The artist–printmakers took their sketching/etching way of working and thinking around the well-known and less well-known sights of the United States, in the process creating some truly memorable images.[4]

As the viewer walks from the 1900s to the 1960s, the familiar development from realism to modernism, notably abstract modernism, unfolds, and with strong hints at what is to follow. Abstract modernism is very strongly represented, particularly near the end of the exhibition. In the print form, as in painting, where a work might be placed in that art-historical story can be roughly gauged by the degree to which it comes to the surface. Of course, except for the most literal-minded, this is a matter of technique, because all of the imprints are made as flat a surface as a painting and a photograph.

Martin Lewis's *Shadow Magic* of 1931 (see Figure 3) brings together aspects of the Realist and modernist traditions in its urban location, a possible narrative, the play of light, and an intriguing use of print technology, in this case drypoint. The result is abstraction vying with representation, albeit of an anonymous scene. The blurred cross-hatching style on the sides of the gasometer is part of the artist's method and tends towards abstraction, except that this micro-design is exaggerated for realist

[4] In its various locations, the exhibition benefited from accompanying lectures by American studies specialists from a number of universities, among them Birmingham, Central Lancashire, King's College, Leicester, Manchester, Nottingham and Sussex.

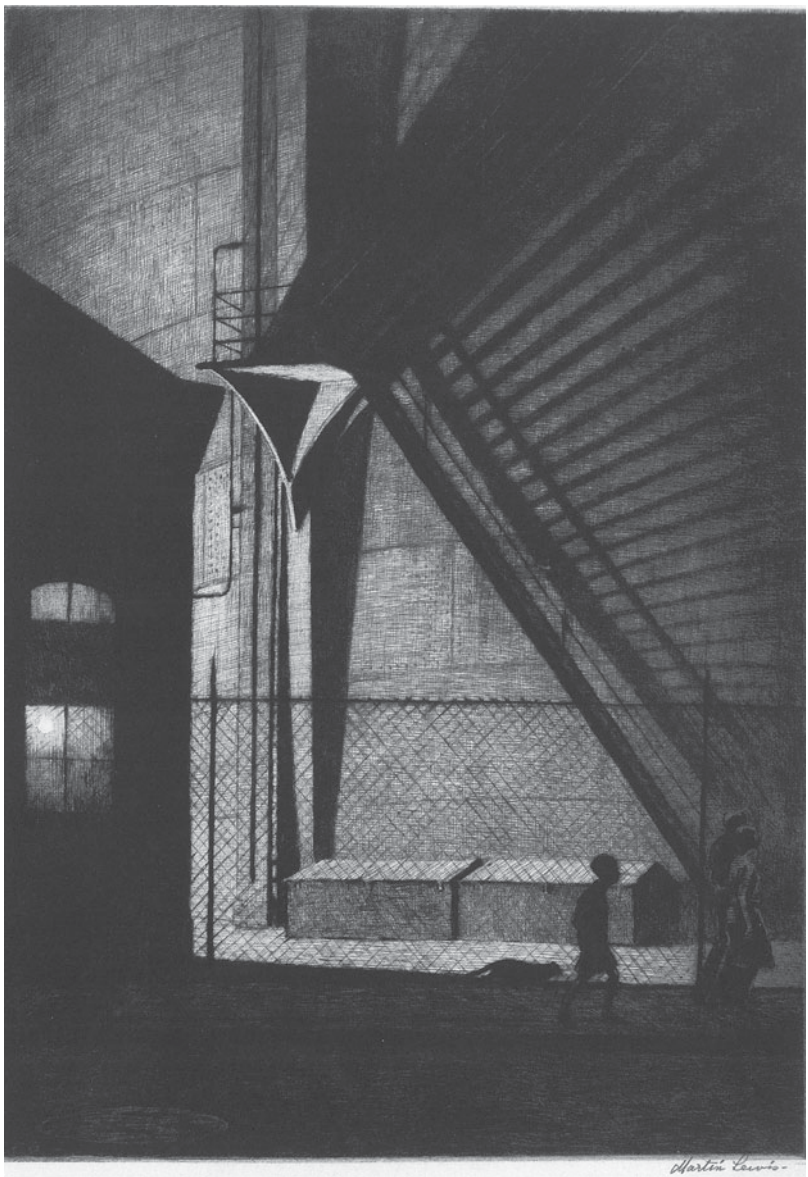

Figure 3. Martin Lewis, *Shadow Magic* (drypoint, 342 × 240 mm, 1939).

purposes in the chain-linked fencing. Then, there are the shadowy figures. They might be relegated to a corner of the image, but they are yet recognizable, even individualized in near-silhouette.

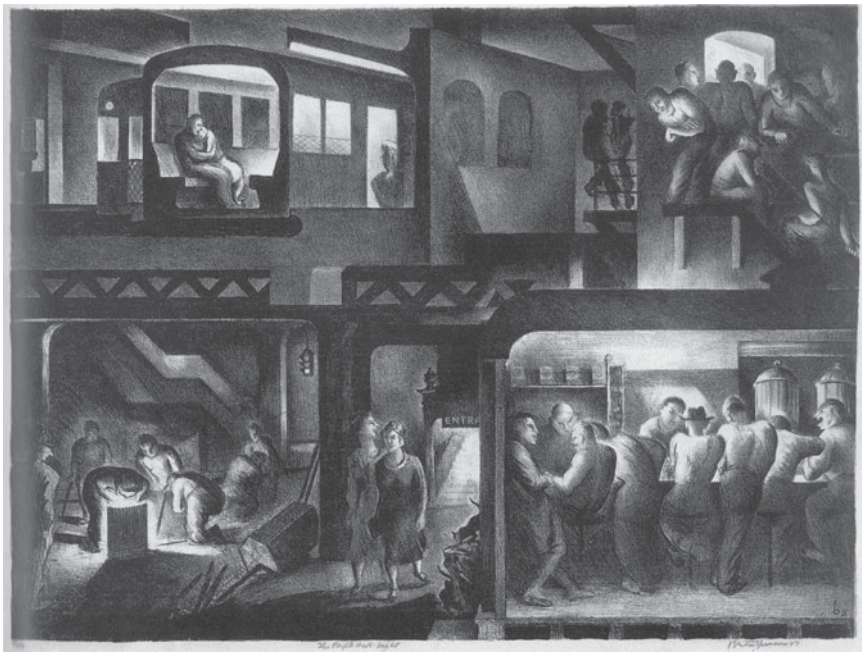

Figure 4. Benton Spruance, *The People Work: Night* (lithograph, 347 × 480 mm, 1937).

Benton Spruance, like many artists during the Depression, was on the left, and he continued his political engagement well into the 1950s. The style of *The People Work* (1937) (see Figure 4) is a form of social, though not really Socialist, Realism, but, most strikingly, he offers us a cross-section. The cross-section view is quite common in prints from a period when cities had been developed enough infrastructurally to be interesting: they had subways, sewers, and tunnels. Moreover, it was a period when the visual representations of large infrastructural projects, such as the New York Subway (the first line was built in 1904), had gone well beyond the planning stages, when maps and diagrams had to be functional, to a period when some of the drafting techniques could be imaginatively adapted for other purposes. There is a persistent debate in architecture departments and practices about the importance of drawing; that is, the drawing of cross-sections of a building that are literally invisible, compared with computer-generated images that create three-dimensional spaces that are yet to exist in built form but have coordinates that can be recognized. *The People Work* is very much of the period before computer-generated images, and maximizes the insights that come with a sight that could not be seen. There are grand, full-scale paintings of such sights, of course: visions of hell in mediaeval European art (and beyond) squeeze out the maximum fear and horror from the cross-section view. But Spruance's lithograph retains its association with the architectural section, being both impossible and recognizable. The artist, here, cuts away the front of a Subway train, the walls of the Subway and so on, to produce panels.

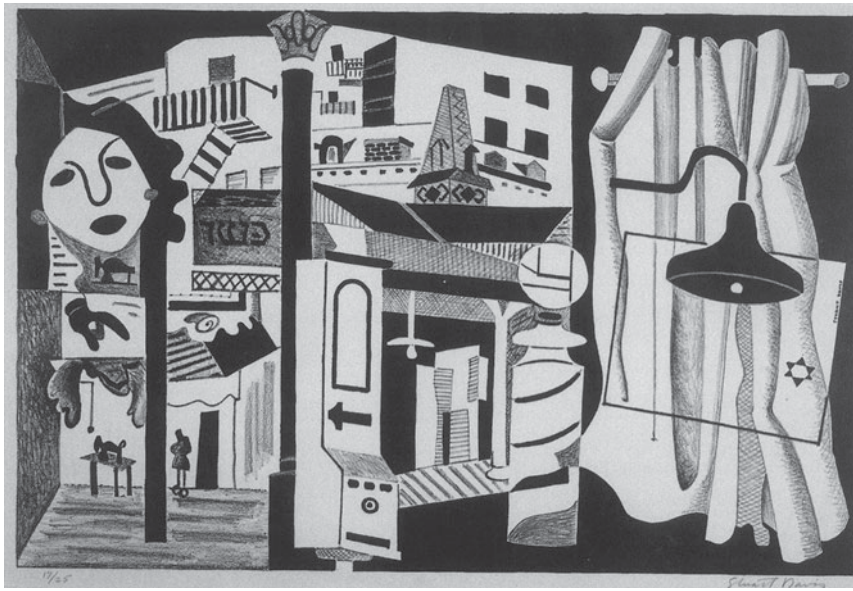

Figure 5. Stuart Davis, *Sixth Avenue El* (lithograph, 302 × 456 mm, 1931).

And the panels allow this artist to tell human stories. They help him to populate a hostile environment. As in Martin Lewis's work, the people remain individualized – even the indistinct couple in the central top panel whose relationship would not be seen in this larger, infrastructural context without this dual experiment in impossible seeing and abstraction.

In Stuart Davis's *Sixth Avenue El* (1931) (see Figure 5) the surface has become a space in which to juxtapose images that have a life outside of the "real" location specified by the stanchions of the Sixth Avenue elevated railroad. Objects are also out of scale: a lamp, a match, a woman's face, more like a mask. And yet Stuart Davis does not entitle his print *Untitled*, the title given to so many later modernist prints, as well as paintings, and he does not abandon location, as Hananiah Harari does in *City Signs*, a colour screenprint of 1938. Davis's are images and signs that are related in intriguing but not representational ways to a location in New York City, but all the activity has come to the surface, which, in turn, is expanded beyond that space under the El.

Interestingly, the elements to gravitate towards the surface in Howard Cook's *Times Square Sector*, from the year before, are the signs. For all the cubist angularity in Cook's etching, there is still depth, but perspective simply gives up with the word "TIMES". Even more than the other, incomplete word ("…IPPETT"), the word "TIMES" inhabits an impossible representational space, and has an impact upon the way that the surrounding buildings occupy space.

The details so central to pre-1900 prints, which remain important to artists such as Sloan, Bellows and Hopper, give way to pattern. Accordingly, abstraction comes to dominate the print scene, as well as the wider art scene, after the Second World

Figure 6. Thomas Hart Benton, *The Race* (lithograph, 227 × 334 mm, 1942).

War, and the exhibition gives particular weight to prints by Jackson Pollock, in two sections, "S. W. Hayter and Atelier 17 in New York" (four prints), and "Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism" (one print). Yet the first Pollock appears in the section of the exhibition devoted to Regionalism. His lithograph, *Stacking Hay* (c.1935–36), is probably the only truly awful (though still interesting) print in the exhibition. It bears many of the marks of 1930s Regionalism: figurative but stylized, even sentimental in its attachment to the land and the folk, as the economic system crashed in far-off cities. It is difficult to see, in this print, the Jackson Pollock who came to symbolize the triumph of American abstract modernism after the Second World War. Yet Abstract Expressionism (in all its variations and notwithstanding contextual, Cold War, theses) arose in part out of internal developments, evident in the way that images such as this one by Pollock became more and more abstract, less and less figurative.

Pollock's mentor, Thomas Hart Benton, sits far more comfortably in the Regionalism section, but his lithograph, *The Race*, exemplifies the claim that while abstraction cannot but provoke an interpretation, Realism includes elements of abstraction (see Figure 6). Benton hated modernism and led a reaction against the urban modernism that is well represented in this exhibition. In this image, however, along with the ostensible subject of a symbolic race between the horse and the engine, the swirling shapes draw our attention. These swirls are not so far from being abstract, even as we recognize in the swirls the engine's smoke, the clouds and the haystack. And in the surface of the pond, figurative art has, indeed, become abstract art. Actually, the unexpected link between the 1930s – supposedly a period

when Realism made a comeback under the influence of the economic Depression – and the postwar period of late modernism is better made by doing what this exhibition encourages, and moving to one side of the usual art-historical stories. Shelby Shackelford's wax relief of 1936, *Rust Cotton Picker Comes to the South* is a fine instance of the coming together of modernist influences and social critique, and while that is something one could argue of some paintings, her use of wax in this example, and soot in others, introduces a domestic, do-it-yourself, trying-out, feel to the works.

The closing sections of the exhibition demonstrate the contribution that prints made to the period of Abstract Expressionism. Sculptor David Smith's *Fishdocks* (1952) is representational in outline – a trawler or some other kind of fishing boat – with a frame of waves and clouds, yet it is geometric within, even to the point of some Mondrian-like colour additions. However, the sheer scale of Abstract Expressionism and offshoots and reactions to it did not leave much of a role for what are mostly small prints. Even though Pollock's prints and paintings are full of lines, these are lines without limits which carry the burden not of representation but of composition and emotional expression. The careful, pure etched line offered little to activity on the new scale of Abstract Expressionism or, as some of it was called, "action painting." Where printing, as a process, did make a significant contribution to abstraction is in the tinkering and experimenting that has always been an aspect or, sometimes, a by-product of the printing process. The earlier abstractions, such as *Composition No. 1* (1930 or 1939), a colour woodcut on oriental laid paper by Grace Martin Taylor, and the mid-century *Combo*, a colour screenprint by James McConnell, are notable instances. Incidentally, the influence of music upon works such as McConnell's *Combo*, Leonard Nelson's *Rimba-Rimba (Red)* (1946), and Edward Landon's *Counterpoint* (1942) is a rich area for abstraction's relationship with the print medium that is rather neglected as a consequence of the exhibition's overall adherence to the standard art-historical categories. The Harlem Renaissance, for instance, is absent as an influence on the musical composition of American prints, part of the overall absence of African American prints, other than Dox Thrash's *Surface Mining* (c. 1939).

The colour screenprint, such as *Combo*, and Robert Gwathmey's *The Hitchhiker* (1937) is the other sphere in which a form of modernism and the print tradition have been productively associated (see Figure 7). Gwathmey's print looks beyond the chronological limit of the exhibition to Andy Warhol, who has a striking relationship with the print medium. The posters, which make up the backdrop to the figure of the hitchhiker, highlight the consumer affluence that is beyond him, and the man seated or slumped at the roadside. This is a Depression-era scene, but in Warhol's work of the 1960s and beyond the large poster images which are in the background in this print take over the whole of the print, and get larger or are multiplied: a tin of Campbell's Soup, and then tins of Campbell's Soups; many Marilyn Monroes; many Chairman Maos. Warhol's studio in New York, the Factory, signalled that the craft dimension of printing had become exaggeratedly industrialized. As that happenned and as the prints got bigger or were multiplied, prints took on a blank dimension, a characteristic that is missing in most of the prints in this exhibition, even including non-representational, abstract prints. It is not necessary to peer closely at a Warhol print, as the man with the magnifying glass is depicted doing in John Sloan's

Figure 7. Robert Gwathmey, *The Hitchhiker* (colour screenprint, 428 × 332 mm, 1937).

Connoisseurs of Prints. The point of a Warhol print is that it is already in one's face and, as with movie close-ups filling the screen, there is greater blankness, not greater engagement. But Warhol remains elusive and marks a watershed. He can be seen either as bringing printing techniques fully into the mainstream of art as an aspect of mass production, including the reproduction of art as a commodity; or as making art aware that printing has always been there, part of the laboratory of art, and likely to reassert itself, just when art threatens to become too commodified.