

MAX ARTHUR COHN'S SERIGRAPHS AND THE PROGRESSIVE
LEGACY OF THE NEW DEAL

by

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A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in Art History

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2024

ABSTRACT

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2024
Under the Supervision of Professor K. L. H. Wells

Max Arthur Cohn (American, b. England 1903-1998) was among the first artists to create “serigraphs,” a type of silkscreen print that gained popularity in the 1940s in New York City. Cohn was a founding member of the Silk Screen Group which later became the National Serigraph Society. This thesis contextualizes Cohn’s serigraphs within the history of the medium’s development and the broader history of mid-twentieth century American art. I analyze how Cohn’s serigraphs made for demonstration democratized access to the medium, Cohn’s experimentation in serigraphy expressed the diversity of style encouraged by Popular Front, and Cohn’s serigraph prints and greeting cards were supported by interior designers who became a crucial market for serigraphs. Serigraphs were shaped by the progressive ideals of interwar America and are a key legacy of the New Deal Federal Arts Projects. Serigraphy was a medium ideal for individual expression with collective origins and a public audience.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAC	American Artists Congress
FAP	Federal Arts Project
NSS	National Serigraph Society
PWAP	Public Works of Art Project
WPA	Works Project Administration

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My approach to this research was informed by my background as a studio artist. I am interested in the history of art as a profession in the United States. During this project, I was able to immerse myself in an underrepresented yet relatively well documented area of art history. I enjoyed learning about the innovative artists who developed serigraphy in community with one another with the goal of bringing artwork into more homes. It has been validating to learn not only about widespread government support of the arts, but also that the artists themselves had a lot of autonomy in organizing and securing the funding for the Federal Arts Projects.

The Art History faculty and staff have been incredibly supportive and attentive throughout my time at UWM. I am forever grateful for the opportunities for growth I was given by the Art History Department through a Teaching Assistantship and the Mathis Gallery Teaching Assistantship. This research was made possible by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate School and the Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship. With AOP support, I was able to present at SECAC 2023 where I received feedback on an early version of this project. I am a grateful recipient of the Jeffrey R. Hayes Graduate Research Award. This funding allowed me to travel to conduct crucial archival research and object-based research within multiple collections. I wish to thank all the librarians and archivists that helped me access primary resources including Marisa Bourgoïn at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Caitlin Bague at the National Gallery of Art, and the Reference Staff of the New York Public Library Print Collection.

One of the unique pleasures of this project has been the wonderful opportunity to meet Jane Cohn Waldbaum whose willingness to offer insight has greatly enriched my understanding of the material. Jane, thank you for being such a generous reference for me. The collection of

work that Jane and her husband, Steven L. Morse, have given to the UWM Art Collection presents innumerable opportunities for future student research and I am incredible grateful to be granted the opportunity to work from it.

I thank Leigh Mahlik for helping me access records and artwork held in the UWM Art Collection, and for being an excellent mentor and advocate. I also wish to thank my second reader, Professor Sarah Schaefer, for constructive feedback and incredible thoughtfulness. I am immensely grateful to Kay Wells for being my primary adviser. Thank you for all of the time and excellent advice you have given to me over the course of my research. You have kept me focused during this iterative and multidirectional project. Through your encouragement, I was able to develop my argument in a way that is true to my perceptions and meaningful to the wider landscape of American art history. Thank you for everything you have done to support me as a scholar and professional.

I dedicate this project to Cas, Maya, Quin, and Cerulean who have always believed in me, and to Jacob who moved across the country with me and has supported me through the highs and lows of completing my degree.

INTRODUCTION

Max Arthur Cohn (American, b. England 1903-1998)¹ was among the first artists to create “serigraphs,” a type of silkscreen print that gained popularity in the 1940s in New York City. I contextualize Cohn’s serigraphs within the history of the medium’s development which began in the 1930s within the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Poster Division and later the WPA Graphic Arts Division. I trace the rise of serigraphy in the 1940s through its peak popularity in the 1950s and relate the works created in both the interwar and post-war period to the broader history American art. I analyze how Cohn’s serigraphs made for demonstration democratized access to the medium, Cohn’s experimentation in serigraphy expressed the diversity of style encouraged by Popular Front, and Cohn’s serigraph prints and greeting cards were supported by interior designers who became a crucial market for serigraphs. I argue that serigraphs are best understood as a legacy of the WPA. The crystallization of the progressive ideals of bringing artwork into the homes of everyday people and the conceptualization of American artists as laborers motivated artists coming out of the WPA to take on entrepreneurial roles and democratize access to their artwork. Serigraph artists achieved this through engaging directly with the growing market for American art in the 1940s and 1950s. Serigraphy was a medium ideal for individual expression with collective origins and a public audience.

Max Arthur Cohn was an American painter and lesser-known pioneer of serigraphy. Although Cohn had a prolific painting career, relatively little has been published about his work.²

¹ Max Arthur Cohn was born in England in 1903 and immigrated to the United States in 1905. Jane Cohn Waldbaum, “Max Arthur Cohn: Biographical Information,” updated 2017, Max Arthur Cohn, Curatorial Records, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

² No monographs or catalog raisonné exist but Cohn and his works have been documented in a variety of formats. For instance: Peter Hastings Falk, “Max Arthur Cohn: Pioneer of the Screenprint,” *Journal of the Print World* vol. 11, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 14-16.; *The Art of Max Arthur Cohn*, directed by Adam Shanker, narrated by Peter Collins, (New York: Best Shot Video, Inc., ca. 1990-1999), VHS, 29 min.; Kenneth

Cohn is perhaps best known for demonstrating the silkscreen printing technique to Andy Warhol.³ This connection has sometimes been overemphasized and should not be misconstrued as a significant student-teacher relationship. Andy Warhol worked for I. Miller Shoes, one of the clients of Cohn's Graphic Art Studios. Warhol likely went to Cohn's studio to pick up the printed shoe boxes he had designed and watched Cohn complete the job.⁴ Cohn did later make a gouache painting (fig. 1) on the back of one of a piece of board printed with a design for I. Miller (fig. 2). Cohn was in the first generation of artisans to learn the commercial silkscreen printing trade at a summer job when he was seventeen. Shortly after, Cohn moved to New York City where he joined the Art Students League. Cohn worked for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and participated in the Artists' Coordination Committee of the Art Students League which influenced the creation of the Federal Arts Projects (FAP).⁵ Cohn was later an easel painter in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) from 1936 to 1939. Curators and art historians have often focused on this period of his work; however, Cohn had a long career beyond the end of these projects. The successful careers of artists who participated in relief work can be considered a part of the legacy of the WPA.

The medium of serigraphy was incubated primarily in the WPA Poster Project in New York City, but it rose to prominence at the end of these projects when a group of artists who met through

Bendiner, *Max Arthur Cohn: Art of the 1930's* (Milwaukee, WI: UWM Art Museum, 1989), 1-8.; Francis V. O'Connor, *The WPA Era: Urban Views & Visions* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1992).; Stephen Coppel and Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock* (London: The British Museum Press, 2008).; Ann Prentice Wagner, *1934: A New Deal for Artists* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2009).

³ "Max Arthur Cohn," Artists, Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/max-arthur-cohn-935>.

⁴ Jane Cohn Waldbaum, Correspondence to *New York Times*, *Obituary News*, March 25, 1998, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 1, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁵ Max Arthur Cohn, Letter to Kenneth Bendiner, April 26, 1988, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 22, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

the WPA formed The National Serigraph Society (NSS), an artist's collective to develop the medium and educate others about its potential. Cohn was a founding member of the Silk Screen Group which became the National Serigraph Society, and he co-authored a handbook with J.I. Biegelesen that taught artists how to create color screen prints in their studios. Cohn also had his own silkscreen printing company, Graphic Art Studios, until 1962 when he began to focus solely on painting.

Cohn painted continuously through the next three decades, and in 1989 Kenneth Bendiner curated an exhibition of Cohn's artwork from the 1930s at the UWM Art Museum.⁶ During the course of this exhibition, Cohn gifted several works to the UWM Art Collection, many of them serigraphs. Max Arthur Cohn's daughter, Jane Cohn Waldbaum, is Professor Emerita of Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). She and her husband, Steven L. Morse, recently donated a large collection of Max Arthur Cohn's artwork and manuscript material to the UWM Art Collection. As a student at UWM, I have been granted the opportunity to work directly with this under-researched collection.

Visual analysis of serigraphs has frequently been limited to a discussion of examples that serve as a pre-history for Pop Art or examples that display the imitative property of the medium through "painterly" effects. Cohn's serigraphs are a unique expression aligned with his overall practice and individual style. I argue that the appearance of serigraphs can be better understood through recognizing the progressive motivations artists had for creating them. The artists that made serigraphs were invested in growing the audience for American art beyond the elite. The idealization of the democratic potentials inherent in the medium of serigraphy is a theme present

⁶ The UWM Art Museum was the predecessor to the Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery which manages the UWM Art Collection.

in many of the historical accounts of serigraphy.⁷ The connection to democratic ideals can be seen in serigraphy's easily accessible components, serigraphy's connection to mass media as an easily distributed print media, serigraphy's wide range of subject matter and styles, and the entrepreneurial spirit embedded in the collectively owned Serigraph Galleries. This theme of democratic ideals has not been explored in relationship to the aesthetic properties of serigraphs. I argue that ideals of democracy and accessibility shaped every aspect of the serigraph medium.

I use Cohn's serigraphs as an example of one artists' engagement with the medium, and I contextualize these works within the known history of serigraphy and the broader history of mid-century American art. I focus my analysis on three areas: Cohn's demonstration serigraphs, the relationship between Cohn's serigraphs and paintings, and the reception of Cohn's serigraphs in a decorative art context. In the first section, I provide an overview of the historiography of serigraphs. In the second section, I place Cohn's demonstration serigraphs in context of both skill-sharing within the FAP and the National Serigraph Society, as well as the publication of a technical handbooks aimed at a national audience of artists. In the third section, I discuss the relationship between Cohn's paintings and serigraphs and how his unique use of the medium is indicative of the wider diversity of style and subject matter found in serigraphs exhibited by the National Serigraph Society. This diversity of individual styles is contextualized by the democratic ideals espoused by the anti-fascist "Popular Front" which rose to prominence in the years that the National Serigraph Society was most active. In the fourth section, I analyze the reception of serigraphs among interior decorators who became a crucial market for serigraphs. Together the concepts of demonstration, experimentation, and dissemination illuminate how the

⁷ Carl Zigrosser, "The Serigraph, A New Medium," *Print Collector's Quarterly* vol. 28, no. 4, (December 1941): 477.; Clifford S. Ackley, *American Screenprints: 1930s-1960s* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1991), 3.; Brooke Mulvaney, "Made for Color: American Screenprints 1930s to the Present" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2004) 6-7.

goals of serigraph artists in the mid-twentieth century centered around democracy and entrepreneurship. Through the case study of Max Arthur Cohn, I explore the driving forces behind the development of the serigraph medium in New York City from its origins in the early 1930s through its decline in the early 1960s. This analysis of a single artist's serigraphs reveals opportunities to expand scholarship about serigraphs and the later careers of artists who worked on WPA projects.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SERIGRAPHS

In the 1930s, the silk screen process was well suited to the artist's studio. Unlike other printing processes which required large and expensive equipment, a silk screen press could be put together with door hinges, wood scraps, and a little bit of ingenuity. Silk screen inks were commercially available and affordable. Guy Maccoy, inspired by the formal qualities of pochoir prints, created the first extant "fine art" silkscreen prints in 1932.⁸ Max Arthur Cohn made his first "artistic" silkscreen print while he was studying at the Art Students League in 1924 when he offered the process as a viable alternative to color woodcut printing.⁹

The New York City WPA Poster Project facilitated the first large-scale investigation of silk screen's potential as a fine art medium.¹⁰ In 1939, Anthony Velonis, Hyman Warsager,

⁸ "Woman with Cat," Collections, Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed March 23, 2024, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/46386>.

⁹ "One of the pioneers in screenprinting in the United States was Max Arthur Cohn, who claims to have made the first *artistic* screenprint in 1924, eight years before Maccoy's first known prints...Cohn was familiar with [Fiske] Boyd's woodblock prints, and he was well aware that the process of cutting separate wood blocks for each color was laborious and time-consuming. He suggested to Boyd that a new medium—the screenprint—could be used to create color prints of the same quality but in less time. To prove his point, Cohn copied one of Boyd's woodblock prints and printed an edition of ten prints in just one hour." Falk, "Max Arthur Cohn: Pioneer of the Screenprint," 14.

¹⁰ Anthony Velonis, "A Graphic Medium Grows Up," in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 156.

Elizabeth Olds, Harry Gottlieb, and several other artists who were participants in the FAP of New York City established the Silk Screen Group, a subsection of the United American Artists Union.¹¹ Max Arthur Cohn is listed as a participating members of the Silk Screen Group in an exhibition catalog from “Exhibition of Silk Screen Prints” at F.A.R. Gallery.¹² Weyhe Gallery curator Carl Zigrosser coined the term “serigraph” in 1940 to describe art prints made with the silkscreen process.¹³ Zigrosser workshopped the term with Anthony Velonis and took inspiration from the structure of the term lithograph, using “seri” derived from “sericum” which is Latin for “silk” to arrive at “serigraph” or “silk-drawing.”¹⁴ The Silk Screen Group became The National Serigraph Society (NSS) in 1943 to reflect their expanded membership practices when they invited artists across the United States to join.¹⁵ The NSS described itself as a “non-profit making organization composed and controlled by artists whose aim is the development of the silk screen print as a graphic arts medium.”¹⁶ In 1945, Serigraph Galleries opened on 57th Street in New York City, and the NSS published *Serigraph Quarterly* from February 1946 to July 1950.¹⁷ The NSS asserted control over the term “serigraph” to mean only silk screen prints made entirely by

¹¹ Exhibition brief, “Silk Screen Printing,” January 1950, p. 2, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹² Full list of artists included in this exhibition: Philip Bibel, Sarah Berman, Charles Barrows, Ruth Chaney, Max Arthur Cohn, Frank Davidson, Wynn Graham, Gertrude Goodrich, Ruth Gikow, Harry Gottlieb, Hanniah Harari, Miki Hammer, Ernest Hopf, Riva Helfond, Philip Hicken, Mervin Jules, Joe Leboit, Edward Landon, Helen Malta, Doris Meltzer, Beatrice Mandelman, Elizabeth Olds, Leonard Pytlak, Herbert Pratt, Rosa Rush, Hulda Robbins, Harry Sternberg, Harry Shokler, Pauline Stiriss, Caroline Sehlmeier, Anthony Velonis, Hyman Warsager, Sylvia Wald, and Carol Weinstock. Exhibition catalog, “Exhibition of Silk Screen Prints: The Silk Screen Group of the United American Artists: F.A.R. Gallery 19 East 61st Street,” ca. 1939-1943, Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³ Carl Zigrosser, “Ten Years of Serigraphy,” *The New Colophon* vol. 1, part 1 (January 1948): 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵ Exhibition brief, “Silk Screen Printing,” January 1950, p. 1, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

one artist without the use of a photochemical reproduction process.¹⁸ The artist created each color separation either with paper stencils, lacquer film stencils, the autographic glue “block-out” method, or the lithographic tusche stencil method. Serigraphs usually employed between five and twenty colors and were created in limited runs as fine art prints. Although there were theoretically no limits on the number of works that could be produced in an edition, most of the serigraphs from the 1940s and 1950s were produced in an edition of twenty to sixty. In 1962, the NSS was disbanded and although artists did not necessarily stop making serigraphs, the term became destabilized.

The development of serigraphy was documented in its own time through exhibition catalogs and limited-run periodicals for printmakers and collectors. Scholars that historicized serigraphy in the 1940s and 1950s provided information on the origins, technical processes, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the medium.¹⁹ There was a nearly twenty-year silence in scholarship which was broken by Richard S. Field when he curated “Silkscreen: A History of a Medium” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1971. In the catalog for this exhibition, Field emphasized the imitative properties of serigraphs, describing them as “serving to make inexpensive multiples of oil paintings, watercolors, drawings, or lithographs.”²⁰ Through this description of serigraphs imitating other artforms, Field laid the groundwork for categorizing serigraphs as lacking a strong identity of their own. Field discussed serigraphs briefly as

¹⁸ Requirements for submitting works to the Serigraph Galleries listing in the open invitation for submissions to the “Thirteenth Annual Exhibition of the National Serigraph Society,” November 1950, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 18, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁹ Zigrosser, “The Serigraph, A New Medium.” 443-77.; Zigrosser, “Ten Years of Serigraphy.” 58-66.; Una E. Johnson, “New Expressions in Fine Printmaking: Methods–Materials–Ideas,” *Brooklyn Museum Bulletin* 14, no. 1 (1952): 1–28.

²⁰ Richard S. Field, *Silkscreen: History of a Medium* (Philadelphia, PA: The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1971), 1.

historical background and focused the majority of his analysis on the conditions that led to the wide success of screen prints made after 1962.²¹

In 1977, Susan Patton curated “The Federal Art Project and the Birth of Serigraphy 1938-1943” for her senior thesis at Princeton University.²² In a review of this exhibition, O. J. Rothrock urged that the technical achievements and stylistic expressions of serigraph artists should be “revaluated upwards,” and he claimed that serigraphs reconciled “the brilliant colors and decorative values of the international abstract movement with the recurring insistence on social values characteristic of American art.”²³ Rothrock juxtaposed the dueling influences of Currier & Ives and cubist pochoir prints to define stylistic qualities unique to serigraphs.

Print collectors Reba and Dave Williams in their 1986 article “The Early History of the Screenprint” state: “Most of the painterly screenprints are awkwardly drawn and composed, and garishly coloured...oil paintings in which something is slightly wrong. By contrast, screenprints where the artist uses flat planes of colour, hard edge to hard edge, and especially in abstract composition, are frequently quite successful.”²⁴ Here the authors drew attention to serigraphs that technically resembled paintings in surface quality and texture and described them as unsuccessful while they praised the works that more closely resembled Pop Art screen prints. This evaluation measures the success of serigraphs by their resemblance to works that were made later with different objectives from serigraphs. Reba and Dave Williams implied that serigraph artists were misguided by distancing themselves from the commercial sheen replicated in Pop Art prints. The authors characterized serigraphs as both conservative, imitating painting to

²¹ Ibid.

²² O. J. Rothrock, “Serigraphs and Monotypes: Two Research Exhibitions in the Graphic Arts Collection,” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 39, no. 1 (1977): 38–40.

²³ Ibid., 40.

²⁴ Reba Williams and Dave Williams, “The Early History of the Screenprint,” *Print Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1986): 293.

achieve proximity to traditional fine art status, and adolescent, lacking confidence in the hard-edged qualities later seen as most typical of the screenprint. These interpretations greatly influenced the scholarship that followed.

In 1991 the catalog essay for “American Screenprints: 1930s-1960s” held at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Clifford S. Ackley acknowledged the trend in preceding criticism to judge serigraphs in contrast to the technical approach popular beginning in the 1960s and argued that the earlier screen prints should be valued because of the skill required to create delicate tonality and illusory depth in the screen print medium.²⁵ Brooke Mulvaney presented a similar argument in her 2004 catalog for “Made for Color: American Screenprints, 1930s to the Present.”²⁶ Mulvaney used Max Arthur Cohn’s prints as examples of serigraphs which emulated the technical effect of watercolor paintings.²⁷ Mulvaney argued that the “painterly” effects in serigraphs should be admired because they had to overcome the challenge of not being inherent to the medium.²⁸ Mulvaney contrasts Cohn’s work with the work of Robert Gwathmey who “utilized the screenprint’s innate physical characteristics to produce flat unmodulated areas of color.”²⁹ By creating a dichotomy between “not inherent” techniques used by Cohn and the “innate” techniques used by Gwathmey, Mulvaney supported the prevailing view that serigraphs failed to achieve medium specificity by not embracing the hard-edge aesthetic that they were seemingly best suited to embody.

²⁵ “Influenced by the manner in which silkscreen was used during the Sixties, critics have generally recommended crisp, hardedge forms and broad areas of flat unmodulated color as the ideal for this rather inflexible medium. The aesthetics of Thirties and early Forties silkscreen printmaking fly in the face of such strictures. Considering the relative difficulty of achieving deep spaces, continuous tones and modeling in the round with silkscreen, some of these earlier artists were surprisingly successful in achieving their goals,” Clifford S. Ackley, *American Screenprints: 1930s-1960s*, 2.

²⁶ Brooke Mulvaney, “Made for Color: American Screenprints 1930s to the Present.”

²⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁸ “While this might be true of early screenprints, creating subtle gradations of tone is quite remarkable considering the medium’s inherent ability to produce clean crisp lines.” *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Beginning in 2013 with the English-language publication of Guido Lengwiler's *A History of Screen Printing: How an Art Evolved into an Industry*, a new wave of scholarship and exhibitions has brought the history of serigraphy to a wider audience.³⁰ Recent scholarship has focused primarily on the factual details of the medium's development, however the narrative of serigraphy as a phase of experimentation that failed quickly persists. Serigraphs exist as a footnote in the overall history of the screen print, largely described as an awkward adolescence for the medium. They are and often misrepresented by curators and critics as conservative works that were detrimentally imitative of paintings. I argue that artists who created serigraphs were not driven by imitating other mediums but were creating work within the "medium specificity" of serigraphy developed in community by members of the NSS. The diversity of styles and technical approaches evidence that serigraph artists were continually synthesizing the languages of painting and printmaking. Although serigraph artists distanced themselves from commercial reproductions, they fully harnessed the ability to create inexpensive multiples for their goal of democratizing access to fine art. Serigraphy was an internationally accepted medium which maintained clear viability in the United States for two decades.

DEMOCRATIZATION THROUGH DEMONSTRATION

In this section, I analyze the serigraphs Cohn made for demonstration within the larger context of demonstration activities carried out by other serigraph artists who participated in the

³⁰ Guido Lengwiler, *A History of Screen Printing: How an Art Evolved into an Industry* (Cincinnati, Ohio: ST Media Group International, 2013).; Susan Tallman and Michael Ferut, "Screenprint 2014," *Art in Print* 4, no. 2 (2014): 4–10.; "Serigraphy: The Rise of Screenprinting in America," Exhibitions, Zimmerli Art Museum. Rutgers University, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/exhibitions/63/serigraphy-the-rise-of-screenprinting-in-america#>.

FAP and the NSS. The NSS was founded as a non-profit artist collective with an educational mission. Many participating artists, including Cohn, were enthusiastic about sharing the secrets of the trade widely. One of the most significant contributions of serigraph artists was to expose an entire generation of artists, nationally and internationally, to the possibilities of the silkscreen print medium. This was accomplished through a variety of wide-reaching demonstration activities.

Although Cohn explored the artistic potential of silkscreen printing ten years earlier, his first extant fine art silkscreen print *Gathering Wheat* (fig. 3), was made in 1934. This early serigraph shows a high level of technical accomplishment with a wide variety of textures and a high number of saturated, opaque colors tightly registered. Cohn created depth through color and the illusion of atmospheric distance by layering multiple compositional elements. Cohn's previous experience with the silkscreen process explains the high level of sophistication and detail executed in this composition.

In 1935, Cohn created a silkscreen print of two female nudes with just two color-screens (fig. 4). Because this print was created as a demonstration, it is one of a kind and currently in the collection of the Whitney Museum. This image uses the white of the paper as a third "color" in the composition. There is a red-orange color which describes the shadows and hair of the two figures and a thin gray color that forms the background of the image, emphasizing the exterior contour of the figures. This print demonstrates how proper registration allows crisp edges between two colors and how a foreground and background can be achieved with just two colors. The early date of this print makes it likely that this was created for a small group of fellow artists rather than being displayed at a public exhibition. This print pre-dates the formation of the Silk

Screen Group and was made during the year between Cohn's employment in the PWAP in 1934 and the FAP Easel Project which he began working for in 1936.³¹

It is possible that Cohn created the print as a demonstration of the silkscreen technique to artists in the graphic art division of the FAP which was founding in the fall of 1935.³² Hyman Warsager, who worked in the WPA Graphic Arts Division, recounted that a wide variety of printmaking techniques were used by the graphic artists, including silkscreen printing. "Here for the first time silk screen was used as a creative print medium."³³ However, Warsager credits Anthony Velonis with introducing the silkscreen printing process to the Graphic Arts Division.³⁴ Anthony Velonis was a key figure in the development of serigraphy, who incorporated silkscreen printing into the WPA Poster Division in 1936.³⁵ The existence of Cohn's 1935 demonstration print does not fit neatly into the existing history of the development of serigraphy. Further investigation of this particular work could reveal a new trajectory in the history of this medium.

In 1939, Anthony Velonis created *Decoration Empire* (fig. 5) a silkscreen print "made to demonstrate the various means of creating a stencil on a screen."³⁶ *Decoration Empire* was made with innovative techniques highlighting the diversity of marks and textures achievable within the medium and is a stark contrast to Cohn's 1935 demonstration print *Two Nudes*. While Cohn's demonstration print focused on executing a full composition economically while displaying

³¹ Jane Cohn Waldbaum, "Max Arthur Cohn: Biographical Information," updated 2017, Max Arthur Cohn, Curatorial Records, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

³² Hyman Warsager, "Graphic Techniques in Progress," in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 139.

³³ The printmaking techniques used by artists in the graphic arts division of the FAP included lithography, color lithography, wood engraving, woodcut, color woodcut, etching, aquatint, mezzotint, soft ground etching, dry point etching, monotypes, and silkscreen printing. *Ibid.*, 139-40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁵ "Posters: WPA Posters," Digital Collections, Library of Congress, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/works-progress-administration-posters/about-this-collection/>.

³⁶ Reba Williams and Dave Williams, "The Early History of the Screenprint," 289.

different textures and was likely completed during a workshop, Velonis's demonstration print required more time to make and was likely intended to be studied closely after the fact. In *Decoration Empire* there are a multitude of colors and contrasting textures in a single composition, giving the work a collaged look. The over-rich surface is constructed such that despite the many layers of pigment, each lies stable on the surface. A blue pitcher has lace-like lines spread across the surface in a gentle grid, a texture achieved through laying cheesecloth on the tusche layer and then removing it, creating a reverse pattern of the fabric. Each object in the still life is tightly grouped together and unified through vertical contour lines. *Decoration Empire* and *Two Nudes* were both created early in the development of serigraphy as a fine art medium. These early prints are prototypical of technical demonstrations which continued to be a prominent activity among serigraph artists.

Another way of considering the activity of demonstration is in the context of job-training. Artists working for the FAP were just that—workers. New York-based artists affected by the Great Depression aligned themselves with other workers and formed the Unemployed Artist Group, which became the Artists Union in 1934.³⁷ The historical context of New York artists in the 1930s allying themselves with other laborers through organizations like the Artists Union has been well established.³⁸ One of the most influential aspects of these organizations was the opportunities they gave artists to learn new skills in a social setting. The Artist's Union occasional art classes for members and organized several exhibitions at the American

³⁷ "The Artists' Union thrived on mass demonstrations and picketing, perhaps seeking solidarity with miners and factory workers around the country," Robert C. Vitz, "Clubs, Congresses, and Unions: American Artists Confront the Thirties," *New York History* 54, no. 4 (1973): 436.

³⁸Gerald M. Monroe, "The Artists Union of New York," *Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (1972): 17–20.; Robert C. Vitz, "Clubs, Congresses, and Unions: American Artists Confront the Thirties," (1973): 424–47.; Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 26, no. 4 (1986): 17–23.; Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "'New Masses' and John Reed Club Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 12 (1989): 56–75.

Contemporary Art Gallery (ACA).³⁹ In 1936, the artist Elizabeth Olds remarked on how the FAP greatly enriched graphic arts in America through providing instruction in a variety of printmaking techniques, including the silkscreen process.⁴⁰ The FAP expanded educational opportunities in the arts to the public through the Community Art Centers.⁴¹ FAP director Holger Cahill attributed the shared enthusiasm for providing access to art experiences to the democratic philosophy articulated by John Dewey.⁴² Dewey was a prominent public intellectual and co-founder of The New School for Social Research whose ideas about education influenced many artists to believe in the importance of making art accessible to the general public.

The structure of the FAP projects, shaped by democratic ideals of access to education, provided a unique catalyst for the rapid development of the serigraph medium. The collaborative environment and high level of visibility for the project greatly enriched the fine art potential of screen prints. A group of New York artists formed the Silk Screen Group in 1939, all of whom had participated in the FAP projects.⁴³ The Silk Screen Group was affiliated with the United American Artists.⁴⁴ United American Artists was the name of the Artists Union after it joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).⁴⁵ In 1942, the Artists Union and the American

³⁹ Robert C. Vitz, "Clubs, Congresses, and Unions: American Artists Confront the Thirties," 436.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Olds, "Prints for Mass Production," *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 142.

⁴¹ "The WPA Community Art Center program has given six million people in every section of the country some understanding of the significance of art in the life of the community," Holger Cahill, "Forward," *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor, (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 39.

⁴² "This wide interest in the arts, this democratic sharing of art experience, is a comparatively recent development in American life. It is the devoted work of people who, like John Dewey, believe that democracy should be the name of 'free and enriching communion' in which everyone may have a part," *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁴³ Harry Shokler, "The National Serigraph Society: The First Ten Years," *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 4 no. 2 & 3 (New York: National Serigraph Society, May and August 1949), 1, 6-8. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁴ Exhibition catalog, "Exhibition of Silk Screen Prints: The Silk Screen Group of the United American Artists: F.A.R. Gallery 19 East 61st Street," ca. 1939-1943, Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁵ Gerald M. Monroe, "The Artists Union of New York," 19.

Artists Congress both left the CIO to form the Artist's League of America.⁴⁶ The Silk Screen Group being union-affiliated points to another commonality among their members—union membership. Many New York artists that worked for the WPA were union members, including Cohn, who was a member of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators & Paperhangers of America.⁴⁷ The artists who formed the Silk Screen Group created an artist collective which was based on the foundations of resource-sharing. The relatively inexpensive materials shared between a group of people lessened the risk of start-up costs. These serigraph artists developed their technical prowess in collaborative settings and shared their expertise widely.

The connection between the FAP Projects and the formation of the National Serigraph Society is a significant example of the legacy of the New Deal. The history of WPA artists continuing to work together through an artist-run organization helps to address a knowledge gap in art history concerning the years immediately following the end of the FAP projects. These artists utilized a collectivist gallery model to extend the creative environment of the WPA into the future. Many artists who joined Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17 shortly after the end of the WPA projects similarly sought a continuation of artistic development and collaboration, particularly women who, as Christina Weyl notes, made up a significant portion of the WPA Graphic Arts Division.⁴⁸ Not only were the WPA projects crucial in allowing resources to be used in the development of the expressive potential of silkscreen printing within the WPA Poster Project, but the model of these projects also inspired artists to find new ways to continue

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁷ Official Membership Book: Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators & Paperhangers of America, 1968-1969, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 3, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁴⁸ "This may explain why Atelier 17 held such appeal, particularly in the early 1940s, when the WPA-FAP projects were winding down and women were looking for similar situations." Christina Weyl, *The Women of Atelier 17: Modernist Printmaking in Midcentury New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 29.

working collaboratively. The Silk Screen Group in its early days was a “shabby loft” rented together by the artists as a space to experiment with silkscreen printing with equipment constructed from orange crates and scrap lumber.⁴⁹ Artists built upon relationships formed during the WPA projects to work in new ways and not simply return to a traditional academic gallery model.

Once the Silk Screen Group became the National Serigraph Society, it provided instructional courses on serigraph techniques to members. The social environment of skill-sharing encouraged artists to participate in developing the technical possibilities of serigraphy. Because of the membership model of the NSS, they were less incentivized to keep trade secrets and more incentivized to gain as many members as possible. The more artists that were a part of the NSS, the more money would be coming in from dues and the wider the range of artwork there would be for potential customers. Demonstration served to share the basics of the technique with other artists which could lead to new members joining the NSS. In 1946, Max Arthur Cohn and Leonard Pytlak were guest instructors for the NSS.⁵⁰ NSS artists expressed interest in learning about commercial screen-printing processes including techniques for textile and wallpaper printing.⁵¹ Cohn likely provided expertise on these commercial processes. All the pioneers of the medium learned the silkscreen process as a commercial trade first and the

⁴⁹ “We had very little money for even the most necessary supplies...but what we did have, or could get, orange crates, the versatility of which was truly astounding. Paint we bought at the dime store. Paper we tracked down at the wholesale houses, dividing the expense of job lots among us. Screens we ourselves build of scrap lumber,” Harry Shokler, “The National Serigraph Society: The First Ten Years,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 4 no. 2 & 3 (New York: National Serigraph Society, May and August 1949), 1, 6-8. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁰ “Classes in Serigraphy,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1. No. 3 (New York: National Serigraph Society, August 1946), 2. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵¹ Doris Meltzer, “Notice to Students,” November 2, 1949, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

adapted the techniques into a studio setting. When introducing other artists to the process, the foundations of the process as a craft were retained.

The artists in the National Serigraph Society shared their techniques through classes, demonstrations, and *Serigraph Quarterly* publications. One of the most successful exhibitions documented in *Serigraph Quarterly* was “How to Make a Serigraph,” an exhibition held in 1946 of five serigraphs in every production stage from sketch to final proof.⁵² During the opening reception, Bernard Steffen provided a demonstration of the serigraph process and created the final screen for a new work in front of a capacity audience. Steffen’s demonstration included the creation of the final stencil needed to complete his serigraph titled *Still Life*. He displayed the sketch for each of the thirteen color separation stencils and then printed the final layer.⁵³ Suggestions for “lecture demonstrations” were distributed the NSS members which encouraged them to demonstrate the “tusche stencil method” and allow audience members to participate by pulling ink across the screen with the rubber-bladed squeegee.⁵⁴ Presumably, audience members who participated in the demonstration felt a sense of “buy-in,” and were more likely to make a purchase.

The demonstration of the process used to create serigraphs went beyond the exhibition space of Serigraph Galleries when the first television broadcast of making a serigraph was given by Doris Meltzer and Leonard Pytlak on Dumont Television in 1946, giving viewers across the nation an opportunity to learn about serigraphs.⁵⁵ Demonstration of serigraphy reached an

⁵² “Announcements,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 2 (New York: National Serigraph Society, May 1946), 4. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵³ “Announcements,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 3 (New York: National Serigraph Society, August 1946), 4. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁴ “Suggested Notes for Lecture Demonstrations given by Members of the National Serigraph Society,” n.d., p. 2, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁵ “News About Members,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 2 (New York: National Serigraph Society, May 1946), 2. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

international audience when in 1950 an exhibition was shown in the “United States Information Centers in Germany, Japan, and Austria.” This NSS was commissioned by the Reorientation Branch of the United States Army to create this exhibition which contained a “photographic display to explain the techniques of serigraphy including color separations and progressive proofs of one serigraph.”⁵⁶

Another way technical information about how to create serigraphs was shared beyond members of the NSS was through the publication of handbooks. There were many trade manuals in circulation that provided insight into the silk screen process as a commercial skill. Artists followed many conventions of these handbooks when creating manuals that focused on the techniques most popular for creating serigraphs in the artists’ studio. Anthony Velonis wrote the first technical manual about silkscreen printing directed specifically towards an audience of artists which was published by the Federal Arts Project in 1939.⁵⁷ Many other artists published screen printing handbooks in the next two decades each with similar information but unique presentation and discussion. In 1942, Max Arthur Cohn co-authored *Silk Screen Stenciling as a Fine Art*.⁵⁸ This book included information about purchasing supplies and constructing the equipment necessary to create screen prints in a studio space as well as advice about color mixing on the page. The accessibility of the supplies meant that anyone, anywhere could pick up the technique on their own without needing access to a large studio space or a bustling art scene.

The first edition of *Silk Screen Stenciling as a Fine Art* contains a book plate of an original serigraph by Cohn, *Harlem River* (fig. 6). *Harlem River* is an image of an industrial

⁵⁶ Exhibition brief, “Silk Screen Printing,” January 1950, p. 1, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁷ Anthony Velonis, *Silk Screen Technique* (New York, Creative Crafts Press, 1939).

⁵⁸ J. I. (Jacob Israel) Biegeleisen and Max Arthur Cohn, *Silk Screen Stenciling as a Fine Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1942).

dock with distant figures at work with a hazy silhouette of the city in the background and reflections on the water in the foreground. Also included in the book is an image of “progressive proofs” showing the individual color separations of this print in sequence (fig. 7). The eight colors are layered from background to foreground. The first two layers of transparent colors resemble watercolor washes that define the sky and water in two distinct pinks. Increasingly smaller details in darker colors are layered in succession to build out the foreground. This technique is similar to how watercolor paintings are constructed, with more diluted lighter colors applied to the surface before darker, more concentrated pigments. The progressive proofs reveal the process of color mixing where two or more transparent colors are layered to create a new color on the page. Eight color transparencies were used to create this image, but the final image contains far more than eight hues. The fourth image in the grid shows the application of a transparent gray color which appears differently on the white of the page from each of the preceding four colors, and on the preexisting color mixing, resulting in a total of six colors. The skillful overlapping of transparent colors was seen as a highly desirable aspect of the serigraph medium. The success of this image depends greatly on careful planning and exact color registration.

Cohn was credited by Zigrosser with the technical innovations that allowed serigraphs to replicate the effect of watercolor washes.⁵⁹ Cohn frequently worked in watercolor, and *Harlem River* reflects his approach to building a composition through thin layers of luminous color. While each serigraph requires careful planning, Cohn’s inclusion of wide brushstrokes creates texture in the sky and lends a sense of immediacy to the composition. Including both the progressive proofs and the plate of *Harlem River* itself allowed anyone who purchased the book

⁵⁹ Zigrosser, “The Serigraph, A New Medium,” 463.

to experience a demonstration at a distance and compare the intermediary steps to the finished product.

Even a simple demonstration of the silk screen stencil technique would provide viewers with a greater understanding of the artist's physical and intellectual control over the work and the high level of craftsmanship necessary to yield clean and consistent prints. Screen printing is a highly accessible printmaking medium because of its low barrier to entry, but it is also something that requires a lot of investment to gain mastery. Technical demonstrations for fellow artists encouraged democratic access to the skills and materials needed for making serigraphs. Demonstrations aimed towards art buying audiences were essentially a marketing strategy. Demonstrations of techniques held at gallery exhibitions helped convince audiences of the fine art status of serigraphs and therefore their higher monetary value. Democratic ideals were, perhaps paradoxically, present even in this marketing context. It was crucial to establish serigraphs as fine art for the NSS to argue that they were able to provide democratic access to fine art through reasonably priced color prints. Demonstrations emphasized that these works were *both* fine art *and* inexpensive, which aligned these works with ideals of "art for the masses" by bringing fine art into a larger number of American homes. These demonstrations emphasized the manual, non-mechanical, process of serigraph methods which were created using a brush or a knife and required only human strength. This communicated that serigraphy should be respected as a fine art-making process because of the traditional, direct manipulation of materials by the artist. Another message conveyed through demonstration was that the artists had intellectual control over the work. Every decision was made by the artist at each stage in the process. This elevated the status of serigraphs based on the authenticity of the artist's hand. Serigraphs were affiliated with the appeal of sole authorship which increased their proximity to the value of

paintings. The element of showcasing the artist at work had the most immediate result for audiences of confirming authenticity and increasing the understanding the level of the skill that goes into creating serigraphs. The most immediate result for other artists was the increased understanding of the accessibility of the process and an encouragement to try it out for themselves.

DEMOCRATIC FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN SERIGRAPHS

Max Arthur Cohn was a painter who independently experimented with the expressive potential of the silkscreen printing process, and his serigraphs were related to his painting practice in multiple dynamic ways. He explored much of the same subject matter in both his serigraphs and paintings, and he created the same compositions in oil painting and serigraph. Cohn experimented with a variety of techniques and stylistic approaches across his serigraphs and his engagement with the medium may have influenced his turn toward abstraction in the 1940s. Cohn's unique use of the medium was indicative of the overall diversity of the medium. Artists adapted the medium into their studio practices and as a result, their serigraphs reflected their individualized styles. The technical diversity was matched by a diversity in both subject matter and style. The technical and stylistic diversity of serigraphs reveals another potential motivation for making fine art screen prints; serigraphs were an expression of democracy in the form of individual artistic freedom. The Popular Front sought to unify Americans against fascism during World War II and encouraged artists to pursue individual aesthetic interests as a way to emphasize democratic freedom of expression in opposition to fascist censorship.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 37-38.

Serigraphs were technically diverse, displaying a wide range of pigments, textures, opacity, layering effects, and sizes. In 1936 Anthony Velonis commented on the surprising range of technical diversity among early screen-printed works. “Each print is so different and so sensitively individual that one can hardly believe all the prints were products of the same process.”⁶¹ Artists made decisions about the pigment, opacity, during the creation of each color separation, exponentially increasing variation.⁶² Specialized techniques allowed for a wide range of expression within the serigraph medium. Prints ranged from thin transparent washes to opaque impasto swatches. Some serigraphs had only a few colors, while others had layers and layers of individual colors that are difficult to count. Some colors were formed through the careful layering of two other colors, resulting in color mixing on the page. The technical diversity of serigraphs was likely influenced by the focus on experimentation and skill-sharing discussed in the previous section.

The handbook co-authored by Max Arthur Cohn describes several popular technical processes used to create serigraphs in the 1940s, each with their own formal capabilities. The methods described in the book include the paper stencil method and lacquer film stencil method which both resulted in sharp contours made by the stencil knife, The “block-out” stencil method and “tusche” stencil method which both allowed artists to create a stencil by painting a resist liquid on the screen. The “tusche” stencil method employed lithographic tusche liquid or lithographic crayon and allowed for the most direct transfer of autographic marks into stencil

⁶¹ Velonis, “A Graphic Medium Grows Up,” 156.

⁶² “The screens control not only the position of various colors but the surface quality of the pigment. A substantial layer can be controlled from the thinnest transparency to the heaviest density. Some colors are transparent while others are opaque, and an unlimited range of textural effects can be achieved. The imagination and skill of the artist play upon all these possibilities and his individuality is emphasized constantly.” “Multipictures: The New Graphic Arts Medium” (New York and Chicago: Art Movement, Inc., November 1942), 5. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

form. Many of these techniques could also be combined in the creation of a single serigraph, allowing for even more technical diversity.

Cohn's 1939 serigraph *Low Tide Gloucester* (fig. 8) exemplifies a range of techniques used to create a single serigraph seen through the variety of texture and opacity employed throughout the composition. An image of different types of ships pulled into a canal in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the most striking aspect of this piece is the atmospheric depth achieved through a soft gradient of blue in the sky. The sky emulates a watercolor "wash," a technique Cohn has been credited with innovating.⁶³ Subtle blues and greens are modulated with increasing opacity from the distant green mountain to the clear blue of the water reflecting the sky, to the deeper greens reflecting the ships in the foreground. The opaquer areas are in the foreground while the transparent colors recede back into space creating a soft atmosphere. This atmospheric perspective is supported by the more direct, forced linear perspective. Small, irregular brush strokes of at least four analogous colors are layered on top of one another creating a convincing illusion of floating reflections. These small brushstrokes were likely created through the use of tusche liquid. The texture of the wood of the foremost ship appears to be created using lithographic crayon. These different technical approaches create a collage-like sense of asymmetry and make it possible to ascertain the different processes which went into creating each distinct element. A to-scale preliminary drawing for *Low Tide Gloucester* (fig. 9) shows that Cohn transferred drawn contours directly into the final print. Cohn wrote notes about where certain colors were to be used in the serigraph and made very few deviations from this

⁶³ "Numerous artists are adding some new note or emphasis to the ever growing body of serigraph achievement. Max Arthur Cohn, for instance, has been developing transparent washes. Such prints as *Boat Pier* and *Harlem River* have much the quality of transparent watercolor," Zigrosser, "The Serigraph, A New Medium," 463.

plan during the process of creating color separations for *Low Tide Gloucester*. However, the printing process required further experimentation to achieve the two gradients in the final print.

Cohn recorded that there were 56 prints of *Low Tide Gloucester* in the edition. There are 49 prints of *Low Tide Gloucester* that remain unsold, many of these appear to be outside of the official count of the edition. They could be “test prints” or perhaps “misprints” but they were not directed categorized as such by Cohn. While some do show obvious signs of error where the paint has been scraped or gouged, there are others which are entirely complete and only show variation in color choice and application. One of these outlier prints, (fig. 10) shows the use of gradients in the sky and sea and the building on the right. The process for creating gradients involved loading two different colors of paint onto the screen next to each other and then using the rubber-bladed squeegee to push the ink through the screen. Every time the blade is moved across the screen, the pigments become more thoroughly mixed together until a soft gradient is achieved in the center. In this print, the colors have not yet fully combined, but Cohn chose to print on a full version of the composition rather than printing first on test sheets of paper until the ideal gradient was achieved. This led to greater variation among the prints than would have been considered acceptable by the standards of fine print editioning promoted by the NSS.⁶⁴

Although slight variations among serigraphs were seen as a compelling element that added to their status as unique and original, the NSS advised serigraph artists to make every print in an edition standardized. While Cohn was a member, he did not consistently follow NSS recommendations for how to create a run of fine art prints. For example, he did not always use standardized paper and often did not consistently title, sign, and edition his serigraphs. It is

⁶⁴ Edward Landon, “Editorial On ‘Print Quality,’” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 2, (New York: National Serigraph Society, May 1946), 2. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

possible that Cohn was more interested in creating multiple unique paintings on paper using silkscreen stencils than an edition of uniform prints. The fluidity between Cohn's paintings and serigraphs is one aspect of his unique engagement with the medium. Cohn's print run for *Low Tide Gloucester* expresses this connection, and it displays evidence of experimentation with different technical approaches.

The NSS focused on furthering the medium of serigraphy and did not place limits on the subject matter or style of the individual works. This allowed the preexisting diversity in modern American art from the 1930s and 1950s to come through in the new print medium. In the announcement of the Annual Christmas Show of 1947, the NSS staff emphasized how the exhibition would feature "all schools of creative expression."⁶⁵ Art historical scholarship on the era has defined some of these "schools" as Precisionism, Social Realism, and Regionalism. Surrealism was also prevalent during these decades and many mid-century American artists were creating figurative abstract compositions inspired by Fauvism, Cubism, and non-objective abstract works. The NSS regularly circulated catalogs of serigraphs for members to select their yearly gift print. In 1947 Serigraph Galleries printed a catalog of new serigraphs for the audience of potential buyers.⁶⁶ A spread of pages from this publication (fig. 11) provides a snapshot of the diversity of serigraphs being made in the same year.

Two serigraphs reproduced on this page spread represent the polarity between realism and abstraction that co-existed in this gallery space. Harry Shoulberg's 1945 serigraph, *Still Life*

⁶⁵ "The prints to be exhibited will be chosen as gift suggestions. They will represent all schools of creative expression and are priced to twelve dollars." "Announcements," *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 2, no. 4 (New York: National Serigraph Society, November 1947), 4. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶⁶ Catalog, "New Serigraphs by Members of the National Serigraph Society available from Serigraph Galleries, 38 West 57th Street, New York City," 1947, Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

(fig. 12) depicts an arrangement of fruit, vessels, and a knife on a small table. The table pushes up against a shallow background of a door, a piece of draped fabric, and a radiator. Stylistically, this piece draws on academic traditions of still life painting and is a realistic representation of an arrangement of objects. However, the saturated colors, the gestural outlines, and the all-over rhythmic texture of this piece are expressionistic. In *Still Life* Shoulberg used a limited color palette, with dustings of each color separation scattered throughout the composition. Edward Landon's 1946 *Ballet Macabre* (fig. 13) contrasts with Shoulberg's work stylistically. Landon had a background in Precisionist painting, but he focused almost entirely on creating serigraphs beginning in the early 1940s and his work became increasingly abstract.⁶⁷ Landon's serigraph *Ballet Macabre* is comprised of silhouetted abstract figures against a modulated background of green-tinted grays. The wide brushstrokes in the background in soft gradation provide a sense of motion and atmospheric depth. The shapes in the foreground diffuse into one another but appear to cast shadows in their environment, lending a surreal tone to the piece. While Shoulberg used a large number of opaque colors layered atop one another, Landon used only a few transparent colors which only appear to overlap in the background. The blues and reds of the foreground seem to shape themselves around the darker contour lines, with one sharp edge and one rough edge which resemble the texture of lithographic crayon. Landon's piece appears to use a separate technique for the background than for the foreground while the purples, greens, and oranges of Shoulberg's piece blend together through consistent texture. Together, Landon and Shoulberg's prints exemplify the diversity of stylistic approach, one is highly abstracted and conceptual while the other is formal and memetic, and technical approach, one contains thin application of four

⁶⁷ "Edward Landon," The British Museum, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG34691>.

colors while the other contains a large number of opaque colors. These contrasts are repeated throughout the catalog.

Two works by Max Arthur Cohn were also published on this spread, *The Bay (Wellfleet)* (fig. 14) and *Wheat Field* (fig. 15). Both serigraphs depict naturalistic, yet somewhat simplified and abstracted rural landscapes which places these works between the works by Shoulberg and Landon on the spectrum between realism and abstraction. The two serigraphs by Cohn contain bright colors and rural subject matter align them stylistically with Regionalism. These four works were published on the same page spread alongside numerous others. There was no hierarchy among different stylistic approaches nor separate categories for different types of work. The new serigraphs were not arranged by artist name nor price. The diversity among the works was amplified through the display which ensured that works of a similar style were not all grouped in one place. The NSS also often displayed its diverse membership as a racially integrated organization with a nearly equal gender makeup.⁶⁸ The cover of *Serigraph Quarterly* featured Roy DeCarava's serigraph, *Pickets*, when it won second prize at the Atlanta University Annual of 1946.⁶⁹ Women were well represented as members and frequently featured in the "Meet the Artist" section of *Serigraph Quarterly*.⁷⁰ Cohn was a Jewish man and, like many other members of the NSS, a first-generation immigrant.

It is likely that in addition to abstaining from declaring one stylistic approach to be the most ideal for serigraphy, the NSS was actively encouraging a wide range of styles to be

⁶⁸ Among the participants listed in the 1950 exhibition "Silk Screen Printing" were 11 women 14 men (44% women, 56% men) and 4 first-generation immigrants (16%). Pronouns and place of birth are included in the artist biographies. Exhibition brief, "Silk Screen Printing," January 1950, p. 2, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶⁹ *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 4 (New York: National Serigraph Society, November 1946), 1. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷⁰ Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

represented in the medium. Cécile Whiting recounts a shift among Communist-aligned artists in the United States from proletariat art created in print mediums to social realism created in oils following the announcement of the “Popular Front” in 1935 at the Seventh World Congress of Communist International.⁷¹ This shift in priorities was marked by the disbandment of the John Reeds Club and the formation of the American Artists Congress, a far less sectarian group formed by Popular Front ideals.⁷² When inviting new members, the AAC explicitly invited artists working in any style and with any subject matter, only requiring them to be against war and fascism.⁷³ Although many artists left the AAC in 1940 following the Soviet-Nazi Pact of 1939 and the Soviet invasion of Finland, many American artists continued to value the Popular Front stance against censorship.

The NSS was formed in this moment when artists increasingly distanced themselves from the Soviet Union while continuing to posit democracy as the opposite of fascism. Democracy in modern art was expressed through the freedom of the individual artist to explore whatever aesthetic they wished. During World War II, the United States became a propagandistic symbol for democracy over fascism. Shortly after the war, in 1950, the NSS prepared an exhibition of serigraphs for the Reorientation Branch of the United States Army to be held in United States Information Centers in Germany, Japan, and Austria which celebrated American art as a democratizing force.⁷⁴ Cohn was clearly invested in developing his personal style as an artist. His serigraphs are widely varied in subject matter and stylistic approach and his works from the 1940s and 1950s are not easily categorized into a single category of Precisionism, Regionalism,

⁷¹ Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷⁴ Exhibition brief, “Silk Screen Printing,” January 1950, p. 2, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

or Social Realism. His individualized studio practice contributed to the overall diversity that was emphasized by the NSS.

One of Cohn's most well-received serigraphs, *Mexican Boy* (fig. 16), was an overall naturalistic, figurative piece. Cohn created *Mexican Boy* in 1940 in an edition of 28. The copy held by the Emile H. Mathis Gallery of Art has a stamp from the National Serigraph Society on the back. *Mexican Boy* was awarded an Honorable Mention in the "Pictures for Children" Competition held by the Museum of Modern Art.⁷⁵ This serigraph was also selected by the International Print Society for a special "Print Club" edition available to subscribers.⁷⁶ *Mexican Boy* was cited as an example of excellent execution of the tusche stencil method by Harry Shokler in *Artists Manual for Silk Screen Making* published in 1946 by the American Artists Group.⁷⁷ The tusche method is described in the handbook Cohn co-authored with J.I. Biegelesen as the technique that, apart from the photographic stencil method, "...most closely approximates the freedom of the original drawing, reproducing the spontaneity of the artist's design. Every tusche stroke on the silk is a latent paint stroke in the finished print."⁷⁸ The tusche stencil method was the most effective way to create images that resemble realistic styles developed in easel paintings.

Cohn used the tusche stencil technique to create a work that resembles a traditional easel painting of a genre subject. *Mexican Boy* is an image of a young boy wearing a large hat, a pink collared shirt, white pants, and light brown sandals. The subject is looking up and at the viewer

⁷⁵ Master Checklist, "Pictures for Children," Exhibitions, The Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3024>.

⁷⁶ "International Print Club: Gift Print," n.d., p. 3, Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷⁷ Harry Shokler, *Artists Manual for Silk Screen Print Making*, 2nd ed. (New York: American Artists Group, 1946), 159.

⁷⁸ J. I. (Jacob Israel) Biegelesen and Max Arthur Cohn, *Silk Screen Stenciling as a Fine Art*, 67.

from a seated position with his hands resting against one another. Cohn employed an analogous color combination to unify the work while using more colors in the boy's face and hands to create depth and tone. It speaks to the status of serigraphs as a fine art medium that this type of image would be taken on in this form.

This image is likely based on a painting Cohn made during a trip to Mexico just after his marriage in 1934 (fig. 17). In a 1988 letter to Kenneth Bendiner, Cohn described traveling with his wife Sarah as “an outlet to gather material and broaden our outlook.”⁷⁹ The boy in the painting is at a slightly different angle and his features are not very clear. Many of Cohn's figural paintings from this trip are painted at a distance, without the direct gaze of the subject. This serigraph transforms the source image into a more traditional “portrait.” This is not a portrait of a named individual, but of a “type.” As viewers we learn only what can be seen at a distance. In the serigraph, the subject is decontextualized from his surroundings, though his pose and attire were transferred relatively faithfully.

Robert Henri (1865–1929) was an American artist who made similar portraits of people while traveling a few decades earlier. Henri described portraits like *Tam Gan*, 1914 (fig.18), a painting of a young Chinese girl living in the Southwestern United States, as an individual expression of beauty and human dignity in an essay titled “My People.”⁸⁰ Henri deliberately decontextualized his subjects to avoid “explaining” them through where and how they lived and focused instead on creating a faithful portrait of an individual.⁸¹ In *Mexican Boy*, Max Arthur Cohn also decontextualized his subject. The unnamed boy is not engaged in any work or placed in a larger environment; he is sitting for a portrait, although it is unclear whether the subject

⁷⁹ Max Arthur Cohn, Letter to Kenneth Bendiner, April 26, 1988. Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 21, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁸⁰ Robert Henri, “My People,” *The Craftsman* vol. 27, no. 5 (February 1915): 459-469.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 467.

himself consented to be painted by Cohn. It is possible that Cohn was influenced by the travel portrait works of Henri as a student of John Sloan who was a member of the Ashcan “Eight” under Henri’s leadership. Cohn likely followed this compositional strategy to encourage viewers to see the humanity of the figure.

Mexican Boy was conceptualized as an image for children to see a peer. This work was aligned with humanism and the spirit of universalism that many modern artists hoped to capture. However, his unnamed subject represents only a racialized “type,” which undercuts the intent. There are implicit power dynamics in the creation and distribution of this image, as the likeness of the subject was captured by an American artist spending leisure time in an area with a lower standard of living. Cohn, like many traveling artists, used people he saw as scenic inspiration for his studio work. The image evokes the status of portraiture, but it does not tell us about the individual and it was not made for him and his family. Cohn described his interests in subjects for painting in the early years of his painting career as “industrial subjects, genre scenes with ordinary people and scenes along the waterfront. Here were plenty of subjects for painting and also the freedom of jostling crowds.”⁸² *Mexican Boy* is a work that Cohn likely intended to be seen as an image of a genre scene with an ordinary person. A majority of Cohn’s figures across his paintings were anonymized, portrait work was rare for Cohn, and were generally rare among serigraph artists. The modulation of color highlighting the individual features of the boy’s face provides an apt example of stylized realism achievable in the medium, and Cohn was credited for this achievement. This work exemplifies the high level of effort Cohn put into his serigraphs. This work is also an example of how serigraphs existed on equal terms with his paintings as a finished work developed from preliminary sketches.

⁸² Max Arthur Cohn, Letter to Kenneth Bendiner, April 26, 1988, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 21, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

In addition to creating serigraphs that were similar to pre-existing paintings, Cohn also created paintings modeled after his serigraphs. Cohn frequently repeated compositions across multiple mediums. The re-working of images and recurring motifs are a consistent element of Cohn's overall studio practice. Cohn essentially duplicated many compositions in oil, watercolor, and gouache. In this way, serigraphs became fully incorporated into his painting practice. Cohn created the serigraphs *Road to Easton* (fig. 19) in 1942 and in 1996 he created an oil painting of the same subject titled *R.R. Overpass* (fig. 20). Cohn created this painting while he still had the serigraph in his possession. This later painting adds back in detail that was originally omitted. *Road to Easton* contains the expressive, indexical mark of the artist's hand through the transfer of brushstrokes and pen strokes facilitated by the tusche stencil method. The pairing of *Road to Easton* and *R.R. Overpass* is one example of many works that were recreated by Cohn across different mediums. Cohn created a watercolor in 1934 (fig. 21) which he translated into the serigraph *Harlem River* (fig. 6). Motivated to make a distinction between serigraphs and reproductions of paintings made with the silkscreen printing process, the NSS dissuaded artists from creating serigraphs after existing paintings. Cohn did not limit his creation of serigraphs or paintings to follow this rule. Cohn frequently made multiples of his paintings or reworked compositions frequently over time. It is likely that Cohn did not see the recreation of paintings as negative in any way.

Another significant aspect of the relationship between Cohn's paintings and serigraphs were his experiments with abstraction. One of Cohn's most serigraphs, *Brooklyn Bridge* (fig. 22), foreshadows Cohn's later focus on abstraction. *Brooklyn Bridge* was created on thick watercolor paper in 1945 in an edition of 31. It is a composition created with seven color separations. These colors overlap in only a few instances, and when they do they create depth through three

different tones of green. The composition has a dynamic push and pull between depth and flatness, achieving a remarkable amount of illusion of depth for such an all-over and muted composition. The white of the paper is fully commanded as a color in the composition which can be seen especially in the foreground where the short side of one building is left white. The angles and shading show an affinity with Cubist representational abstraction. Cohn likely used a tusche crayon to create the gestural black lines that shape out the bridge and surrounding buildings through a series of short, angled marks. The pressure and angle of the lithographic crayon can be inferred through the tapering of the lines. There are feather-light lines tracing the cables of the bridge, some of which are merely implied through the angles of color blocks behind them. The image is essentially constructed through a series of flat geometric shapes. Cohn pushed this approach to describing figures through angled lines further in his paintings, with many of his works consisting of abstraction away from a figural sketch into an all-over composition where the figure is sublimated into a series of jagged lines that push forward in the image. The composition of two or three women standing or sitting together was one of the most prominent motifs Cohn returned to throughout his painting career which can be seen in a 1959 painting on board, *Three Abstract Figures* (fig. 23). Cohn reworked this composition repeatedly, bringing the figure and the background closer together until they merge into a pattern of color and directional lines.

While it is not clear whether *Brooklyn Bridge* was Cohn's first time abstracting a cityscape in this way, it is among his earliest. Cohn's paintings became increasingly abstract throughout his career. There is a possibility that working with silkscreen stencils influenced Cohn's overall body of work by encouraging him to experiment with abstraction. Individual color separations are created through the process of abstraction even when the finished serigraph

is highly realistic. While I argue that creating a serigraph required the process of abstraction and therefore could lead artists to become more interested in abstraction, I do not think that serigraphy as a medium lent itself necessarily to abstract styles. The tusche stencil method specifically allowed for the transference of autographic marks directly onto the separation screen. Many of the popular techniques for creating serigraph stencils involved the brush and crayon as primary tools, including *Brooklyn Bridge*. The abstraction that I am discussing is not the hard-edge abstraction that has come to define the medium of screen-printed art. I refer instead to the conceptual activity of abstraction which the process of making serigraphs required of artists as a possible inspiration for Cohn's later works. Cohn's turn to abstraction in the 1940s occurred when he was painting the least and working with the silkscreen process the most. Cohn produced commercial silkscreen work through his company, Graphic Art Studios, between 1948 and 1962.⁸³ He created serigraphs and commercial silkscreen products in his company studio, and he painted either at his apartment in New York City or in the studio he built near his country house in Milford, New Jersey.⁸⁴

Cohn studied at the Académie Colarossi in Paris in 1927.⁸⁵ He stated that he was inspired by Picasso and Matisse.⁸⁶ He likely had an interest in abstraction long before he started making clearly abstract works. A clear force that could have influenced Cohn was the overall interest in abstraction that many American artists began expressing in the years leading into the rise of Abstract Expressionism. Cohn wrote in 1988 that "The spirit of the times after the WPA gave the

⁸³ Jane Cohn Waldbaum, Correspondence to *New York Times*, *Obituary News*, March 25, 1998, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 1, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁸⁴ Jane Cohn Waldbaum, email correspondence with author, April 24, 2024.

⁸⁵ Jane Cohn Waldbaum, "Max Arthur Cohn: Biographical Information," updated 2017, Max Arthur Cohn, Curatorial Records, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁸⁶ Stephen Coppel and Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock*, 178.

New York artists a chance to experiment with looser and freer ways of painting. After a period of experimentation on my part, my work became abstract but with the figure still a vital part of the painting.”⁸⁷ Although there were many forces that led Cohn to begin exploring abstraction, experience with silkscreen stencils was likely one of them. There is an element of abstraction in the way he reduced figures to simple, distant shapes even in his early serigraph *Gathering Wheat* (fig. 3). Even if Cohn did not decide to create works more abstractly because of his experience with the silkscreen process, creating color separations caused him to think through the placement of color in an image all over and all at once which could have influenced his approach to all-over abstraction.

The stylistic diversity of serigraphs may have been emphasized by the NSS to show their alignment with democratic values. But the diversity itself was ultimately the result of the close alignment of serigraphy with individual studio practices. During the 1940s and 1950s, many artists embraced their own individual styles. Those interests, developed in their wider studio practices, were made present in their serigraphs. Max Arthur Cohn's serigraphs were both technically and stylistically diverse. Cohn, perhaps more than other serigraph artists, allowed his serigraphs to become an integrated part of his painting practice. Max Arthur Cohn's serigraphs provide an example of how one artist was working in serigraphy as an element of a larger painting practice. Cohn worked within the medium of serigraphy to create works that aligned with his own personal style and choice of subject matter. This shows that serigraphs reflect the artistic practice of those who made them, which supports the rhetoric of freedom of expression within the medium.

⁸⁷ Max Arthur Cohn, Letter to Kenneth Bendiner, April 26, 1988, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 21, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

DEMOCRATIZATION THROUGH DISSEMINATION

The diversity of style and subject matter discussed in the previous section also made serigraphs more marketable. The wide range of serigraphs created by artists across the nation provided options that suited a wide range of potential buyers. By the 1890s, the secular idea of personality had begun to dominate the display of home interiors.⁸⁸ The variable options of serigraph styles and subjects increased the likelihood that a buyer would find a piece that they felt reflected their own personal taste. In addition to individual collectors, museums and interior decorators purchased a large quantity of serigraphs. Although serigraphs had more proximity to painting through their rich, highly colorful surfaces, serigraph artists took full advantage of their paper substrate to distribute works widely. In this section, I discuss how serigraph artists used the market as a way of democratizing access to their work. Conceptualizations of serigraphs as an “art for the masses” influenced the marketing, dissemination, and reception of serigraphs. The art of serigraphy was sustained in post-WPA years through direct engagement with the market. Serigraph artists pooled their resources to establish Serigraph Galleries and marketed their works as multiple original fine art prints. Members of the NSS used the market to democratize access to artwork by controlling the pricing of serigraphs and thus making them affordable to the rising middle class in post-war America.

Although Cohn sold works through Serigraph Galleries and sent in commission checks for the private sales of serigraphs he conducted privately in his studio, he did not make much money from serigraphs. He, like other serigraph artists, sold them inexpensively to make them more accessible. Cohn was able to support himself and his family through his graphic art

⁸⁸ Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2006), p.124-125.

business.⁸⁹ Although Cohn did not disclose his motivations for creating serigraphs, he was not relying on them for significant monetary income. As discussed in the previous section, Cohn likely viewed serigraphs as one among many mediums he used to create works of art. Making serigraphs also gave Cohn an opportunity to stay connected to other artists while he was painting less during the years he was a business owner. He was also likely able to gain further visibility through widely disseminated serigraph works.

The market for serigraphs was expanded to a national scale through the ease of delivering works on paper through the mail. The prominence of serigraphs as a mailable artform was further emphasized through the creation of serigraph greeting cards. The NSS had greeting cards for sale throughout the year and in high volume around the holidays. In 1952 the NSS held a collection of 100 “miniature serigraphs” being sold at the annual Christmas exhibition which Doris Meltzer described as “little gems” suitable for framing.⁹⁰ There were two different formats of serigraph greeting cards, “decorative little card[s]” which were created in runs of 1,000 and priced at 15-25 cents, and “miniature picture[s]” which were created in editions of 250 and were priced at 1-2 dollars or 5 dollars when framed.⁹¹ The greeting cards were less expensive than the full-sized prints, so greeting cards gave visitors to Serigraph Galleries an opportunity to buy a serigraph at a lower price point. The miniature serigraphs were also distributed to museums to sell.⁹² The serigraph greeting cards were highly successful and possibly influenced the adoption of artist-made Christmas cards sales by museums. The Junior Council of the Museum of Modern Art commissioned screen-printed Christmas cards from prominent modern artists beginning in

⁸⁹ Jane Cohn Waldbaum, email correspondence with author, April 24, 2024.

⁹⁰ Doris Meltzer, “National Serigraph Society Confidential Newsletter,” November 3, 1952, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹¹ Doris Meltzer, “National Serigraph Society Confidential Newsletter,” December 5, 1951, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹² *Ibid.*

1954.⁹³ In 1950 Cohn, as Graphic Art Studios, was commissioned by Charles Chipman's Sons Company, Inc. for a run of 300 Christmas cards.⁹⁴ This shows that demand for silkscreen printed greeting cards went beyond the museums, and that Cohn was creating greeting cards in both commercial and fine art contexts simultaneously.

Max Arthur Cohn created a miniature serigraph of children sledding in Central Park (fig. 24) which was included in Serigraph Greeting Cards catalog in 1948 alongside *Night Scene Winter* and *Winter Landscape*.⁹⁵ This card contains the screen-printed phrase "Season's Greetings" in the inside and is stamped on the back as an original serigraph, copyrighted by the National Serigraph Society. This card measures 4 3/8 by 6 1/2 inches and contains a scene of twenty children all dressed in dark blue or brown with long sleeves, boots and caps. The figures are sledding down the hill, carrying their sleds up the slope, or spectating in groups. The scene is framed by barren trees and skyscrapers in the distance. The snow is represented primarily by the raw white of the paper with shadows cast by the figures, and divots in the snowbank are the light teal of the sky mixed with the soft purple of the distant cityscape. Even though there are a lot of figures moving in different directions, there is an overall sense of unity achieved through the similarity of the figures. There are no hints of collision or conflict, and the entire scene is nestled cozily in tree cover. Cohn abstracted the totality of figures into a few small, faceless shapes while maintaining a convincing image of their weight, movement, and personality as individuals. The UWM Art Collection has three copies of *Central Park in Winter*, each with slight variation in the

⁹³ "The Museum of Modern Art's Christmas card program was initiated in 1954 by the Museum's Junior Council." Michelle Elligott, "From the Archives: Holiday Cards from MoMA," Inside/Out (blog), December 17, 2015, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2015/12/17/carte-moderne-holiday-cards-from-moma/.

⁹⁴ Letter from Charles Chipman's Sons Company, Inc. to Graphic Art Studios, December 5, 1950, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1928-1978. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹⁵ Exhibition invitation and catalog, "Serigraph Greeting Cards," ca. 1948. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This serigraph was titled *Central Park in Winter* when it was published in the NSS catalog but was titled *Sledding in Central Park* when it entered the UWM Art Collection in 2019.

printing, as well as twenty-one other serigraph greeting cards or miniature serigraphs made by Cohn. Several of the cards Cohn created were personalized with screen-printed text wishing recipients “Happy Holidays from Max, Sarah, and Jane” which shows that Cohn sent these cards specifically to friends outside of a commercial context. Indeed, Cohn likely continued to create serigraph greeting cards after he made his final full-scale serigraph prints.⁹⁶

Serigraphs were described as a solution to a perceived market gap: that people wanted art in their homes but could not afford paintings. Serigraphs were described by Serigraph Galleries director Doris Meltzer in 1950 as “a democratic art form created for the large number of people who want good art but cannot afford to own it.”⁹⁷ The concept of accessibility through market distribution was seen as another democratizing force for American art. Serigraphs were closely tied to WPA-era ideals of “art for the masses” and these ideals were realized through mass market availability. The Federal Arts Projects brought art to the American people through funding art projects that were displayed in public spaces and municipal buildings. Scholars have acknowledged the progressive ideals that shaped many of the federally funded projects. Christopher DeNoon emphasizes the connection between the WPA Posters and the ideals of integrating the fine and practical arts.⁹⁸ The synthesis of decorative and fine art was developed by the nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelite movement but came to the Federal Arts Projects more

⁹⁶ Cohn’s serigraph greeting cards are primarily undated but have been estimated to be made between 1938 and 1979. Jane Cohn Walbaum, “Max Arthur Cohn: Artist’s Greeting Cards,” September 2019, Max Arthur Cohn, Curatorial Records, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁹⁷ Exhibition brief, “Silk Screen Printing,” January 1950, p. 2, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹⁸ “...these posters...represent the best of that impulse of the era in general, and the WPA Federal Art Project in particular, to integrate the fine and practical arts. The idea goes back to the English Pre-Raphaelites of the mid-nineteenth century, and was certainly reborn into modernism in the German Bauhaus of the 1920s. It is not surprising that a key leader of the WPA poster division, Richard Floethe...was trained there.” Christopher DeNoon, *Posters of the WPA* (Los Angeles: Wheatley Press, in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1987), 9.

directly through a newer iteration of these concepts expressed in the German Bauhaus school.⁹⁹ Susan Tallman, and others, have demonstrated that Bauhaus artists saw original handmade art as elitist and wanted to create a truly accessible, democratic form of art through mass production.¹⁰⁰ This suggests that the integration of fine and practical arts advocated by the Bauhaus school leaned more heavily in favor of the practical. Printmaking, as a mass media form, was a suitable vehicle for these ideals. Erika Doss has described how printmaking was particularly well-suited to the popular interwar ideals of creating an art affordable for all.¹⁰¹ In the catalog for a 1940 exhibition of serigraphs at the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts, art critic Elizabeth McCausland emphasized that the subject matter and images were meant to appeal to a wide audience, “For in the new orientation of artists to a popular audience lies the most hopeful omen for the creation of contemporary popular art in America.”¹⁰² The idea of a “popular art” included expanding the buying audience for American art in the United States. Artists created work for the masses and in turn the popular audience financially supported local, living artists. The monetary support of living artists was one of the goals of the NSS. Ralph M. Pearson emphasized this in a 1948 article for *The Art Digest*, “Support for organizations like these *causes works of art to be produced in our day*. Buying expensive jewelry and such from swanky millionaire business

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Susan Tallman, *The Contemporary Print: from Pre-Pop to Postmodern* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 69.

¹⁰¹ “Notions of creating affordable ‘art for the people’ were common in the 1930s, and the serial capacity of prints—etchings, lithographs, woodcuts, serigraphs, and more—meshed perfectly with these ideals. Even before the WPA/FAP’s Graphics Division was created in 1935, outfits such as the Contemporary Print Group, the Associated American Artists, and the American Artists Group had formed with the intention of providing ‘pictures for the mass’.” Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: from Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 252.

¹⁰² Elizabeth McCausland, Exhibition catalog, “Exhibition of Silk Screen Prints at the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts,” 1940, Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

firms, and old masters, causes *no* works of art to be produced. Imagine what a check for a thousand dollars would mean for a group of serious workers” [emphasis in original].¹⁰³

For advocates of the ideal of “art for the masses,” affordability meant accessibility. The idea that art could be for everyday people as a part of everyday life was an important notion for justifying a “popular” art. A lower price point was an intuitive vehicle for democratization when the market democratized access to a wide variety of products and services through mail-order catalogs and supermarkets. Unlike other printmaking methods, serigraph prints did not require purchasing and maintaining expensive equipment. The equipment needed to produce serigraphs were easily sourced or constructed and artists could produce works in their own studios. The screen print process could be used on any type of paper and the commercial inks used for screen printing were called “process oil paints” and they were relatively inexpensive. Artists could also use a specially manufactured “process oil paint base” to be able to create serigraphs using their studio oil paints. However, there were limitations to the amount of oil paint that could be added without disrupting the integrity of the ink and the base made for this purpose was expensive.¹⁰⁴

The Museum of Modern Art held the exhibition “Color Prints under \$10” in November 1940. The press release for this exhibition explained that all the prints on view were for sale to fulfill the exhibition’s purpose of “stimulating” the public’s interest in buying contemporary American art.¹⁰⁵ This exhibition featured Max Arthur Cohn’s *Boat Pier*, a waterfront image of a small structure with one small figure walking out on the dock (fig. 25).¹⁰⁶ The figure is defined

¹⁰³ Ralph M. Pearson, “A Modern Point of View: On Spending Money,” *The Art Digest*, October 1, 1948, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ralph Mayer, “Some Notes on Serigraph Materials,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 2, no. 1 (New York: National Serigraph Society, February 1947), 3.

¹⁰⁵ “Since the purpose of Art Week is to stimulate the public’s interest in buying American art at moderate prices, thus bringing together the artist and the wider buying audience, all prints shown may be purchased from the exhibitions.” Press Release, “American Color Prints Under Ten Dollars,” Exhibitions, The Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2995>.

¹⁰⁶ “American Color Prints Under Ten Dollars,” Exhibitions, The Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2995>.

economically with just a few lines and colors that are repeated in the composition. The patchwork sky haloes the figure through a gap in color where the raw paper comes through. Forms are outlined with dark greens and browns. The lack of black outlines lends a softness to the overall image and ensures that individual colors are used multiple times throughout the composition. *Boat Pier* strikes a balance between simplicity and detail which lends an immediacy to the work. This piece takes on the appearance of a quickly rendered watercolor sketch when, in actuality, it was carefully constructed through individual color separations that strategically fit together to fill and outline each component of the image. A serigraph like this that sold for \$10.00 in December 1940 would equate to \$220.00 in February 2024.¹⁰⁷ The same price point was used by the NSS in the title of a 1946 exhibition “Gift Prints Under \$10.00” which was held around Christmastime and yielded unprecedented attention from the press.¹⁰⁸ This price placed serigraphs into the buying range of middle-class Americans or professional decorators designing office spaces, cruise ships, or hotels. This is far from the socialist ideals of every American being able to easily own original works of art. However, these lower priced works did reach a less elitist, more democratized popular audience. The sale of artwork at moderate prices increased the visibility of modern American art and allowed the artists who were making serigraphs to maintain their careers.

When funding to the FAP projects ended in 1943, artists took on entrepreneurial strategies for engaging directly with the art-buying market. The NSS functioned by charging membership dues. Serigraph Galleries conducted sales on behalf of the NSS members and

¹⁰⁷ “CPI Inflation Calculator,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=10&year1=194012&year2=202402>.

¹⁰⁸ “The Society’s Christmas exhibition of Gift Prints Under \$10.00 attracted more widespread press comment to date than any previous showing.” “Announcements,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 2, no. 1 (New York: National Serigraph Society, February 1947), 5. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

organized exhibitions in galleries and museums across the United States. The 57th Street location placed serigraphs alongside other fine art galleries and gave them greater exposure to an art-buying audience. Members of the NSS pooled their resources to minimize financial risk for everyone, but when they began selling artwork alongside other commercial art galleries, there was no guarantee of their success. The “reasonable” pricing of serigraphs did mean that a wider range of people were able to afford them, but it also meant that they needed to make more individual sales than other galleries. Interior decorators took great interest in serigraphs and shaped the success of post-war serigraphs by buying serigraphs in larger quantities for clients to decorate individual homes as well as commercial spaces. Because of the national membership and the diversity of style among members, decorators had a large catalog of works to choose from to serve different spaces and clients. Because of the low cost of individual works, the decorators could buy a large number of works at a time and fill wall space easily with brightly colored pieces. Finally, because serigraphs followed fine print conventions, the works were made in consistent sizes, were easily framed, and had vetted value as fine art originals.

Serigraphs entered the gift market of New York City where they were perceived as more expensive than color reproduction prints but higher quality.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, color was one of serigraphy’s greatest assets. The advantage serigraphs had over color lithographs was its ability to use paint as ink, thus having access to a wider range of pigments, opacity, and viscosity than was possible in printing ink. Carl Zigrosser remarked upon the importance of color for serigraphs in 1941, “The greatest virtue of the serigraph is color. Its greatest triumphs will come through the creative use of color—color, and color solely in the rendering of form, color for emotive effects.

¹⁰⁹ “More expensive but worth it artistically is National Serigraph’s lot.” “Art in the Christmas Mail,” *Art News* (December 1-14, 1945): 30. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Perhaps its greatest use will be as decoration, to brighten the walls and homes of the people.”¹¹⁰ As Zigrosser notes, the rich colors of serigraphs were desirable specifically for decorative capabilities.

In the summer of 1946, the NSS held an exhibition titled “Decorator’s Choice” which was curated in partnership with five professional decorators as curators: Bertha Schaefer, Henri Courtais, Milka Iconomoff, Nancy McClelland, and Mary Dunn.¹¹¹ The object list for this exhibition indicated which decorator selected each work and for what purpose they selected it. The purpose indicated which type of room each print was suited to the “decorative requirements” of in “either modern or period style.”¹¹² The “purposes” indicated which room the serigraph would decorate best and included: nursery, general, girl’s room, bedroom, living room, cabana, child’s room, bathroom, library, library or music, dining room, and hall.¹¹³ The decorator Bertha Schaefer selected Max Arthur Cohn’s serigraph, *The Bay (Wellfleet)* (fig. 10), to be in the exhibition and placed it into the “general” category meaning it would be suitable for any room in the home.¹¹⁴ The scene consists of five fishermen on a shoreline. There is a limited color palette of gray, green, light brown, and dark, reddish brown. The clothing and skin tone of the figures are repeated in the environment around them creating a sense of cohesion. The texture of the sand is described through specks of pigment that glitter across the shore. An empty boat is placed in the foreground which invites the viewer to imagine themselves in the scene. The *Bay*

¹¹⁰ Zigrosser, “The Serigraph, A New Medium,” 475.

¹¹¹ Exhibition object list, “The Decorator’s Choice,” 1946, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 17, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹² “Announcements,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 3 (New York: National Serigraph Society, August 1946), 4. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Exhibition object list, “The Decorator’s Choice,” 1946, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 17, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This serigraph was titled *The Bay* in this 1946 exhibition image list but was later titled *Wellfleet* by Cohn, which indicates that this is a scene observed in Wellfleet, Massachusetts.

(Wellfleet) is similar to other serigraphs made by Cohn, with small but detailed figures carrying out quiet activity in a receding landscape. The selection of this work indicates that Cohn's subject matter and style was considered well-suited to serve a decorative function in the midcentury home.

In 1951, the NSS held a similar exhibition titled "The Designer's Choice" which employed a similar model of guest curation by a group of professionals, this time including works chosen by Edward Wormley, Warner-Leeds, Ann Hatfield Associates, Allen McGhee of Manor House, and Marvin Monk of Design House.¹¹⁵ The connection between Serigraph Galleries and professional decoration and interior design went beyond these collaborative exhibitions. Margaret Elliot wrote an article for the *New York World-Telegram* in 1948 which describes an interaction with Serigraph Gallery director Doris Meltzer in which Meltzer "dished out advice for homemakers deciding what pictures to hang in their homes and where to hang them."¹¹⁶ This advice included the suggestion of filling large open wall space with several smaller artworks all framed alike to create a miniature art gallery in the home.¹¹⁷ Serigraph Galleries likely offered the service of framing a set of works in matching frames, they required that artists send in their works unframed and unmatted, and they offered different frame options for whether the work was being sold "as decorations" or "as Fine Prints."¹¹⁸ A confidential newsletter sent to NSS members in 1952 noted that decorators received a twenty percent

¹¹⁵ Exhibition invitation, "The Designer's Choice" preview, May 29, 1951, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 18 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹⁶ Newspaper clipping, Margaret Elliot, "Art on Silk Screen Original, Cheaper," *New York World-Telegram*, October 4, 1948, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 18, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ "Suggested Notes for Lecture Demonstrations Given by Members of the National Serigraph Society," n.d., p. 2, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

discount at Serigraph Galleries.¹¹⁹ The NSS also announced a shopping consultation service specific to advice on home decoration in *Serigraph Quarterly* in March 1950.¹²⁰ The announcement explained that design consultations were already being offered informally by gallery staff daily and that a focus on decorative art and design was conceptually in line with the values held by many members of the society who had “entered into the current feeling that a home is a work of art, and an expression of the individual’s taste and personality—that therefore no facet of the home is unworthy of the artists’ considerations.”¹²¹

Decorators also purchased serigraphs to be displayed in commercial spaces. The most well-documented commercial context for serigraphs was ocean liners. A sales memo from the NSS, it notes that some of Cohn’s serigraphs were sold to be displayed on the S.S. Constitution and the S.S. Independence.¹²² An exhibition in 1948 at Serigraph Galleries displayed 24 serigraphs selected by Donald Desky Associates to adorn the walls in the newly re-commissioned U.S.S. Argentina.¹²³ The announcement of this exhibition in Serigraph Galleries emphasized how this was an excellent opportunity for serigraphs to gain attention of the press and how the inclusion of serigraphs made the American ships more attractive and therefore more

¹¹⁹ Doris Meltzer, “National Serigraph Society Confidential Newsletter,” November 3, 1952, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹²⁰ This service included offers for printing serigraphs on fabric. E.G.S. “New Gallery Service,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 5, no. 1 (New York: National Serigraph Society, March 1950), 2-3. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Sales memo, National Serigraph Society, August 1 to November 1, 1950, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1928-1978. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹²³ “A special showing of the serigraphs installed in the staterooms and cabins of the newly re-commissioned liner S. S. Argentina of the Moore-McCormack fleet will be held at Serigraph Galleries from February 16 through March 6. 24 serigraphs in varying quantities were selected by Donald Desky Associates and represents the work of members Charles Barrows, Marion Cunningham, Frank Davidson, Ernest Hopf, Dora Kaminsky, Bernard A. Kohn, Marie R. Macpherson, Doris Meltzer, Isaac Lane Muse, Ruth Starr Rose and Mary van Blarcom.” “Serigraphs on the S. S. Argentina,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 3, no. 1 (New York: National Serigraph Society, February 1948), 6. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

competitive with popular “foreign lines.”¹²⁴ The first page of the November 1948 *Serigraph Quarterly* featured photographs of serigraphs selected as decorations for staterooms by Henry Dreyfuss who was charged with the design of the American Export Lines known as the “Four Aces:” the S. S. Excalibur, the S. S. Exochorda, the S. S. Exeter, and the S. S. Excampion.¹²⁵ Serigraphs gained a wider audience by being featured prominently in these ocean liners that had been re-designed for passenger cruises after the war. Corporate spaces like ocean liners, hotels, and office buildings allowed a wider population of people to enjoy serigraphs if not in their homes, then perhaps at their workplace or in the hotel or restaurant they visited. There was a prominent subsection of modern artists that were optimistic about the potential for corporate sponsorship to support individual freedom of expression among artists and to grow the art-buying audience.

While serigraph artists successfully sold their work to many individuals, museums, and interior decorators, they struggled against the commercial connotations of the silkscreen process. Silk screen printing processes were used for a wide variety of products in the United States beginning in 1915. Highly visible screen-printed materials by the 1930s included car pennants, show cards, and product labels. Anthony Velonis recounted in a 1965 interview that in 1932 the screen print process was being used “in textiles quite a bit” and as “backgrounds for, I’d say for department store windows and wallpaper. Some poster work but it was rather crude, as a matter

¹²⁴ “The Exhibition will be of especial interest because of the wide press coverage attending the debut of the newly-decorated ship. Perhaps the accomplishment of furnishing an American passenger ship in a more comfortable and attractive style will influence other American shipowners to follow suit, the better to compete with foreign lines which have been much more popular heretofore. Further, the exhibition will demonstrate the charming originality of the prints which are being used to enliven and make attractive the rooms which on American ships were previously so commonplace as to be cell-like.” Ibid.

¹²⁵ *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 3, no. 4 (New York: National Serigraph Society, November 1948), 1. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

of fact.”¹²⁶ The NSS worked constantly to control the definition of “serigraph” which they used to distinguish their works from photographically produced silkscreen color reproductions. In 1949, Harry Shokler explained that the demonstrations that the Silk Screen Group held to spread awareness of the fine art capabilities of the medium were well received by the public but unfortunately the immediate popularity of fine art screen prints led “a certain firm” to take advantage of the situation and flood the market with mechanically reproduced works that were being labeled “Original Silk Screen Oil Paintings.”¹²⁷ Carl Zigrosser defined a serigraph print as “one which the artist made after his own design and for which the artist himself executed the component color stencils.”¹²⁸ Serigraph Galleries invested heavily in establishing the fine-art status of serigraphs and acted as gatekeepers of the term. In an invitation for members to submit work to “The Thirteenth Annual Exhibition of the National Serigraph Society,” the requirements for the medium are specified, “Only serigraphs (original silk screen prints) produced since March 1951 are eligible. No hand coloring or retouching subsequent to printing nor prints using photographic stencils will be accepted.”¹²⁹

Serigraph artists were not the first to struggle against the commercial connotations of a color print medium. Lithographers working in color faced a similar problem in the late nineteenth century. Chromolithography had become incredibly popular for reproducing color images in magazines, book plates, and a wide variety of memorabilia. However, the popularity of Jules Chéret’s largescale, brightly colored posters drew many artists to the increasingly evident

¹²⁶ Anthony Velonis, Oral history interview with Anthony Velonis, 1965 October 13, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹²⁷ Harry Shokler, “The National Serigraph Society: The First Ten Years,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 4 no. 2 & 3 (New York: National Serigraph Society, May and August 1949), 6. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art.

¹²⁸ Zigrosser is quoted by Harry Shokler in *Artists Manual for Silk Screen Print Making*, vii.

¹²⁹ “Thirteenth Annual Exhibition of the National Serigraph Society,” November 1950, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 18, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

potential of color lithography as medium for academic art.¹³⁰ Ruth Iskin credits André Mellerio with theorizing the “multiple original.”¹³¹ The term “multiple original” described prints that were conceived of as prints only with no “original” painting or drawing that they were derived from. An artist creating a color lithograph would create a design specifically to be expressed by printing layers of stone plates with color separations to result in a fixed number of color prints. Each of these resulting works should be considered an original because the artwork was conceived of as something that would exist in a fixed number of multiples, and prints were considered an original art since they were created for their own sake and not merely a process used solely for reproduction.¹³² Artists in France in the late nineteenth century strategically distanced their fine art color prints linguistically by calling them *lithographie originale en couleurs* instead of *chromolithographies*¹³³ They also invoked ideals of medium specificity by using fewer colors, avoiding the “muddy” effect observed in chromolithographs when too many colors were layered on top of one another.¹³⁴

The rhetoric used by American serigraph artists is notably similar to Mellerio’s theorization of the “multiple original.” Perhaps most obviously, serigraph artists linguistically distanced themselves from commercial screen-prints through the term “serigraph.” The NSS insisted that any serigraphs submitted to them follow the conventions of other fine art print

¹³⁰ Phillip Dennis Cate, Sinclair Hitchings, and André Mellerio. *The Color Revolution: Color Lithography in France, 1890-1900* (Santa Barbara: P. Smith, 1978), 4.; Ruth Iskin, *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s-1900s* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), 131-132.

¹³¹ Ruth Iskin, *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s-1900s*, 137-138.

¹³² Phillip Dennis Cate, Sinclair Hitchings, and André Mellerio, *The Color Revolution: Color Lithography in France, 1890-1900*, 81.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³⁴ “However, successive printings do not mix colors thoroughly but rather superimpose them. It thus seems wise to avoid excessive mixtures ending in the pretentious insipidities of chromolithographs. It is to the advantage of the modern multi-color print to keep color areas separate, with a simplicity of tone, aiming more for harmony of the whole than for complicated shadings.” Phillip Dennis Cate, Sinclair Hitchings, and André Mellerio, *The Color Revolution: Color Lithography in France, 1890-1900*, *Ibid.*, 94.

editions. As Edward Landon wrote for *Serigraph Quarterly*, “The serigrapher should approach his projected print with the same craftsmanship displayed by the etcher, wood-engraver or other graphic artist.”¹³⁵ It was seen as imperative by the NSS that serigraphs be printed on standardized paper of equal size with proper margins, that each print in a run should be consistent, and that artists sign, title, date, and edition each print in the same place.¹³⁶ Elizabeth Olds used the term “Multiple Original” to describe color screen prints in a catalog for an exhibition of work by the Silk Screen Group at F.A.R. Gallery.¹³⁷ The NSS reinforced a dichotomy between the autographed original and a signed reproduction.¹³⁸ The NSS used this distinction to maintain the fine art status of their prints, which was further validated by museums who incorporated serigraphs into their permanent collections.

William Stanley Hayter wrote in a 1946 article for *Serigraph Quarterly* that the greatest value that serigraphs had was that they allowed artists to make color reproductions of their own work.¹³⁹ This statement was understandably criticized by subsequent letters to the editor since members of the NSS were deeply invested in the designation of their prints as original works of art. Hayter’s statement implies that artists were outsourcing the labor of creating color

¹³⁵ Edward Landon, “Editorial On ‘Print Quality’,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 2 (New York: National Serigraph Society, May 1946), 2. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ “One reason for the increasing popularity of Silk Screen prints is that ‘multiple originals’, pictures in color, for the home and office have now become a reality to a larger buying public because of the reasonable price.” Exhibition catalog, “Exhibition of Silk Screen Prints: The Silk Screen Group of the United American Artists: F.A.R. Gallery 19 East 61st Street,” ca. 1939-1943, Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³⁸ “In the Interest of Integrity, An Open Letter to Publishers, Dealers and Educational Institutions,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 3, no. 4 (New York: National Serigraph Society, November 1948), 2. Landon papers box 2, folder 2 Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³⁹ Stanley William Hayter, “The Silk Screen,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 4 (New York: National Serigraph Society, November 1946), 1. Landon papers box 2, folder 2 Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

reproductions of their work and that they could save money and create reproductions that were more true to the originals by doing it themselves. It is unclear whether any artist followed this advice, as many members wrote argumentative letters to the editor decrying this suggestion. The negative reception to Hayter's statements, which took the form of several combative letters to the editor of *Serigraph Quarterly*, reveals that anxiety around serigraphs being equated with color reproductions persisted even as the medium peaked in popularity. The NSS expressed relief and excitement when screen printing became more fully mechanized because it made it easier to distinguish between commercially produced screen prints and fine art serigraphs.¹⁴⁰ Serigraphs were presented as original works of fine art that were distinct from commercial reproductions but were sold purposefully at a lower price point.

The combination of the perceived proximity to commercial reproductions and the success of serigraphs in a decorative context likely led them to be marginalized in subsequent art historical scholarship. In *Weaving Modernism* K. L. H. Wells describes the concept of "marketplace modernism" as a wider view of modern art that examines its various, sometimes contradictory, contexts including commercial galleries, corporate offices, and the private homes of collectors who commission work as participants in a wider visual culture unbounded by the limitations of what has been historically categorized as fine art.¹⁴¹ While Wells focuses on the marketplace modernism of tapestries, which are larger works requiring a team of skilled

¹⁴⁰ "Announcements," *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 5, no. 2 (New York: National Serigraph Society, June 1950), 2. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 2, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴¹ "Examining modern tapestry performs a parallel service for our understanding of twentieth-century art because tapestry points us to a kind of 'marketplace modernism,' a wider definition of modernism that similarly illuminates its own context, public reception, plurality, and contradiction. Marketplace modernism existed in blockbuster exhibitions, biennials, corporate headquarters, government buildings, churches, and even airplanes, as well as commercial galleries and private homes. To take this wider view does not necessarily imply that we are leaving the domain of art to consider a broader category of visual culture. Rather, it is to see modern art as itself constituting a visual culture, an extended network of objects and exhibitions venues and meanings for a range of historical actors," K. L. H. Wells, *Weaving Modernism: Postwar Tapestry Between Paris and New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 8.

craftspeople and the coordination of the artist and commissioner in a more expensive sale, this concept helps explain the way that these smaller, less expensive, studio-made serigraphs engaged in marketing their works through partnerships with interior decorators. Marketplace modernism allows for a more expansive view of marketing that goes beyond monetary objectives and includes the wider cultural impact of works that are made and shown to be sold.¹⁴² The lens of marketplace modernism provides an alternative approach to including decorative works in art historical scholarship without minimizing their fine art status nor the commercial forces at play. Understanding the decorative role that even canonical modern art played in postwar America provides an opportunity to see the value in serigraphy without arguing for its elevation beyond its original context as a moderately priced gift print. The connection between decorative art and serigraphy has been under-acknowledged perhaps in the interest of securing serigraphy as a legitimate fine art. However, this aspect of serigraphy has a basis in a lineage of legitimate movements in art—the Pre-Raphaelites, the Arts and Crafts movement, and the Bauhaus School—which valued the space of the home as a work of art itself. Many artists were passionate about furthering the serigraph medium because of the potential it had for market accessibility and as a way for more people to bring beauty into their living spaces.

CONCLUSION

Max Arthur Cohn made most of his serigraphs between 1934 and 1950 but his participation in NSS activities is documented through 1953. Cohn likely created serigraphs to maintain connection to a wider community of artists and to increase his visibility as an artist-

¹⁴² Ibid., 9.

entrepreneur. These prints were sold at inexpensive rates to democratize access to fine art among the growing American middle class. Cohn made his final full-sized serigraph in 1950.¹⁴³ When he retired from his screen-printing business in 1962, although he continued to create serigraph greeting cards, he shifted his focus primarily to painting. This implies that for Cohn, the creation of serigraphs was in some way tied to his commercial art studio. Cohn learned silkscreen printing as a commercial trade, created fine art serigraphs alongside commercial screen prints for years, and shifted to focusing on painting once he was able. However, Cohn continued to sell his remaining serigraphs and discuss his role as a pioneer of serigraphy throughout his later painting career.¹⁴⁴

The decline of serigraphy began in the late 1950s when the rising rent prices in and around 57th street where many art galleries where Serigraph Galleries was situated began to place financial strain on the organization.¹⁴⁵ The end of NSS coincides with the year Marilyn Monroe died and Andy Warhol began creating silkscreen images of her, 1962.¹⁴⁶ There is no causal relationship between the end of serigraphy and the rise of Pop Art, but the two are closely correlated and Pop Art has overshadowed serigraphs in the years to come, especially in the eyes of art critics and historians. While serigraph artists chose to work with a commercial medium and embraced the duplicative potentials of screen printing, they were fighting against the context of commercial reproductions in order to secure legitimate standing in the art market. The NSS

¹⁴³ Jane Cohn Waldbaum, email correspondence with author, April 24, 2024.

¹⁴⁴ “Besides painting my interest also was in serigraphy, a form of color printing that became quite popular with a number of artists and helped form the Serigraph Society and Galleries. Exhibitions were held all over the country and included museums and universities.” Max Arthur Cohn, Letter to Kenneth Bendiner, April 26, 1988, Max Arthur Cohn papers, 1927-2014, bulk 1927-1998, box 1, folder 21, Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

¹⁴⁵ Doris Meltzer, “Notice,” December 31, 1962, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴⁶ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: the Warhol '60s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

documented their struggle against the connotation of creating reproductions of paintings. Indeed, there were several instances where they were unable to control the use of the term serigraph and instead called out instances of “bogus” serigraphs which had used photochemical reproduction methods to create color separations.¹⁴⁷ Serigraphs were criticized in their time for being too closely aligned with a commercial medium and therefore problematic as an investment.

Serigraphs have also been criticized for not embracing the commercial context of screen printing enough. In hindsight, serigraphs were seen as weakly imitating Abstract Expressionism and being too timid to fully embrace the innate commercial context of the screen print medium. I argue that the artists who made serigraphs utilized the mass manufacturing potential of serigraphs for the progressive goal of distributing their artwork to a mass audience. The success of Pop Art meant wider acceptance of appropriating commercial processes and aesthetics. While serigraphs demonstrated that fine art could be created in a commercial medium, Pop artists employed a different approach which prioritized the appropriation of commercial style as art itself. Once this leap was made, serigraphs looked conservative by comparison even though they claim lineage to the arts and crafts movement which sought to integrate art and design to bring beauty into functional everyday objects and spaces.

Serigraphy as a term has become destabilized and is used by art sellers and museums somewhat arbitrarily, but the medium has a legacy of its own. When the NSS disbanded, many of their members joined the Print Club of Philadelphia.¹⁴⁸ Many artists continued to create serigraphs after this. Many serigraph artists continued to be successful printmakers and the role

¹⁴⁷ A section of Irwin Haas’s article “The Print Collector” from the March 1947 edition of *Art News* was reprinted in *Serigraph Quarterly* under the title “Bogus Serigraphs” which declares a work made by Mervin Jules to be a fake serigraph. “Bogus Serigraphs,” *Serigraph Quarterly* vol. 2, no. 2 (New York: National Serigraph Society, May 1947), 4.

¹⁴⁸ Doris Meltzer, “Notice,” December 31, 1962, Doris Meltzer papers, 1930-1976, box 2, folder 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

of screen printing as a fine art medium only grew. The legacy of serigraphy as a decorative graphic art is evident in the large editions of color screen-prints sold by Charley Harper (American, 1922-2007) in museum gift shops; Harper calls these works serigraphs and creates the color separations himself.¹⁴⁹ The museum gift shop remains a prominent site for the wider public to be given an opportunity to participate in art-buying.¹⁵⁰

The serigraphs of Max Arthur Cohn offer ongoing opportunities for further research into the development of the medium. Serigraphs were collected by museums frequently at the time of their creation, but the existing number of serigraphs is only a fraction of what were made at the height of the NSS. Max Arthur Cohn's serigraphs were printed on high quality paper and the thin application of transparent color as endured time better than the thick layers of paint that tend to crack.¹⁵¹ The nearly complete collection of Cohn's serigraphs held by the UWM Art Collection allows for a more in-depth examination of how one artist engaged with serigraphy as a part of their larger artistic practice. Cohn's serigraphs are unique among others because of his skill with watercolor-like transparencies and because his serigraphs were a continuation of his paintings. Because artists were encouraged to experiment with the medium and to create serigraphs that reflected their individual technical and stylistic interests, additional studies of other serigraph artists would likely reveal entirely new trajectories for the meaning of the medium. This investigation of Cohn's engagement with the medium offers an alternative lens for viewing

¹⁴⁹ "In the beginning it was a basement operation with an assistant. Now it consumes so much time and space that I work with a commercial printer, Silk Screen Products of Cincinnati. I still make the stencils, set the registration, check the color, and closely supervise everything that can affect the quality of the print." "Frequently Asked Questions," Charley Harper Art Studio, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.charleyharperartstudio.com/about-charley/faq.html>.

¹⁵⁰ "In the 1990s the major surviving purveyor of inexpensive artists' multiples is the museum gift shop—a conflation of the very two institutions the multiple was supposed to make obsolete." Susan Tallman, *The Contemporary Print: from Pre-Pop to Postmodern*, 80.

¹⁵¹ Falk, "Max Arthur Cohn: Pioneer of the Screenprint," 16.

serigraphs not as the pre-history to Pop Art but as a highly individualized printmaking medium with the common aims of providing colorful works of art to American homes. The progressive aims of the serigraph artists coming out of the WPA shaped a coherent movement of artists furthering the silkscreen print medium.

Progressive ideals of the WPA era shaped every aspect of serigraphs. Ideals of “art for the masses” encouraged artists to create works that were accessible to popular audiences both in terms of price and subject matter which led to the success of serigraphs within decorative art markets. Serigraphs were increasingly tailored towards this buying audience through the adoption of standardized sizes which were easier to frame and the wide sale of serigraph greeting cards which were ideal gifts. The development of individual styles encouraged by the antifascist “Popular Front” encouraged artists to align their serigraph prints with their overall studio practices and to continue to experiment with a wide range of technical processes when creating serigraphs. This led to the high level of diversity among serigraphs which in turn made them more popular with art buyers who were hoping to find works of art for their home that reflected their personality. Skill-sharing and resource-sharing among artists reflected the ideals of access to education and training which shaped the structure of the WPA. Although widely sharing the means for creating serigraphs might have increased the number of commercial color reproductions the NSS had to compete with, it also greatly increased the number of serigraph artists both nationally and internationally. The wide-spread demonstration of serigraph techniques is perhaps the clearest legacy of the serigraph artists.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Max Arthur Cohn, *Abstraction (recto)*, 1982, gouache on board, 13 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches, UWM Art Collection, long-term loan from Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse, MAC #1982-G50.

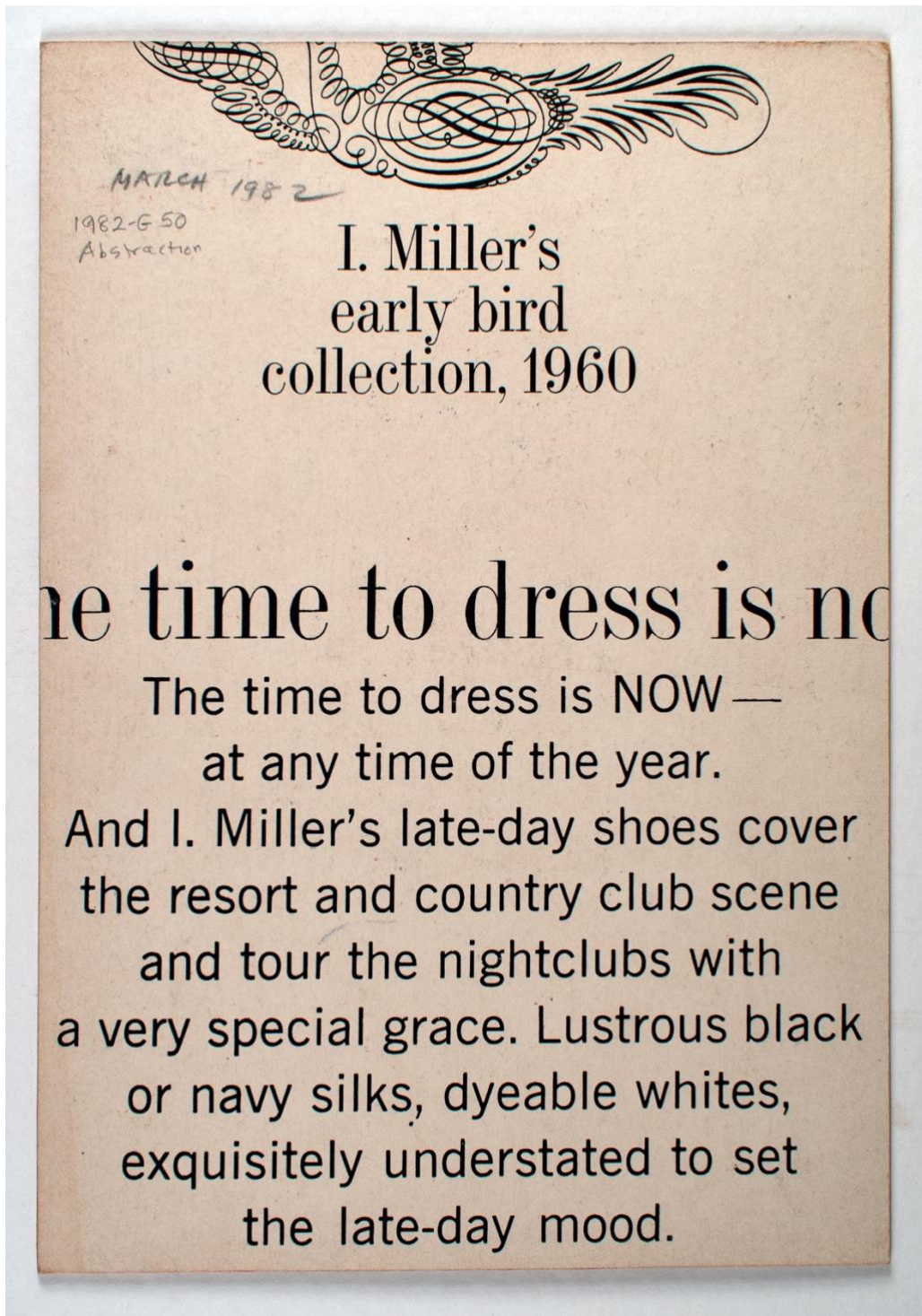


Figure 2. Max Arthur Cohn, *Abstraction* (verso, partial I Miller Shoe poster), 1982, gouache on board, 13 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches, UWM Art Collection, long-term loan from Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse, MAC #1982-G50.



Figure 3: Max Arthur Cohn, *Gathering Wheat*, 1934, color screenprint, edition of 38, 13 3/4 x 20 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 1994.007.14.

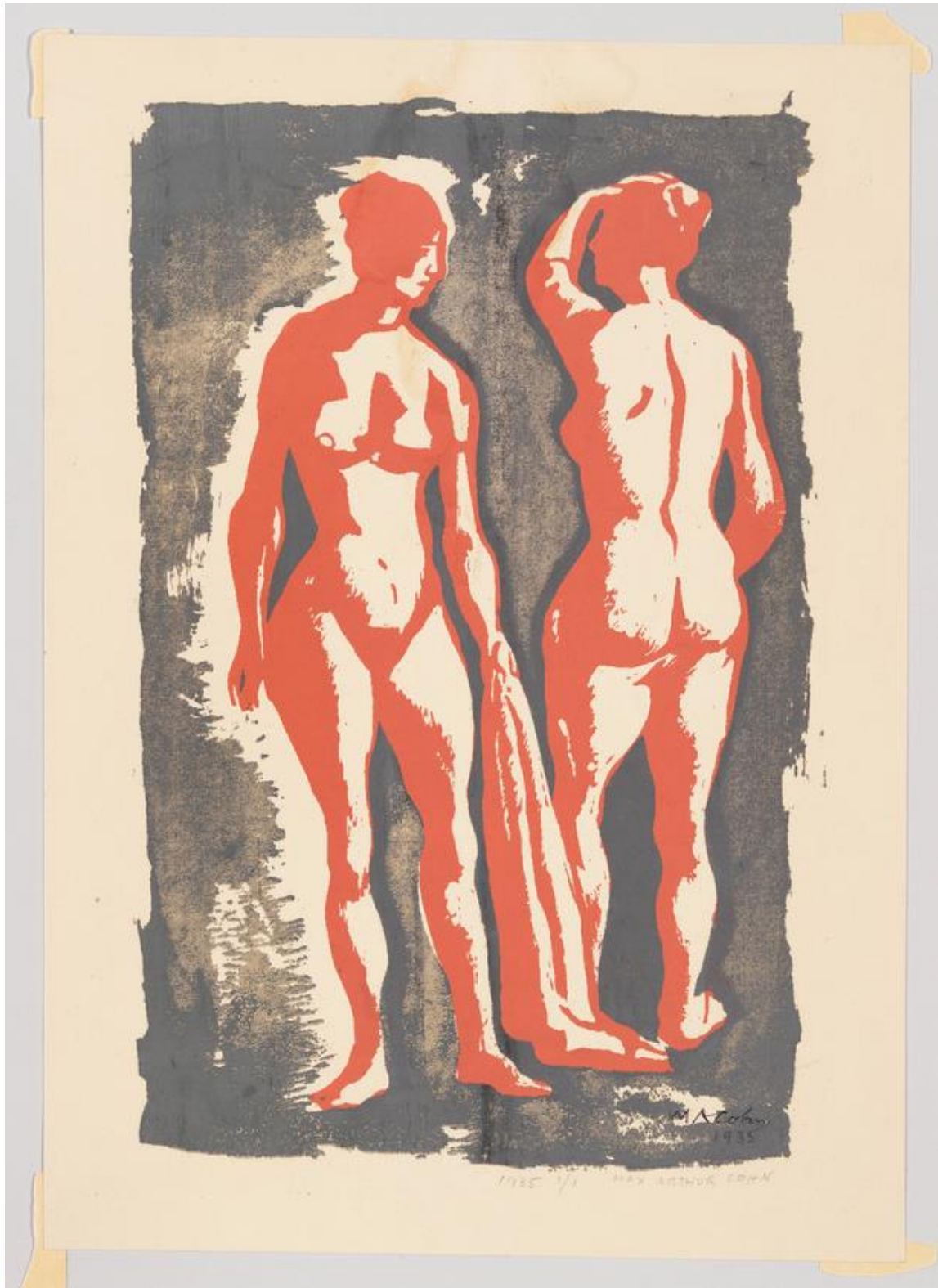


Figure 3. Max Arthur Cohn, *Two Nudes*, 1935, color screenprint, edition of 1, 11 1/4 x 7 1/4, Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse, accession number 2000.317.



Figure 4. Anthony Velonis, *Decoration Empire*, 1939, color screenprint, Artist's Proof, 11 1/2 x 13 3/4, The National Gallery of Art, Reba and Dave Williams Collection, Gift of Reba and Dave Williams, accession number 2008.115.4843.



Figure 5. Max Arthur Cohn, *Harlem River*, 1942, color screenprint book plate, 6 x 8 inches, Biegeleisen, J. I. (Jacob Israel), and Max Arthur Cohn. *Silk Screen Stenciling as a Fine Art*. With an Introduction by Rockwell Kent. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1942, ii.



Progressive proofs.

Figure 6. Max Arthur Cohn, illustration of progressive proofs for *Harlem River*, 8 x 6 inches, Biegeleisen, J. I. (Jacob Israel), and Max Arthur Cohn. *Silk Screen Stenciling as a Fine Art*. With an Introduction by Rockwell Kent. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. 1942, 170.



Figure 7. Max Arthur Cohn, *Low Tide Gloucester*; 1939, color screenprint, edition of 56, 13 1/4 x 22 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 1989.001.08.

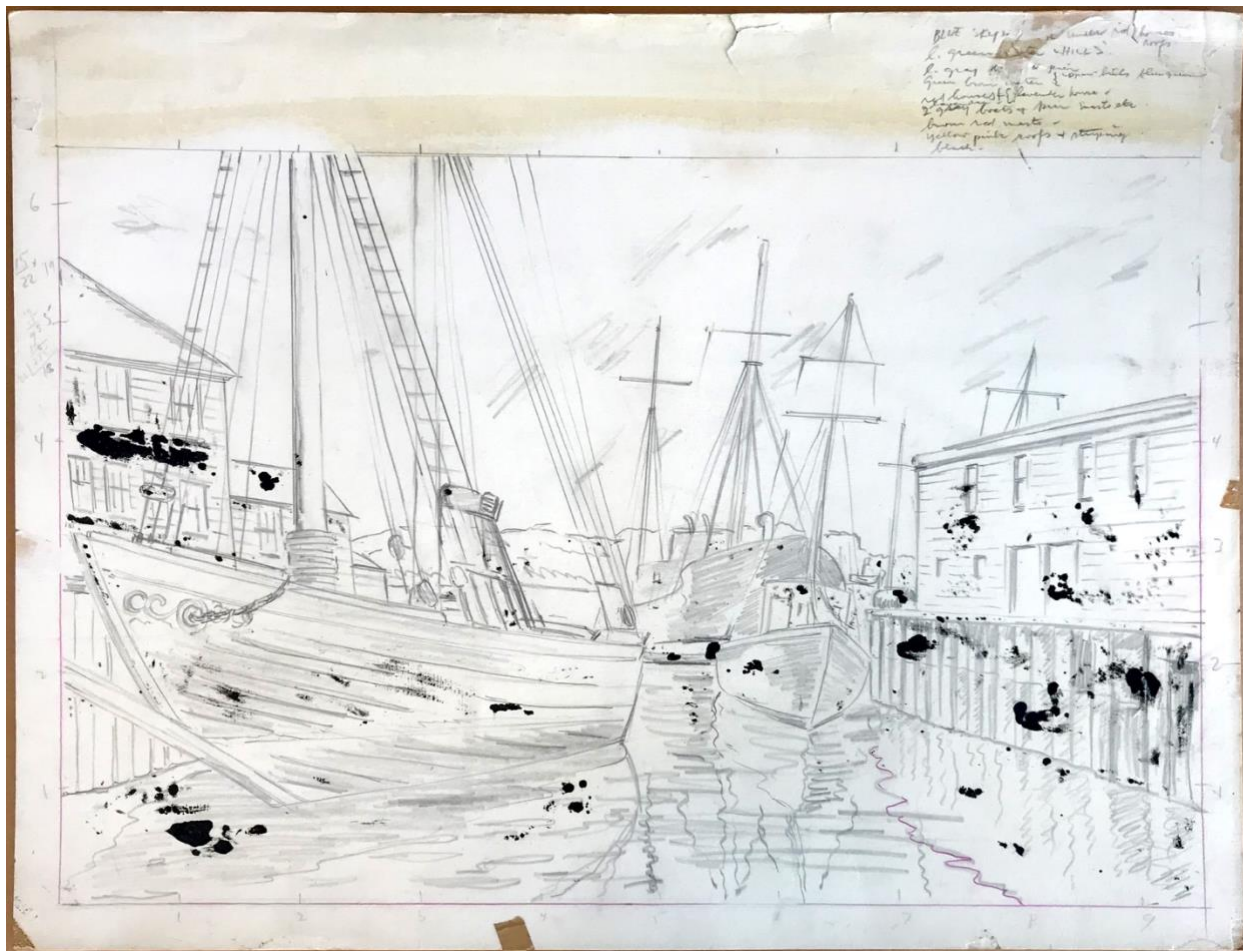


Figure 8. Max Arthur Cohn, preliminary drawing for *Low Tide Gloucester*, c.1939, graphite on paper, 13 1/4 x 22 inches, collection of Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse.



Figure 9. Max Arthur Cohn, test print for *Low Tide Gloucester*, c.1939, color screenprint, 13 1/4 x 22 inches, collection of Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse.

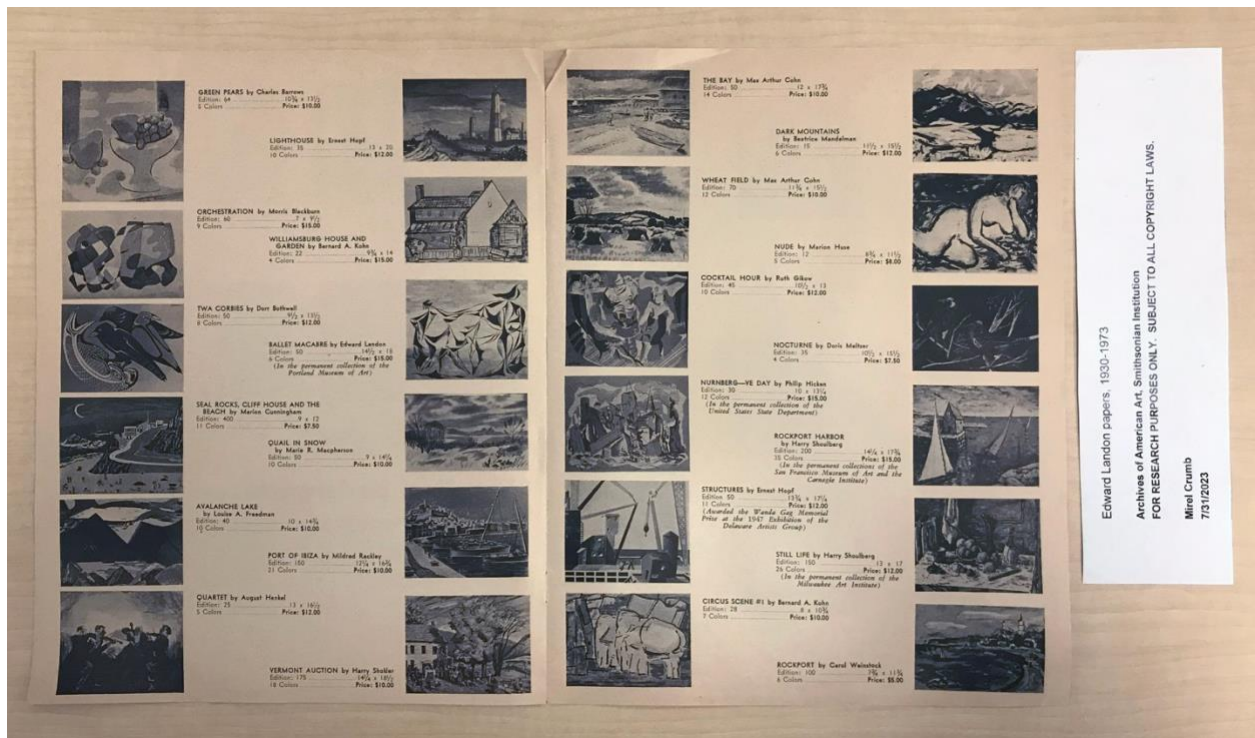


Figure 10. Catalog, “New Serigraphs by Members of the National Serigraph Society available from Serigraph Galleries, 38 West 57th Street, New York City,” 1947, p. 6-7. Edward Landon papers, 1930-1973, box 1, folder 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

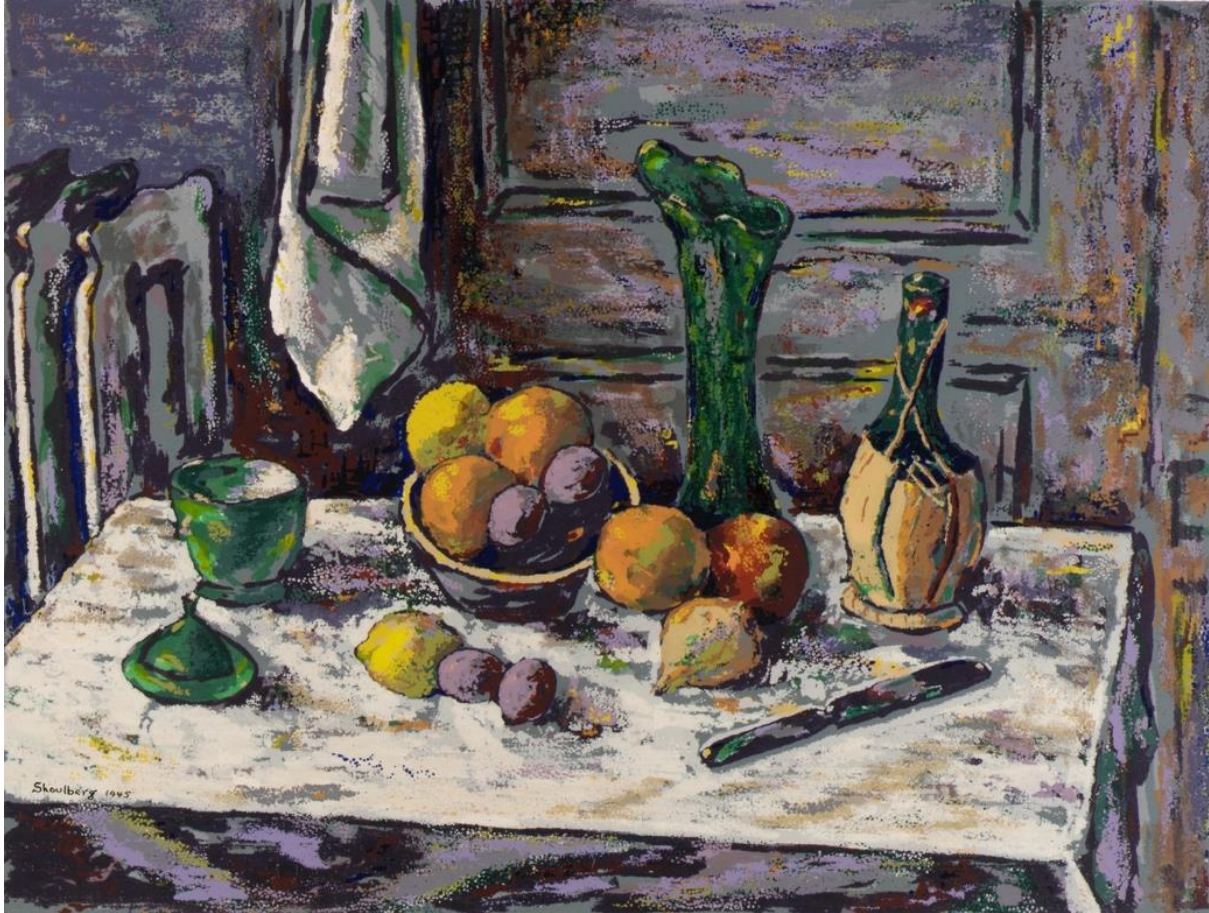


Figure 11. Harry Shoulberg, *Still Life*, 1945, screenprint on paper, 13 1/4 x 17 3/8 inches, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, object number 1980.17.5.

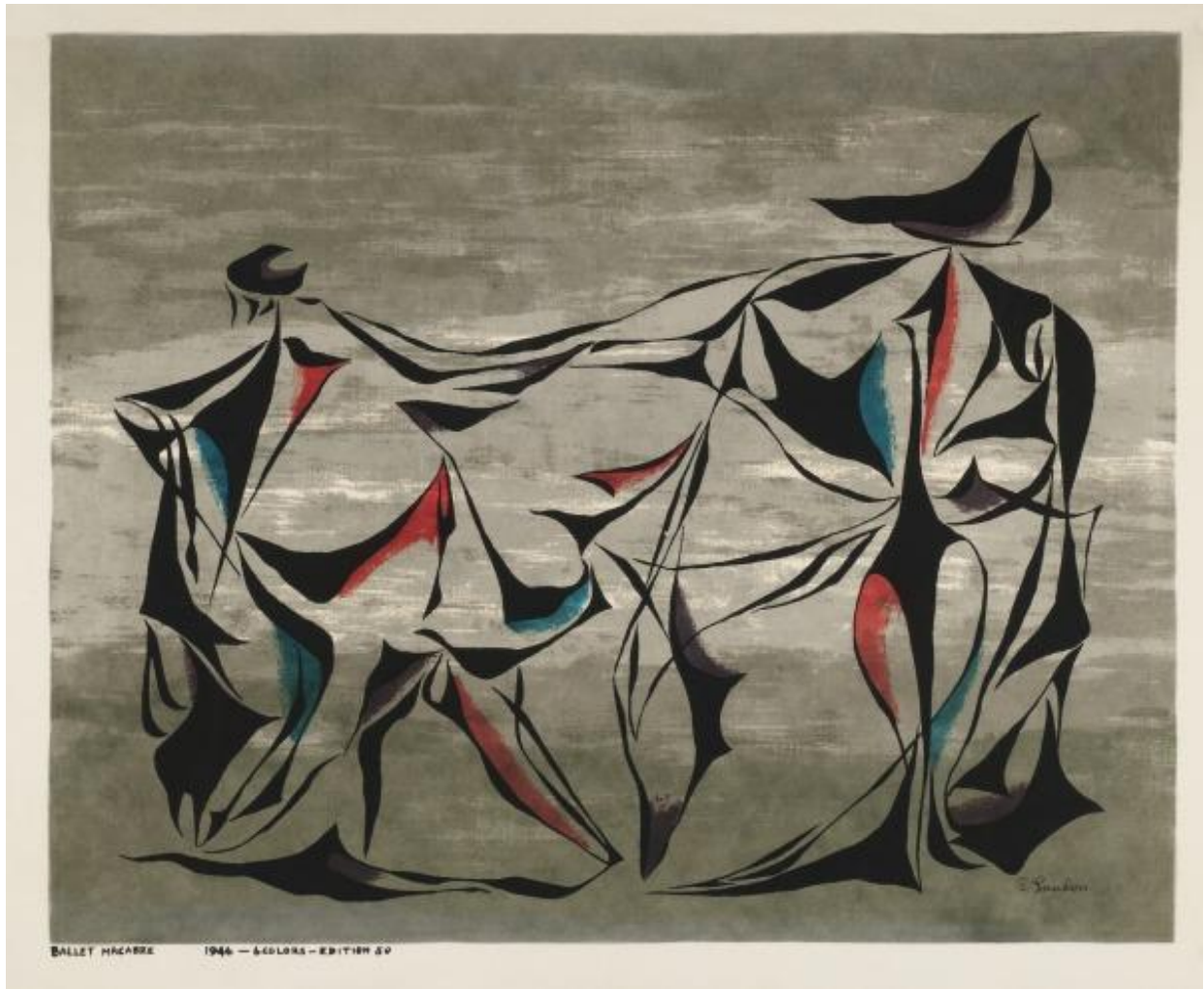


Figure 12. Edward Landon, *Ballet Macabre*, 1946, color screen print, 15 1/16 x 18 1/2 inches, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Rachel Landon, courtesy Mary Ryan Gallery, accession number 1996.350.



Figure 13. Max Arthur Cohn, *Wellfleet (The Bay)*, 1945, color screenprint, edition of 38, 12 3/4 x 18 1/4 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 1994.007.06.



Figure 14. Max Arthur Cohn, *Wheat Field*, 1940, color screenprint, edition of 38, 12 x 16 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 1994.007.15.



Figure 15. Max Arthur Cohn, *Mexican Boy*, 1940, color screenprint, edition of 28, 20 x 13 1/2 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 1994.007.03.



Figure 16. Max Arthur Cohn, *Taxco Butcher Shop*, 1934, oil on paper, 14 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse, catalog number 2021.005.010.



Figure 17. Robert Henri. *Tam Gan*. 1914. Oil on canvas. 24 x 20 inches. Buffalo AKG Art Museum. Sarah A. Gates Fund. Object number 1915:2.



Figure 18. Max Arthur Cohn, *Road to Easton*, 1942, color screenprint, edition of 55, 13 x 18 3/4 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 1989.001.04.



Figure 19. Max Arthur Cohn, *R.R. Overpass*, 1996, oil on canvas, 21 7/8 x 28 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse, catalog number 2020.001.022.



Figure 20. Max Arthur Cohn, *Harlem River*; 1934, watercolor, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, object number 1984.63.1.

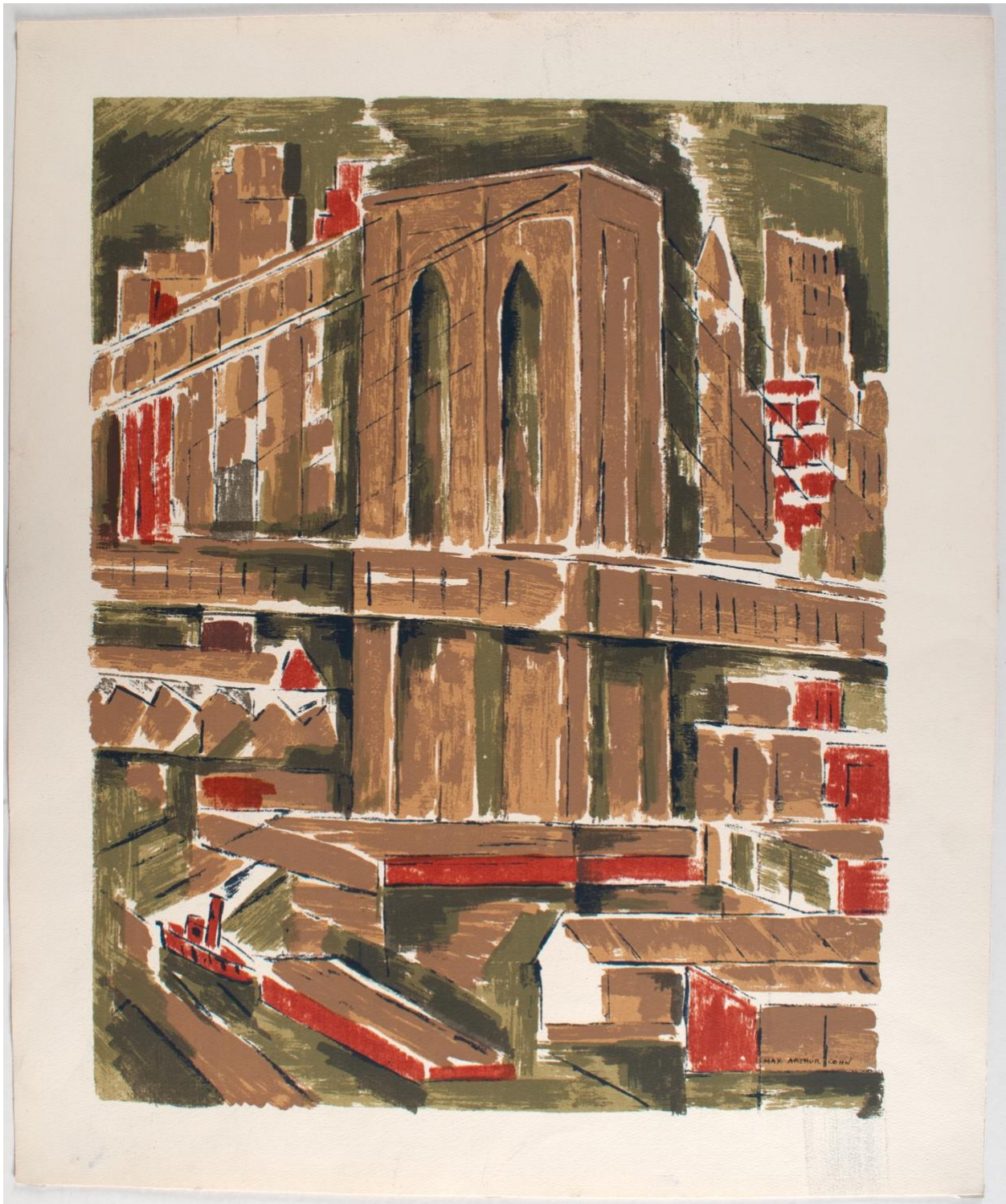


Figure 21. Max Arthur Cohn, *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1945, color screenprint, edition of 31, 21 3/4 x 17 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 1989.001.01.



Figure 22. Max Arthur Cohn, *Three Abstract Figures*, 1959, oil on canvas panel, 13 1/4 height x 11 1/2 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse, catalog number 2021.005.002.



Figure 23. Max Arthur Cohn, *Sledding in Central Park*, ca. 1940, color screenprint greeting card, 4 3/8 x 6 1/2 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Jane Cohn Waldbaum and Steven L. Morse, catalog number 2019.004.020.



Figure 24. Max Arthur Cohn, *Boat Pier*, 1938, color screenprint, edition of 37, 12 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Max Arthur Cohn, catalog number 2019.004.029.

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