

March 31 through May 26, 2019

Presentation Prints of the Woodcut Society, 1932-1954

complete set of 44 prints in original letterpress folders

*J.J. Lankes (1884-1960), Southern Scene, 1932, woodcut on paper
Greenough Collection, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery*



The Woodcut Society, 1932 - 1954

Stemming from an interest in collecting hand-printed bookplates, in 1932 Kansas City grain merchant Alfred Fowler (1889-1959) established the Woodcut Society with the sole aim of increasing “interest in fine woodcuts as a medium of artistic expression.”ⁱ He planned to commission and publish two new woodcut prints each year, proposing a subscription-based organization limited to 200 members who, for \$10 in dues per year, would receive the woodcuts mounted in a presentation folder printed by the Torch Press of Cedar Rapids. As the Woodcut Society was primarily geared toward print collectors, and “intended to be savored in the intimate setting of one’s private library,” the folders each opened to the print facing a page essay by a noted print authority or penned by the artist.ⁱⁱ

The inaugural print distributed in 1932 was the woodcut *Southern Scene*, by New Englander J. J. Lankes (1884–1960), accompanied by the essay “The Woodcuts of J.J. Lankes” written by American poet Genevieve Taggard. London resident Clare Leighton created the wood engraving *The Net Menders* as the society’s fourth print for the membership in 1933, as well as *Winnowers, Majorca* as the fifteenth for 1939, and *Clam Diggers, Cape Cod* as the thirtieth presentation print for 1946. Well known in printmaking circles, Leighton’s 1932 manual on her technique, *Wood-engravings and Woodcuts*, was popular enough to be reprinted several times.ⁱⁱⁱ The manual reproduces other artists’ prints as examples, including Birger Sandzén’s (1871-1954) 1928 nailcut, *River Nocturne*.

The fifth presentation print was commissioned from Thomas W. Nason, *Upland Pastures* (1934) with the essay “The Woodcuts of Thomas W. Nason” written by etcher and long-time president of the American Society of Graphic Arts, John Taylor Arms (1887-1953). Nason also created the twenty-eighth print for 1945. His *Near Lyme, Sunset* (created 1944) came with a foreword by Carl Zigrosser, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who wrote “Nason is, one might say, a pastoral or elegiac poet” and that “this engraving is, as it were, a sonnet in pictorial form.” In May, 1945, Wilma Hall Fowler wrote a letter to another Woodcut Society printmaker, Sir Lionel Lindsay in Sydney, Australia, reporting that “I know you will be interested to hear that the Nason print, NEAR LYME, SUNSET, has been awarded the top purchase prize (one of five equal awards) at the Library of Congress’ Pennell Show, one of the most important annual print exhibitions in our country. It was chosen as a top prize winner from 1,800 entries and we are naturally much gratified.”^{iv}

Sir Lionel Lindsay created two Society prints. *Pheasant and Wistaria* was published in 1935 as the seventh, with the foreword “The Wood-Engravings of Lionel Lindsay” by Campbell Dodgson, Keeper of Prints at the British Museum and print collector himself. Dodgson wrote, “I would call attention to the way in which the technique is subtly varied in rendering the different kinds of feathers...and to the extremely accurate and beautiful drawing of every separate flower in the clusters of wistaria blossoms.” The thirteenth Society offering was Lindsay’s *Repose*, done for 1938 with a foreword by the artist. Describing how he came to like bird subjects so much, Lindsay stated “The peacocks in the present cut were drawn in the gardens of the Villa Wurtz at Rome, where they are tame as the Italian domestic fowl,

and I was enabled to make studies at close range.” At the age of fifteen, Lindsay had begun as pupil-assistant at Melbourne Observatory but soon found art more attractive than mathematics. He worked as a cartoonist for the *Sydney Evening News*, contributed to the *Sydney Bulletin* and etched and painted in all of his spare time. The artist was knighted in 1941 for his services to Australian art and for extending through his work, the influence of Australian art in the United Kingdom and in the United States in such high profile endeavors as the Woodcut Society.

The ninth presentation print, wood engraving *The Lost Anchor* for 1936, was commissioned from Robert Gibbings (1889-1958), who also designed the typography for the folder in which it was mounted and cut the blocks for the ornaments appearing in the title and colophon. Born in Ireland, Gibbings spent most of his career working in London, and is best remembered for directing the Golden Cockerel Press during the 1920s after surviving being wounded at Gallipoli in World War I.

Ukrainian Boris Artzybasheff (1899-1965) was conscripted as a machine gunner by the Russian army during World War I, but afterwards found his way to an engraving shop in New York City. Becoming very well known as an illustrator, Artzybasheff was asked to create a wood engraving as the Society’s twelfth offering. His *The Last Trumpet* for 1937 was accompanied by a biographical foreword Carl Carmer, who commented on the artist’s scene of an avenging angel and falling metropolitan towers: “In its power and dignity it calls attention to his gift for truth-bearing fantasy, his skillful precision, his remarkable feeling for design.”

The nineteenth Society presentation print was delayed from its original 1940 commission date as the artist worked through the Battle of Britain in her London studio. Wood engraver Agnes Miller Parker (1895-1980) created *Fox* for the 1941 membership, which was accompanied by the essay “The Art of Agnes Miller Parker” written by her spouse William McCance (1894–1970), the noted Scottish artist and critic who worked as second controller for the Gregynog Press in Wales at the time. In a letter to the Society membership, Alfred Fowler explained that “Through a misunderstanding, Miss Parker printed 250 copies of FOX...we decided simply to publish that many extra copies of this one print, making the extra copies available at a reasonable price to members who may want them for gifts.”^v

Ernest W. Watson’s (1884-1969) color blockprint, *Once Upon a Midnight Dreary*, was the twenty-second Society offering. The blockprint was the second presentation print of 1942, Wilma Fowler wrote to inform the membership of the newest print: “Recognizing the unfailing popularity of the several color prints in our portfolio, we have prevailed upon Ernest Watson to give us one of his remarkable color block-prints. The subject he has chosen, to be printed from five blocks, is an intensely dramatic rendering of the old Edgar Allan Poe house, where “The Raven” was written in 1844.”^{vi} The print depicting the writer’s rural Baltimore home required ten Rembrandt oil colors applied to five blocks, as described in the unattributed essay. Watson had also done the 1934 gift print, *Woodbine*, for the Prairie Print Makers, another print society that Birger Sandzén (1871-1954) and ten other Kansas artists had founded in 1930.

Walter J. Phillips (1884-1963) created his second presentation print, *Above Lake Louise* (1945), as the twenty-seventh in the series. The first Society print Phillips contributed was a black and white wood engraving, *Vista Lake*, as the second member print in 1932. However, the artist was best known for his color work. In his foreword to *Above Lake Louise*, Phillips describes his color woodcut techniques in the Japanese manner. For this print, the artist hand carved cherrywood blocks for seven colors to be layered, and his “pigments used were powders ground in water and bound with paste.” Although the printmaker was born in England, he emigrated to Canada and spent his career appreciating untamed beauties of nature, including the sparkling Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies.

Fritz Eichenberg (1901-1990) created the thirty-fifth members’ print, his wood engraving *Saint Christopher* of 1949. The artist provided his own text for the letterpressed foreword, noting the subject

of the print was the patron saint of all travelers, and was a Christian symbol of man serving God. Eichenberg also reported being filmed: "...as I started on the engraving, the Pathé Newsreel sent a crew to my studio to "shoot" its production with a new close-up camera. As I began to work on the boxwood on Christopher's head with my No. 2 graver, the cameras started to whirl and hours of toil on the block was boiled down to about a minute on the screen."

The thirty-sixth Woodcut Society commission was *Shy Veery* from James D. Havens (1900-1960), a three-color woodcut of 1949, with a foreword by Elizabeth Whitmore. The New York printmaker was known for promoting the art of color woodblock printing and was a founding member of the Print Club of Rochester. Havens created a similar composition, *Cinnamon Fern and Veery*, as the 1948 gift print for the Prairie Print Makers, another print society that Birger Sandzén and ten other Kansas artists had established in 1930.

Contemporary Woodcut exhibitions

Alfred Fowler was so encouraged by positive response in the first year of his new organization that he immediately followed up with a plan to show new blockprints to a wider audience. In the modest catalogue of the *First Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Woodcuts 1933* Fowler wrote, "In the announcement of the Exhibition it was stated there would be no system of prizes or awards in connection with the event; its primary purpose being to inform the public concerning the accomplishments of modern woodcut artists...it travels and is shown wherever wanted."^{vii} The only stipulation that Fowler made to entrants was that artists would have to supply two impressions of each print in the exhibition—one to travel and one to donate to the Woodcut Society to be given to the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery (now Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art) permanent collection.

The first exhibition was on the road a year and a half, hosted by the Brooklyn Museum, Yale University, the Smithsonian Institution, the Wadsworth Atheneum, Davenport College, the Springfield Art Museum, and the Currier Gallery in New York City, all under the auspices of the College Art Association. Artists who participated in the Woodcut Society's contemporary shows include Provincetown printmaker Blanche Lazzell, British and Australian artists Eric Slater, and Lionel Lindsay, as well as Midwestern favorites Helen West Heller of Chicago, Birger Sandzén and Zona Wheeler of Lindsborg, Kansas. Western printmakers also submitted new work, such Richardson Rome of Estes Park, Colorado, and Frances Gearhart of Pasadena, California. No entry fees were charged and print sale inquiries were referred directly to the artist, with no commission taken.

The Woodcut Society and World War II

Alfred Fowler, who in the spring of 1942 was still directing the Woodcut Society from his Board of Trade business address in Kansas City, proposed a "War Savings Bond Plan" to the membership. In a May 1942 letter to members, Fowler wrote that in the spirit of patriotism, members could buy a war bond registered in his name as the managing director, and use it at the full, matured value to buy prints left over from the past decade's editions of members-only presentation prints, and that War Savings Stamps could be used as well.^{viii} Soon after establishing the new society guidelines, Fowler accepted a captain's commission into the US Army Air Corps and relocated to a training base in San Angelo, Texas. For the war's duration, Wilma Hall Fowler ran the Woodcut Society as Assistant Director, corresponding with artists and organizing all printing, mailing, and finances. In December 1943, Fowler earned a promotion to major and orders to serve at the Pentagon in Washington, DC. While the couple lived in nearby Alexandria, Virginia, Wilma continued to direct the Woodcut Society solo until war's end. By 1948, the Fowlers had taken on other projects and turned the Woodcut Society over to Irvin Haas of Hicksville, New York. The Society continued operating and publishing prints through 1954, when Haas issued the last two presentation prints for the combined years 1953-54 and stopped responding to inquiries.

Collection of Birger Sandzén and Charles Pelham Greenough, 3rd

Although Bethany College art professor Birger Sandzén had acquired many of the Woodcut Society's presentation prints as they were published for his personal collection, there were gaps to be filled for a complete set. Sandzén's son-in-law and fellow print collector Charles Pelham Greenough, 3rd (1908-1983), who had completed a catalogue raisonné of Sandzén's prints in 1952, turned his attentions to locating impressions of the missing presentation folders. Treva Wheete's (1890-1963) color woodcut, *Manuel of Tesuque*, eighth in the series for 1935, eluded Greenough for some time, but advertising in the *Kansas City Star* finally connected him to a willing donor. In February of 1957 Pelham Greenough responded to the offer, assuring the collector the print would be safely preserved in a museum in perpetuity: "Yes, the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery is going to be a permanent and integral part of Bethany College. It is now being built on the campus south of Presser Hall. I expect the gallery to be dedicated this coming Commencement. However, the gallery will not be open to the public until some time this coming fall. I plan to exhibit the entire series of the Woodcut Society in the original folders and in chronological order in the Contemporary Gallery...It should be a very handsome exhibit in every way."^{ix}

The BSMG website www.sandzen.org will provide downloadable, supporting material to accompany the exhibition, which will include images of each of the (44) Woodcut Society prints, plus transcriptions of the presentation folders' foreword essay texts. The task of transcribing was undertaken by John R. Mallery of Overland Park, recent Program Director for the Nelson-Atkins Print Society.

ⁱ J.H. Bender, "The Woodcut Society," *Fine Prints* v. 1, no. 9 (Nov 1932): 28.

ⁱⁱ Bill North, unpublished paper given at Midwest Art History Society annual conference, "Alfred Fowler and the Romance of Fine Prints," (ca. 1993): 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clare Leighton, *Wood-engravings and Woodcuts, series How to Do It 2* (New York: The Studio, 1932).

^{iv} Wilma Hall Fowler to Sir Lionel Lindsay, Sydney, Australia, 9 May 1945; Archives of the Lionel Lindsay Art Gallery and Library at Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Queensland, Australia.

^v Alfred Fowler letter to Membership, [undated, ca. 1941]; Print Division of the New York Public Library, 1800-1954; microfilmed by Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; MDONZ, Roll N119, frame 489.

^{vi} Wilma Hall Fowler to Woodcut Society membership, Nov 1942; Print Division of the New York Public Library, 1800-1954; microfilmed by Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; MDONZ, Roll N119, frame 455.

^{vii} Alfred Fowler, "The First Annual Exhibition," Catalogue of the *First Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Woodcuts, 1933*: n.p.

^{viii} Alfred Fowler to Woodcut Society membership, May 1942 Print Division of the New York Public Library, 1800-1954; microfilmed by Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; MDONZ, Roll N119, frame 452.

^{ix} Charles Pelham Greenough, 3rd, to William H. Lowrance, 21 Feb 1957; Sandzén Archives, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Lindsborg, Kansas.



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Gallery Hours: Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m.