

August 21 – October 23, 2022

Peaceful Places
drawings by
Maurice Bebb (1891-1986)
from the Gallery's
Permanent Collection



Minnesota Landscape, July 22, 1955
graphite on paper

Peaceful Places presents landscape drawings selected from the Maurice Bebb estate gift to the Sandzén Gallery in 2017. The Bebb family donated a large number of prints, drawings, and sketchbooks along with the artist's Sturges etching press following the Gallery's 2016 exhibition *Birds & Beyond: The Prints of Maurice R. Bebb*. Although a good portion of Bebb's copper-plate etchings were portraits of birds, he also created landscape prints capturing glimpses of the places he enjoyed, such as lakes in Minnesota, farms in Tennessee, ranches in New Mexico, and mountains in Colorado. The matted drawings on display here are all landscape scenes the artist chose from his portable sketchbooks of the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, rendering views of his favorite places as well as from special trips to Europe.

Maurice Bebb was an Oklahoma artist who taught himself printmaking techniques while following a career as a florist in Muskogee. He established an artistic reputation as an exceptional etcher, often working in color with multiple plates and challenging fabric matrices. Bebb created more than 230 print designs over his lifetime, selling very consistently from his home studio. The artist was an active member of the three important American print societies of his time, and was commissioned by each for limited edition gift prints: the Print Makers of California in 1953 for *Black Swans*, the Chicago Society of Etchers in 1954 for *Sycamore Warbler*, and the Prairie Print Makers in 1960 for *White-breasted Nuthatch*.

Maurice Robert Bebb was an exceptional printmaker. He is best known for his bird prints which make up about half of the print designs he created during his career. He did not just watch birds that came to his backyard feeder, but he actually studied birds. His passion for birds allowed him to very accurately portray them in his prints. He also traveled to see birds. As an example, in April of 1966 he went on a birding trip to Mexico:

One of these occurred in April, we went on the "Mexico South" tour which is advertised in the Audubon Magazine... We saw some 225 different birds, of which about 72 were new to me, and many of the Easterners who were with us (Detroit, Boston, Connecticut, Florida, Pennsylvania) got many more for their life lists. We had such exotic birds as the long-tailed Magpie Jay, the Mot-mot, two species of trogons, Boat-billed Heron, Crested Guan – and the Potoo. We saw the latter by going through a mangrove swamp at night in

a dug-out canoe, flashing light into the dead branches of the few trees. The eyes looked like headlights in the dark. We had a delightful group of eighteen, from all parts of the country, including five from Oklahoma. Since returning I have made a 5x7" etching of the Mexican Cacique, which I shall give to each member of the party as a souvenir.

His dedication to portraying birds accurately made them very popular with other nature lovers. There are numerous letters like this one from an admirer in his records: "While visiting the Cornell Ornithology Lab over Christmas, I saw your color etchings retailing @\$15 and was much impressed. We are exclusively a wildlife print gallery and might be interested in carrying your work. Do you have any photos or a catalog of your work that I could show my superiors?" Bebb sold his work across the country, sending them to stores, dealers and even individuals on consignment: "Thank you so much for sending me 25 of your prints in good faith. Life can be beautiful when dealing with good people like you."

Bebb's bird prints were popular and sold well, but he lamented during an interview that "people demand my birds and get me off landscapes, which are really my favorite."

His interest in art and printmaking began earlier than the 1940s as previously believed. The artist's first print appears to be an acetate etching of flowers in a vase dated 1933. Bebb experimented with linocuts in the 1930s to create Christmas cards. His first softground etching is *Tulips* printed in 1941, and his first multi-plate color etching with aquatint was also created in the 1940s. At the time he was communicating with John Bender, print dealer and owner of Alden Galleries in Kansas City, Missouri, in the early 1930s. Bender published *Fine Prints*, a little magazine that was "...distributed gratis as a means of increasing knowledge of fine prints." That Bebb was communicating with Bender underscores the fact that Bebb's art interests predated the creation of his earliest prints. In the November 1934 edition of *Fine Prints*, Bebb is quoted describing his feelings about Modern Art:

Mr. M.R. Bebb of Muskogee, Oklahoma, has something to say about modern art. I am quoting two paragraphs from his letter as he expresses my idea exactly. All the paid critics in the world cannot convince me that I should buy pictures that I do not like. The fact that the big dealers, art magazines, art critics, and art schools disagree with me as to the artistic merit of a certain picture does not change my idea in the least. After all the one may be right and the nine wrong. It has happened before in art history. The only safe course is to follow one's own convictions and this Mr. Bebb evidently intends to do.

For years I have been wondering if, possibly, I was lacking in some artistic see to see the merit in drawing such as we used to do in second grade and raw colors. So many 'critics' have taken the stuff seriously that I have spent some time trying to locate some concealed merit but all in vain.

What a relief it will be to get rid of them. Why should I be interested in a picture of a suit of red underwear, just because that happens to be the spontaneous out-pouring of some artist's 'soul?' The last ten years have made me distrustful of all critics of art. The only pictures I am interested in are those that please me. If there is a body of opinion agreed that a certain class of work is good, I am willing to try to try to find out why, with the hope of increasing the number that give me pleasure.

Bebb's interest in prints went beyond just making them, he was also a collector. He had the entire set of Prairie Print Maker gift prints (now in the collection of the Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas), nearly the entire set of Print Makers Society of California presentation prints, a group of Brooklyn Society of Etchers gift prints and works by dozens of other artists. He had works by other printmaking friends including F. Leslie Thompson and Arthur Hall. Bebb was great friends with Arthur and Norma Bassett Hall, visiting them at their home/art school Rancho del Rio in Alcalde, New Mexico. In turn, the Halls visited Maurice at his home and studio in Muskogee. As seen here, Bebb was happy to share works with other collectors:

It is with some reluctance - but a lot of pleasure – that I am including a drawing by Arthur Hall – at no charge of course. I have a lot of his work, but most of the sketches are not signed: this one is. Anyone familiar with his work would recognize this typical example. He often drew these for me to show how I ought to have done it....I know that you will enjoy adding this to your collection, and it would lie unseen in my collection forever.

What is rarely discussed or mentioned is the fact that Maurice R. Bebb was a very competent artist. His printmaking process was highly technical and required great precision to . The drawings in this exhibit are prime examples of his skill. They demonstrate an understanding of light and shadow. As one looks at these, one should remember that Bebb had no formal art training. He did not attend any of the major art schools or study with masters in France. He studied on his own, learning and welcoming guidance from other artists of his time. The sketches presented here are just a small sample of the drawings Bebb created over the course of his travels and his keen observations of the environments he so loved.

— *John R. Mallery, Overland Park, 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.