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# J.J. Lankes (1884-1960): Woodcuts of Rural America

University of Richmond Museums

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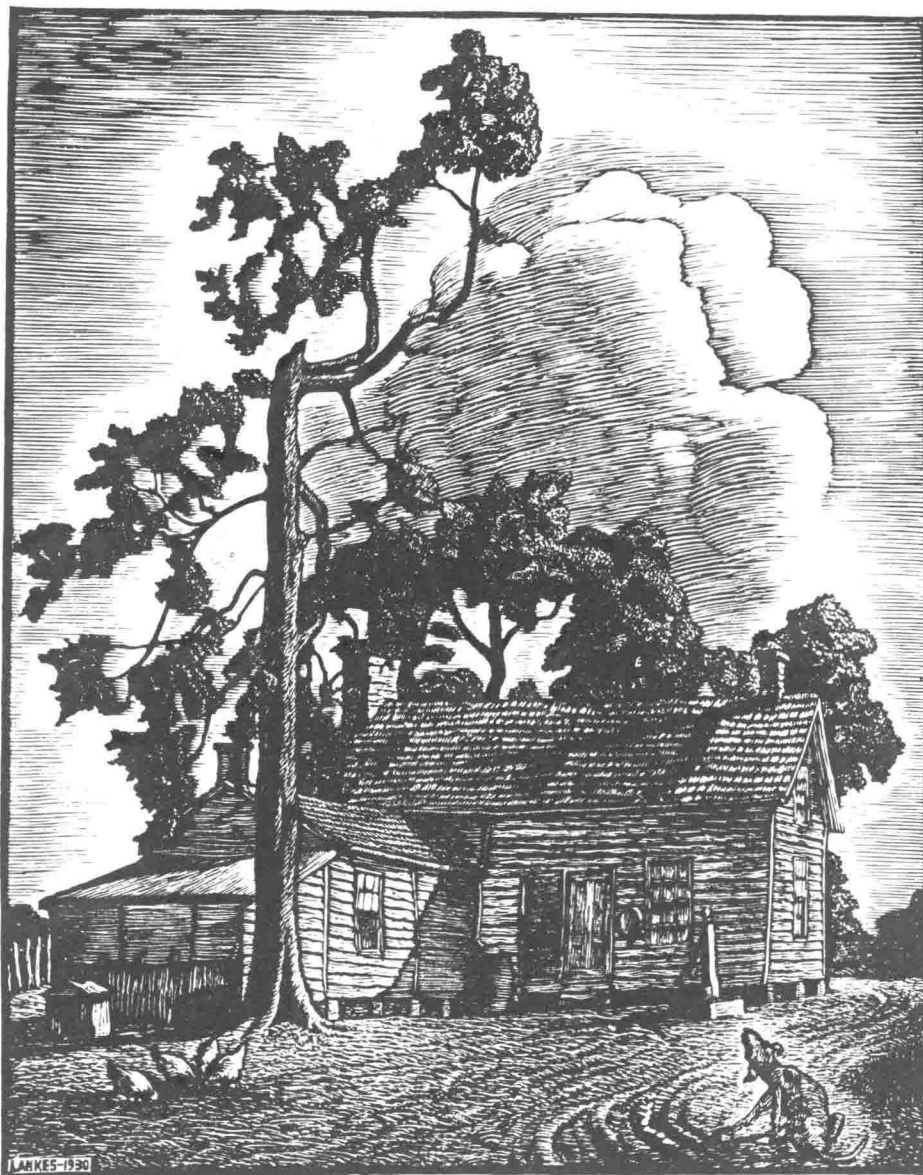
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# J.J. Lankes

(1884-1960)

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WOODCUTS OF RURAL AMERICA

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n 1917, while working at the Newton Arms Company factory in Buffalo, New York, Julius John (J. J.) Lankes created his first woodcut. His only implements were a graver, used to score rifle stocks, and a block of apple wood he had cut from a fallen tree. The experiment proved a turning point in the life of the thirty-one-year-old laborer, draftsman, and erstwhile art student. Rapidly mastering the difficult white on black woodcutting technique, he went on to produce some 1,300 designs over the next forty years.

J. J. Lankes moved to Virginia in 1925. His artistic interests were ideally suited to the depiction of the landscape and houses of rural Tidewater Virginia in the 1920s. He saw in these deteriorating buildings the erosion by time and nature on man and his monuments. Lankes found and recorded, in its unretouched condition, a Williamsburg of decaying eighteenth-century structures together with more stately edifices. In virtually all his images, nature is a strong, often controlling, presence: beneath the surface of the natural object, it lurks as a mysterious, perhaps hostile, force. Generally, we are reminded of the power and endurance of nature, beside which man and his creations are shown as insignificant and transitory.

Lankes' major subject was pre-industrial America, rich in natural beauty, history, and sturdy people who bonded with the land. In his life as in his work Lankes remained a democrat — a scoffer at pretension, a skeptic of entrenched authority, champion of the plain, and respecter of the natural. These values, combined with extraordinary technical skills, won praise from such notable contemporaries as John Taylor Arms, Charles Burchfield, Rockwell Kent, Ray Nash, Charles Harris Whitaker, and Carl Zigrosser. Several of these artists helped pave Lankes' way as an illustrator of books by prominent authors of the 1920s and '30s, most notably Sherwood Anderson, Roark Bradford, Robert P. Tristram Coffin, Robert Frost, and Ellen Glasgow.

Today, Lankes' woodcuts remain evocative representations of American rural life of an earlier time. His unique vision is evident in this retrospective, which

includes works ranging in date from 1917 to 1955. Carl Zigrosser wrote in 1942, "his woodcuts are of the country, and have the smell and feel of the country in them." We not only perceive Lankes' contribution to "American scene" printmaking but also take delight in his vision of early twentieth-century America and of universal themes.

But one should bear in mind that however lofty the larger themes of his work may be, Lankes' approach to art was primarily specific and not theoretical. Thus his more expansive ideas are to be inferred. As Sherwood Anderson observed in "J. J. Lankes and His Woodcuts" (1931), Lankes "is a man deeply concerned with life, but it is his way to get at life through things. He feels always the reflected life in things, in barns, sheds back of barns, in little houses in which poor people live. 'Look,' he says. 'Look again. Don't you see it? . . . Life is here in these inanimate things people have touched.'"

The "things" subsumed in these images reflect a broad and richly detailed spectrum. They range from historical figures and buildings to rural domestic life; from the seasons to commonplace natural objects; from literature to plowing; from Buffalo, New York, to the lower Chesapeake Bay; from the James River to the stars. The sheer variety of these subjects defies neat summarization; each image conveys a unique message. However all of them, to borrow a phrase from Gray's *Elegy*, are "short and simple annals" evoking a rural past that has all but disappeared.

Welford Dunaway Taylor

*James A. Bostwick Professor of English, University of Richmond*

Richard Waller

*Director, Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond*

Co-organized by the University of Richmond Marsh Art Gallery and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, the exhibition will travel throughout the Commonwealth through the Virginia Museum's Department of Traveling Exhibitions and Media Services following its venue at the Marsh Art Gallery (March 9 to April 17, 1994). We are indebted to the lenders and extend our thanks to Roger and Emily Fournier, Elizabeth L. Howard, and J. B. Lankes.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All of the works are woodcuts signed in pencil by the artist; all are printed in black ink, except where noted. Each entry includes year; dimensions of the image in inches, height precedes width; and artist's logbook record number in parentheses.

### *Three Ships*

1917, 3 7/8 x 6 (0015)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *The Knoll* (top)

1919, 4 1/4 x 2 13/16 (0064)

### *Mower* (bottom)

1919, 3 5/8 x 5 7/8 (0050)  
(both printed brown ink)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *Meeting House at Springbrook, New York*

1919, 4 3/8 x 5 7/8 (0051)  
University of Richmond Marsh Art Gallery

### *Walt Whitman*

1919, 8 13/16 x 8 1/8 (0054)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *Saint Mary's Inn*

1920, 5 7/8 x 8 (0092)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *Indian Summer*

1922, 5 15/16 x 8 3/16 (0199)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *New Hampshire (Apple Tree and Grindstone)*

1923, 3 x 4 1/16 (0253)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

### *Barn near Lititz, Pennsylvania*

1923, 7 1/4 x 5 5/8 (0259)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *Near Newville, Pennsylvania*

1923, 7 3/8 x 5 5/8 (0260)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *Aspens*

1924, 6 1/2 x 4 11/16 (0333)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

### Designs for Greeting Cards:

#### *Greetings from J. J. L.* (upper left)

1925, 3 1/2 x 5 (0351)

Collection of J. B. Lankes

#### *Greetings from Theodore and Anna*

*Popp* 1927-28 (lower left)

1927, 5 1/2 x 3 3/4 (0516) (printed

red, blue, green, and black ink)

Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *Christmas Greeting* (upper right)

1925, 2 3/16 x 5 1/16 (0370)

Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

### *Whitaker's Road Greeting* (lower right)

1929, 3 1/2 x 4 1/2 (0639A)

Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

### From *Six Little Moods* by J. J. Lankes:

#### *Evening* (upper left)

1925, 2 x 4 (0355)

#### *Night* (lower left)

1925, 1 11/16 x 4 (0356)

#### *Winter* (upper right)

1925, 1 3/4 x 4 1/16 (0373)

#### *The Wind* (lower right)

1925, 1 11/16 x 4 (0352)

Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *June*

1925, 6 5/16 x 4 15/16 (0365)

Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *Coal Yard Office*

1925, 6 13/16 x 6 9/16 (0380)

Collection of J. B. Lankes

### *March Day in Georgetown*

1925, 4 1/2 x 3 5/16 (0383)

Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

### *Klostergasse, Rothenburg*

1926, 6 7/8 x 5 (0406)

University of Richmond Marsh Art Gallery

### *Bew's Store*

1926, 4 11/16 x 6 15/16 (0417)

Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

### *Virginia Farmhouse*

1926, 4 1/16 x 6 15/16 (0424)

Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

### *Neglected (Barn and Horse)*

1926, 1 7/8 x 5 9/16 (0427)

Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

### *Barn for Mårbacka*

1926, 6 x 3 13/16 (0436)

Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

### *Affliction*

1926, 6 5/8 x 4 3/8 (0456)

Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier



*Swinging*, 1930

*A Lane on the Bank of the James River*  
1926, 14 5/8 x 12 5/16 (0460)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Cabin by the Road*  
1926, 5 x 4 1/4 (0466A)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*The Doctor Calls*  
1926, 13 x 17 3/8 (0470)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Empty House*  
1927, 8 7/8 x 12 (0482)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg*  
1927, 6 11/16 x 5 3/16 (0492)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

*Swinging*  
1927, 6 5/8 x 8 7/8 (0496)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*Visiting (Cherry and Maple Streets, Buffalo)*  
1927, 6 1/2 x 5 1/4 (0505)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*Plowman, Open Cutting (top)*  
1927, 2 13/16 x 5 3/16 (0510)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes  
*Turning Plowman, End of Furrow*  
(bottom)  
1927, 2 1/16 x 5 1/8 (0527)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Spring Plowing*  
1928, 8 1/8 x 5 1/16 (0536)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Bumble Bee*  
1928, 5 1/16 x 3 1/2 (0539)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*April*  
1928, 5 1/4 x 3 1/2 (0543)  
Private Collection

*Evening Star (No. 2)*  
1928, 5 3/4 x 7 (0551)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

Bookplates:  
*Bristow Hardin* (upper left)  
1931, 4 x 2 7/8 (0786)  
*Frederick Koch* (lower left)  
1928, 3 5/8 x 2 5/8 (0552)

*Genevieve Taggard* (upper right)  
1931, 3 7/8 x 2 1/2 (0758)  
*W. Lloyd Wright* (lower right)  
1932, 4 1/8 x 3 3/16 (0792)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

From Thomas Gray's 1751  
*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard:*  
*Stanza 15 (Graveyard)* (top)  
1940, 3 1/16 x 5 3/16 (0992)  
*Stanza 22 (Man on Road)* (bottom)  
1928, 3 1/16 x 5 3/16 (0561)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

*Big Sycamore Tree, West Running Brook*  
1928, 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 (0568)  
Private Collection

*West Running Brook (No. 3)*  
1928, 5 5/8 x 3 5/8 (0571)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

*Worn Road*  
1929, 8 7/16 x 6 3/4 (0586A)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*November*  
1929, 7 1/16 x 5 9/16 (0594)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*Apple Picker (Henry Holt and Company  
Autumn 1929 Catalog Cover)*  
1929, 8 3/16 x 5 11/16 (0601)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*The Lane (No. 2)*  
1929, 7 1/16 x 5 15/16 (0646)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*St. John's Church, Hampton*  
1930, 5 7/16 x 7 (0650)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*The Path (No. 2)*  
1930, 6 1/2 x 4 1/2 (0655)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*Oyster Boats, Hampton*  
1930, 5 1/4 x 7 1/16 (0660)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Farmyard*  
1930, 8 3/8 x 6 11/16 (0661)  
University of Richmond Marsh Art Gallery

*Briarfield (No. 2)*  
1930, 4 7/8 x 6 7/16 (0665)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Kent's Gate*  
1930, 6 7/16 x 9 (0683)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*Wash Day*  
1930, 5 5/16 x 8 3/16 (0709)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*Noonday (North Newport News, Virginia)*  
1931, 5 7/8 x 7 7/8 (0746B)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*House for Sale*  
1931, 7 1/4 x 5 7/8 (0749)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Jamestown Tower*  
1931, 5 x 7 (0773)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*In North Newport News*  
1932, 6 1/8 x 7 7/8 (0811)  
Collection of Elizabeth L. Howard

*New Year's Day*  
1934, 12 x 10 1/8 (0886)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Stone Barn near Beaver Creek, Maryland*  
1937, 5 x 8 3/8 (0938)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

*Near Millersville, Pennsylvania*  
1937, 6 x 9 1/16 (0952)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

*Barn near Mannheim, Pennsylvania*  
1939, 5 15/16 x 9 7/8 (0968)  
Collection of J. B. Lankes

*Winter Twilight*  
1939, 9 x 11 1/8 (0971)  
University of Richmond Marsh Art Gallery

*Building the Tower of Independence  
Ha'i, Philadelphia 1732*  
1943, 12 1/8 x 16 3/16 (1067)  
Private Collection

*People Going to Church* (left)  
1945, 2 15/16 x 4 (1083)  
*Pine Trees in Winter* (right)  
1955, 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 (1199)  
Collection of Roger and Emily Fournier

Cover: *Farmyard*, 1930  
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