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Reginald Marsh Prints: Whitney Museum of American Art Portfolio, Part Two

University of Richmond Museums

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Reginald Marsh Prints

Whitney Museum of American Art Portfolio
Part Two



January 8 to June 29, 2002
Joel and Lila Harnett Print Study Center
University of Richmond Museums

INTRODUCTION

It is only fitting that this two-part, yearlong inaugural exhibition for the Joel and Lila Harnett Print Study Center feature one of America's most important artists whose talents were honed during the 1920s and 1930s, a period when American printmaking experienced a surge in popularity. Reginald Marsh (1898-1954) created images that revealed the society and tempo of his environment and his time, and he was considered a Social Realist along with such artists as Isabel Bishop and Raphael Soyer.

This exhibition, like the Print Study Center itself, would not be possible without the generous and continued support of Joel and Lila Harnett. The portfolio, on loan from the collection of the Harnetts, was published in 1969 by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. It contains thirty prints by Reginald Marsh from 1930 to 1943, the second fifteen of which are included in this exhibition. The first half were featured in the Harnett Print Study Center from September 23 to December 16, 2001.

The Harnett Print Study Center extends the University of Richmond Museums' mission to provide a forum for the study and appreciation of the visual arts. The Center serves the University's students, faculty, and staff, as well as the greater Richmond area and national and international audiences. The 1,200-square-foot facility houses works on paper in the collection of the University Museums and allows students and visitors the opportunity to study these objects more closely.

Richard Waller
Executive Director
University of Richmond Museums

The following essays were included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's portfolio of thirty prints by Reginald Marsh, published in 1969. They are reprinted with permission from the Whitney Museum and Norman Sasowsky.

Cover: Reginald Marsh (American, 1898-1954). Two Girls Walking to the Right, 1943, engraving on paper, 10 x 8 inches. Collection of Joel and Lila Harnett.

REGINALD MARSH, PRINTMAKER

Reginald Marsh's art was a rare combination of firsthand realism and ordered design. From first to last it was based on draftsmanship. He drew constantly, unceasingly. A prodigious worker, he expressed himself in many mediums: oil, tempera, watercolor, fresco, pencil, Chinese ink, lithography, etching and engraving. His printmaking began early in his career and lasted most of his life. In certain respects his prints embodied the graphic essence of his art in its purest form.

Marsh's subjects were drawn largely from the multitudinous life of New York City. He loved and knew the city as few artists have. His art centered on humanity, the human animal in his infinite variety. Wherever the crowds were thickest he found his themes: the streets and their hurrying throngs, the subway and el, the lower East Side, burlesque, night clubs, Coney Island beach with its swarming thousands, the gaudy dream world of Luna park. His social range was wide, from Bowery bums to café society, from dime-a-dance joints to the Stork Club. The popular pursuit of pleasure fascinated him: sex as publicly presented, the magnetic power of the female body. In burlesque houses and dancehalls, on the streets, on the Coney Island beach, he found the human figure in all its beauty, ugliness, and vitality.

His realism was uncompromising, picturing human beings without false glamor or romance. Humor was always present, often mordant, and a relish for the grotesque, though not as broad as caricature. While he never subscribed to the dogmas of the social protest school, he portrayed with complete authenticity the seamy side of city life — derelict drunks, dwellers in flophouses. Without sentimentality, these pictures were poignant documents of human tragedy. Compared to his predecessors of the Ashcan School, his realism was more drastic, more aware of human misery, of the evil that lurks in city streets.

Marsh had remarkable powers of realistic observation. His grasp of characters — in faces, bodies, objects — was innate and unerring. Like Thomas Eakins he was a thorough anatomist, and he studied and dissected in medical schools. His

knowledge of the human body was not just academic correctness, but a living sense of its structure and action. His figures were filled with exuberant vitality. And they were pictured not merely naturalistically, but with a full realization of plastic values. His compositions were crowded with forms, and alive with movement — that rarest of plastic qualities.

Marsh's absorption in the contemporary scene was equalled by his knowledge of the great art of the past, a knowledge stimulated by his teacher and close friend Kenneth Hayes Miller. He studied the old masters as intensely as he did his favorite city. His fullest admiration was for the supreme figures of the High Renaissance and the seventeenth century. Like them, he conceived of pictorial art as design of sculptural forms in three dimensions. His design in its rich profusion of forms and its dominating rhythmic movements was baroque rather than classic.

Marsh's career as a printmaker began in the late 1920's. For some years he worked in both lithography and etching, but by the early 1930's he was concentrating on etching, in which he produced many of his strongest prints, paralleling his paintings and watercolors. Then about 1936 he began to work in the ancient medium of engraving on copper, in which the line is cut by hand into the plate, instead of being etched with acid. Engraving is a challenging medium, calling for unusual manual control, but it proved particularly sympathetic to Marsh's direct graphic style, and in the late 1930's and early 1940's he used it more than etching.

Many of Marsh's prints originated in his paintings, and it is interesting to see how in his prints he eliminated nonessentials, improved the relations of forms, and strengthened the linear structure, so that the print was more developed in design than paintings. His style in prints, particularly engravings, was more severe than in painting, concentrating on form and playing down local color and chiaroscuro, so that his prints often suggest sculptural reliefs. At the same time, there was no loss of the graphic strength and richness of his paintings. In every respect, Marsh's etchings were among the most fully realized of all his works. They rank among the chief achievements of American graphic art in our century.

Although Marsh's reputation as a printmaker was considerable during his lifetime, like many of his contemporaries he never printed his plates to anywhere near their stated editions. (In many cases, editions were never stated.) After his death in 1954, his available prints became increasingly rare. But many of the plates, including the finest, were preserved. Through the initiative and generosity of Mrs. Marsh, and the generous gift by William Benton to the Whitney Museum of all existing plates, the present edition of thirty selected prints has been made possible. One hundred prints of each plate, printed by the long-established firm of Andersen-Lamb of Brooklyn, New York, have been made available to museums, printrooms of libraries, and private collectors.

Lloyd Goodrich
Advisory Director
Whitney Museum of American Art

NOTES ON REGINALD MARSH'S ETCHINGS AND COPPER ENGRAVINGS

The thirty etchings and copper engravings presented in the Whitney Museum edition represent Reginald Marsh at his best in both of these media.

By 1930 Marsh had already acquired extensive experience in etching and drypoint. He kept a set of envelopes and folders containing all of his unmatted impressions and notebooks, which provide the primary source of information about his prints. A good example of the way he worked during this period is *Irving Place Burlesk*. The plate was begun on Sunday, April 20, 1930 — his regular work days were used for painting. He noted that he chose to "dab" the ground on the plate and also recorded the temperature of the acid bath he intended to use to etch the plate. He used a "dutch bath" to etch this plate. Apparently the ground did not hold and random biting (etching) of the plate made it necessary to restore certain portions of the plate. Though the use of a dutch bath required more time, Marsh preferred it to faster biting mordants because the quality of the etched line it produced was superior.

The selection and preparation of the etching paper prior to printing were given special attention. His notes on the inking of the plate included information about the ink, how the ink was applied, the wiping of the plate, and variations within the procedures which might be used in printing. He did most of the printing himself, and constantly sought to improve the quality of his impressions.

Irving Place Burlesk was completed in eight states, that is, work was added to the plate on eight occasions, and proofs were made of each of these additions (or subtractions) in order to determine progress. On August 1, 1930, Marsh noted the use of the engraving tool to put some finishing touches directly on the plate.

Through 1936, etching held Marsh's prime interest. Additional touches of engraving began to appear in his etchings (*Flying Concellos* and *Wooden Horses*) and by 1937 a definite preference for copper engravings had emerged. After years of painstaking work in etching, the more direct means of engraving — its direct process — demanded experimentation of a different order. For the engraving *Merry-Go-Round*, 1938, Marsh recorded that he used "Snyder's Copper," an English hand hammered copper. This copper is of finer quality than that generally used for etching and affords a more sympathetic surface on which to engrave. He began the engraving by first etching an outline drawing into copper to serve as a guide for the actual engraving. Study with Stanley William Hayter, the noted British engraver, encouraged Marsh to engrave more directly into the copper. This accounts, in part, for the greater freedom and spontaneity of later engravings such as his treatment of a similar subject, *Merry-Go-Round*, in 1943.

The development of Marsh's work in etching and copper engraving is evidence of the patience and skill which he brought to both of these media. From 1930 to 1943, he continued to refine his means — from the more complex technique of etching to the more direct technique of copper engraving — and to express himself with greater directness.

Norman Sasowsky

Author of "The Prints of Reginald Marsh: An Essay and Definitive Catalog of His Linoleum Cuts, Etchings, Engravings, and Lithographs"

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Plate (or image) dimensions are given in inches, height precedes width; sheet dimensions for all works are 15 1/2 x 13 inches. The prints are from the collection of Joel and Lila Harnett.

16. *Flying Concellos*, 1936
etching with some engraving on paper, 8 x 10
17. *A Morning in May*, 1936
engraving on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 1/2
18. *Minsky's New Gotham Chorus*, 1936
etching on paper, 9 1/16 x 12 1/16
19. *Wooden Horses*, 1936
etching with some engraving on paper,
8 x 13 5/16
20. *Battery (Belles)*, 1938
etching and engraving on paper,
9 1/16 x 12 1/16
21. *Merry-Go-Round*, 1938
engraving on paper, 10 x 8
22. *Pickaback*, 1938-9
engraving on paper, 10 x 5
23. *Modern 1939 Venus*, 1939
etching and engraving added on paper, 8 x 12
24. *Grand Tier at the Met*, 1939
engraving on paper, 7 x 10
25. *Coney Island Beach No. 1*, 1939
etching on paper, 10 x 12
26. *Girl in Fur Jacket Reading Tabloid*, 1940
engraving on paper, 12 x 6
27. *Merry-Go-Round*, 1940
engraving on paper, 8 x 12
28. *Eltinge Follies*, 1940
engraving on paper, 12 1/16 x 10
29. *Bathers-in-the-Hudson*, 1941
engraving on paper, 8 x 12
30. *Two Girls Walking to Right*, 1943
engraving on paper, 10 x 8



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