

PAINTING A PLACE IN AMERICA

EDITED BY NORMAN L. KLEEBLATT AND SUSAN CHEVLOWE

LOUIS SCHANKER (1903-1981)

Louis Schanker was born in New York on July 20, 1903. When he was a teenager he left school and went to work as a laborer with a circus troupe for two years. He continued to travel, working his way through Canada and the Dakotas as a field hand, gandy dancer, and a stevedore on the Great Lakes. He also rode freight trains across the country before returning to New York in 1919 to study art. Until 1923 he studied drawing from plaster casts in the evenings at Cooper Union and painted in a life class there once a week. He attended the Art School of the Educational Alliance and the Art Students League until 1927.

From 1931 to 1932 Schanker lived in Paris and studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He also worked on his own, making *plein air* studies, and visited museums where he came to greatly admire the works of Renoir, Degas and Signac. In 1933 Schanker lived for a year in Mallorca. It was there that he began to work in a semi-abstract style influenced by analytic Cubism. In other paintings typical of his style of the mid- and late-1930s he employed a heavy black contour against a patchwork of colored atmospheric planes. These were influenced by Rouault as well as the School of Paris. Schanker sought to depict movement, and a sense of time in his works; thus his attraction to subjects such as dance, sports and recreation. The artist also worked throughout his career making carved wood sculptures and reliefs that often reflected the influence of the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi.

In the mid-1930s Schanker became a graphic arts supervisor for the WPA. From 1935 to 1939 he exhibited with the Ten, a group of artists including Gottlieb, Rothko and Solman who reacted against Regionalism and American Scene painting. In 1936 Schanker was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists. His wood-block design was used as the poster for the exhibition "The Ten" Whitney Dissenters, held at the Mercury Galleries in New York in 1938. That year he was given a solo exhibition at the New School for Social Research in New York and also exhibited with YKUF. He also created an abstract mural for the Hall of Medicine and Public Health at the New York World's Fair in 1939. Schanker frequently exhibited both his paintings and sculpture in the Annuals of the Whitney Museum of American Art beginning in 1939. By the late

1930s and into the next decade his work showed the influence of biomorphic Surrealism. Even at this time his subject matter remained grounded in reality. Only in the late 1940s and beyond did his work approach pure nonobjectivism.

During World War II Schanker worked as a shipfitter. He had also established a reputation in printmaking and in the 1940s he began to teach color wood-block printing at the New School, where he continued as an instructor through 1960. In 1949 he also became a professor of art at Bard College and taught there until 1964. A retrospective of the artist's prints was held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1974. He lived in New York City, Stamford, Connecticut, and East Hampton, New York. Schanker died in 1981.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1933 *Louis Schanker*, Contemporary Arts Gallery, New York
- 1938 *Louis Schanker: Paintings*, The New School, New York
- 1974 *Louis Schanker Prints: 1924-1971*, The Brooklyn Museum, New York
- 1978 *Louis Schanker: A Printmaking Retrospective, 1924-1971*, Associated American Artists Galleries, New York (also exhibited 1986)
- 1981 *Louis Schanker: Works of the 30s and 40s*, Martin Diamond Fine Arts, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1934 *An American Group, Group Exhibition*, An American Group Galleries, New York
- 1935 *The Ten: An Independent Group*, Montross Gallery, New York
- 1936 *Opening Exhibition*, Municipal Art Gallery, New York
- 1936 *The Ten*, Galerie Bonaparte, Paris
- 1936 *The Ten*, Montross Gallery, New York
- 1937 *The Ten*, Georgette Passedoit Gallery, New York (also exhibited 1938)
- 1937 *American Abstract Artists*, Squibb Galleries, New York
- 1938 "The Ten" *Whitney Dissenters*, Mercury Galleries, New York
- 1938 *Second American Artists' Congress Exhibition*, Wanamaker's Picture Gallery, New York
- 1938 *First Exhibition of Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Arts and Yiddish Books*

and Press, World Alliance for Yiddish Culture (Yiddisher Kultur Farband), New York

- 1939 *The Ten*, Bonestell Gallery, New York
- 1939 *Annual Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (also exhibited 1941, 1944-1948, 1950)
- 1939 Hall of Medicine and Public Health, World's Fair, New York
- 1947 *Annual Exhibition*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia
- 1963 *The Educational Alliance Art School Retrospective Art Exhibit*, American Federation of Arts Gallery, New York
- 1981 *Decade of Transition: 1940-1950*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1986 *American Abstract Artists 1926-1985: Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (traveled)
- 1989 *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction 1930-1945*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Lozowick, Louis. *One Hundred Contemporary American Jewish Painters and Sculptors*. New York: YKUF Art Section, 1947.
- Mecklenburg, Virginia M. *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction 1930-1945*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989. Exh. cat.
- Yeh, Susan Fillin. *Louis Schanker: Works of the 30s and 40s*. New York: Martin Diamond Fine Arts, 1981. Exh. cat.

AMERICAN ABSTRACT ARTISTS 1930's & 40's

Bolotowsky
B. Browne
Cavallon
A.N. Christie
Diller
Drewes
Gallatin

Garman
D. Grant
Greene
Harari
Holty
Kamrowski
Lassaw
& others

L.K. Morris
Pereira
Rosenberg
Schanker
Shaw
Von Wicht
Vytlačil

MARCH 14 - APRIL 27, 1991

The American Abstract Artists organization was founded in 1937. During the turmoil of the Depression and World War II era it was one of the few groups formed to focus on artistic rather than political and social issues. Its goal was to unite abstract artists, present their work, and generally foster appreciation for abstract painting and sculpture.

The AAA was forged largely as a reaction to the traditional academic sensibilities prevalent in the WPA-era art world. Its members drew their visual and ideological vocabulary primarily from European modernism. Cubism, Constructivism, and Neoplasticism are all reflected in their art. Resulting was a variety of modernist styles as artists experimented and adapted for their particular formal and expressive needs.

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SPECIALIZING IN 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART



Louis Schanker, *Untitled, #1*, 1944, mixed media on paper, 14.75" x 22"

***Color Block Prints
of the
20th Century***

March 18 - April 18, 1992

Associated American Artists

Louis Schanker

1903–1981

41. Abstraction with Heart

1938

Woodcut on cream Japan paper

23.1 × 30.4 cm. (image)

30.1 × 37.7 cm. (sheet)

In pencil, lower margin: *1/15*

ABSTRACTION WITH HEART

Schanker

Brooklyn 13

Worcester Art Museum, anonymous
gift, 1988.85

Louis Schanker stood at the center of the circle of avant-garde woodcut artists in New York in the middle of the twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the artist exerted a profound influence on printmaking, through his own technically innovative works and through his activities as a teacher.

This print is exemplary of the mode of European modernism practiced by Schanker in the late 1930s. Earlier in the decade, the artist's imagery was figurative, and he often concentrated on the expression of movement.

This print reflects his tendency toward nonrepresentational abstraction, the focus of his prints in the succeeding two decades. In *Abstraction with Heart*, the heavy black lines printed by the key block—lines similar to those circumscribing forms in many of Schanker's earlier prints—were broken up and used to imply spatial ambiguity. Indeed, the theme of this composition, the manipulation of space, was accomplished by effects of overlapping and transparency.

The artist's goals were parallel to those of Blanche Lazzell (cat. 18) and Agnes Weinrich (cat. 20) in their contemporary color woodcuts; however, his means were those of New York painters such as Byron Browne

and Arshile Gorky, whose style derived from European modernism. Essentially cubist distortions of space were combined with the bright colors and decorative patterning of the Fauves in Schanker's prints. The hatched lines and checks of Schanker's prints, achieved by a variety of technical means, are reminiscent of Matisse, as are the irregular outlines of form that at times appear scissored. The harmony and joyful mood of this image attest to Schanker's skill as a colorist. The artist used colors to cause forms to seem to advance and recede.

Abstraction with Heart also exemplifies the innovative subtleties of Schanker's technique that impressed Stanley William Hayter (cat. 60).¹ The artist's early woodcuts were printed by hand with small, fabric-covered rubbing pads: his own variation of the Japanese *baren*.² During his activity in the FAP workshop, he developed and refined his technique, utilizing several blocks and liberally applying oil-base ink to the blocks. Variations upon this process included printing colors over black ink on undampened paper, in order to achieve new effects of tone and luminosity.

Perhaps the most innovative and effective of Schanker's printing methods was his practice of pressing one layer of ink atop another before the first had the chance to dry. Because he applied his ink thickly to the blocks, some mixing of colors occurred during printing. In the present print, this effect is apparent in passages where red mixed with blue and with yellow. A similar mottled effect resulted from the sticky ink on the block having lifted some of the previously printed color from the paper.

Four blocks were used to print five colors for *Abstraction with Heart*. The oily ink soaked deeply into the paper, and because it was applied so thickly, no wood grain was printed from the surface of the block.³ Schanker printed by hand rubbing, which is apparent from the verso, where the mottled appearance of ink shows how the sheet was burnished, although on the recto these passages appear flat and saturated.

Schanker's inventive attitude toward technique became a hallmark of his color woodcuts in the 1940s. During this period, he often signed them in the block with an S in a circle, a monogram similar to the Chinese yin-yang symbol. Sometimes Schanker used unconventional tools, such as wire brushes, rasps, and scrapers, to mar the surface of the block. The artist always printed his own blocks and encouraged potentially creative accidents during the process: "The possibility of invention is I believe, one of the most intriguing aspects of woodcut. Traditional tools are no longer sufficient."⁴

Notes

1. Hayter 1962, p. 24.

2. Johnson 1943, p. 4.

3. Aside from the edition of fifteen impressions, there were eight trial proofs. See *ibid.*, no. 7.

4. Lieberman 1955, p. 50. See also AAA 1978 and 1986b; Watrous 1984, pp. 97–98, 178–179.

31

Football, 1938

oil on canvas

28¾ × 37¼ in.

(73 × 90.9 cm)

signed and dated

at lower left: *Schanker '38*

Louis Schanker was prominent among the painters of the 1930s and 1940s for his advocacy of expressionism in American abstraction. His constant activities as a sculptor and as a printmaker were also reflected in his paintings, both in style and technique. Born in New York, Schanker left school as a teenager to join the circus. After several peripatetic years as a laborer, he settled in New York in 1920, beginning five years of part-time studies at Cooper Union, the Education Alliance, and the Art Students League. Although his earliest works reflect the Social Realism promoted at the league, he experimented with the styles of the School of Paris in the 1920s. Schanker left for Europe in 1931, studied briefly in Paris, and then traveled widely. When he lived in Majorca in 1933, his style became markedly abstract, with a vivid palette and cubist distortions of space.

Soon after Schanker's return from Europe, his work reflected the influences of Georges Rouault and Fernand Léger, with undertones of German Expressionism. Schanker became a member of the Mural Division of the WPA Federal Art Project; among his most important projects were murals for the lobby of the radio station WNYC in New York (1937) and the Science and Health Building at the New York World's Fair (1939). In the mid 1930s, the artist began making woodcuts, which he printed in colors from multiple blocks. In 1935 Schanker also became one of "The Ten," a group of young artists who championed abstraction and publicly protested the preference of the museum establishment for conservative, representational styles. He was also a founding member of the AAA. From 1938 to 1941 Schanker was employed by the Graphic Arts Division of the Federal Art Project, and he became a supervisor for relief printmaking.

From the late 1930s on, he worked simultaneously in painting, printmaking, and carved sculpture, and he found reciprocal influences in subject, style, and technique among these media. *Football* belongs to a series of paintings and prints that Schanker produced in the late 1930s and early 1940s depicting figures engaged in sports. Several oils of this period represent the subject of football, and one four-color woodcut of the same title relates closely to this particular canvas.¹ Schanker transferred to the painting the angular, splintered quality of the lines hewn from the woodblock. Beginning with sketches, he abstracted several figures in action and the shapes

between them into a collection of forms floating before a flat, unmodulated field. Although these are essentially simple geometric solids, they hang on a linear superstructure of thick lines. However, like many of Schanker's paintings of the period, this composition is more formal than linear, and it derives from the work of such French Cubists as Albert Gleizes and André Lhote.

Schanker used several technical tricks to vary the quality of the paint on the heavy canvas he favored. He varied a dry-brush technique with passages of thickly applied impasto, and he added grit or sand to the paint in order to achieve a range of textured, tactile surfaces. The artist softened some forms by scraping away paint. Later, he overpainted the ground in a darker shade of gray, thereby isolating some forms and introducing intricacies of overlap and transparency.

During the 1940s, Schanker began teaching printmaking courses at the New School for Social Research, where he briefly shared a studio with Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17. The thrust of Schanker's teaching and his own work was independence and experimentation, and he attracted and motivated many innovative artists. He held several teaching posts at the New School, the Brooklyn Museum School, and Bard College from the mid 1940s until his retirement. In the 1950s Schanker became very active with printmaking associations, exhibiting prints which focused on abstract circular forms and which employed shape and color to express a kinesthetic sense of revolution. In the following decade Schanker returned to sculpture, carving freestanding pieces from wood and plastic; in the 1970s he also experimented with relief prints from carved lucite plates.

DA

Note

¹ The woodblock *Football* is listed in Johnson (no. 39).

Selected References

- Johnson, Una E. *The Woodblock Color Prints of Louis Schanker* (exh. cat.). Brooklyn, New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1943.
- Schanker, Louis. "The Ides of Art: Eleven Graphic Artists Write," *Tiger's Eye*, vol. 8 (June 1949), pp. 45-47.
- Yeh, Susan Fillin. *Louis Schanker: Works of the 1930s and 1940s* (exh. cat.). New York: Martin Diamond Fine Arts, 1981.



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cordially

invites you to a

Benefit Preview Party

Artists of the Hamptons

A GUERNSEY'S AUCTION

5:30 p.m.—8:00 p.m.

Tuesday, February 25, 1992

Lexington Avenue Armory, New York City
(26th Street and Lexington Avenue)

Guernsey's Auction House will present an auction on February 27th and 28th of works by significant artists whose careers at one point focused on Eastern Long Island.

The Benefit Party will provide an opportunity to preview these works and meet some of the artists. Please join us for this special evening. Proceeds from the party will benefit the Peconic Land Trust and will help to preserve rural landscapes on Eastern Long Island.



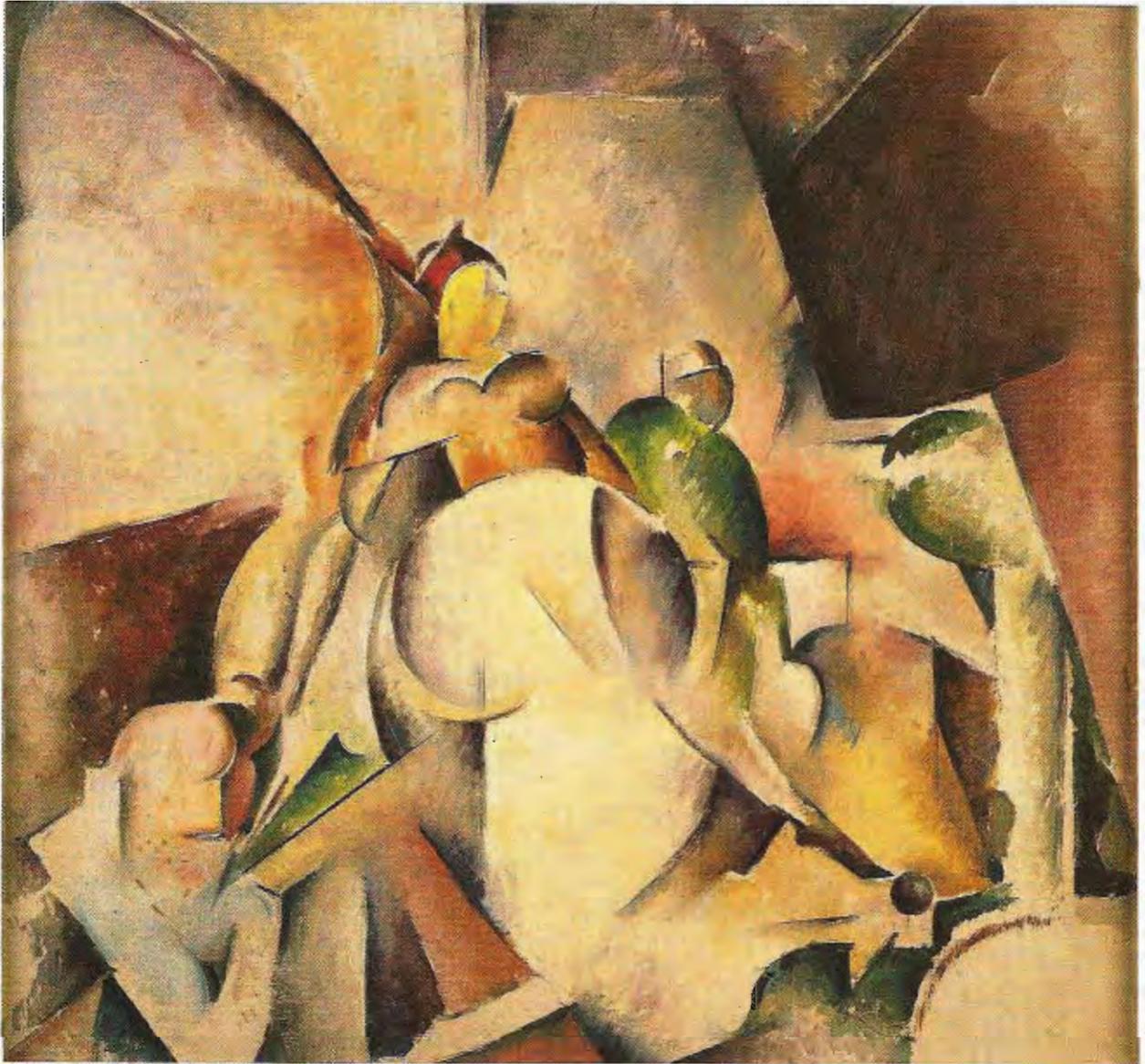
THE SUPPLEMENT

ARTISTS OF THE HAMPTONS

FEBRUARY 27 & 28, 1992

AMERICAN CUBISM:

1909-1949



May 9 - June 3, 1992

Louis Schanker, *Acrobats*, 1938, oil on canvas, 36 x 29 in

Sid Deutsch Gallery

Lines & Myths

ABSTRACTION IN AMERICAN ART
1941 - 1951

BAZIOTES
BROWNE
BUSA
DEHNER
J. ERNST
GORKY

KAMROWSKI
LASSAW
LEWIS
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RACZ
ROTHKO
SCHANKER
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STAMOS

November 5, 1992 to January 23, 1993

Reception
Thursday, November 5, 5-8 pm

color catalogue, essay by Mel Lader

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LOUIS SCHANKER

Untitled [#13], 1944
Mixed media on paper
10.75" x 15.5"

Byron Browne, *Untitled*, 1938. Ink and collage on board, 18.25 x 21 inches

ERY
1992

Aspects of American Abstraction 1930-1942



February 11 - March 27

Benno	Grant	Roszak
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Bolotowsky	Howard	Seliger
Cavallon	Jonson	Shaw
Dove	Kelpe	Slobodkina
Drewes	Meierhans	Storrs
Ferren	Morris	Von Wicht
Gallatin	Pereira	Vytlačil
Garman	Rosenborg	Xceron

Byron Browne, *Untitled*, 1938, ink and collage on board, 18.25 x 21 inches

Color catalogue available

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AMERICAN MODERNISM

1930s & 1940s Abstraction

1993

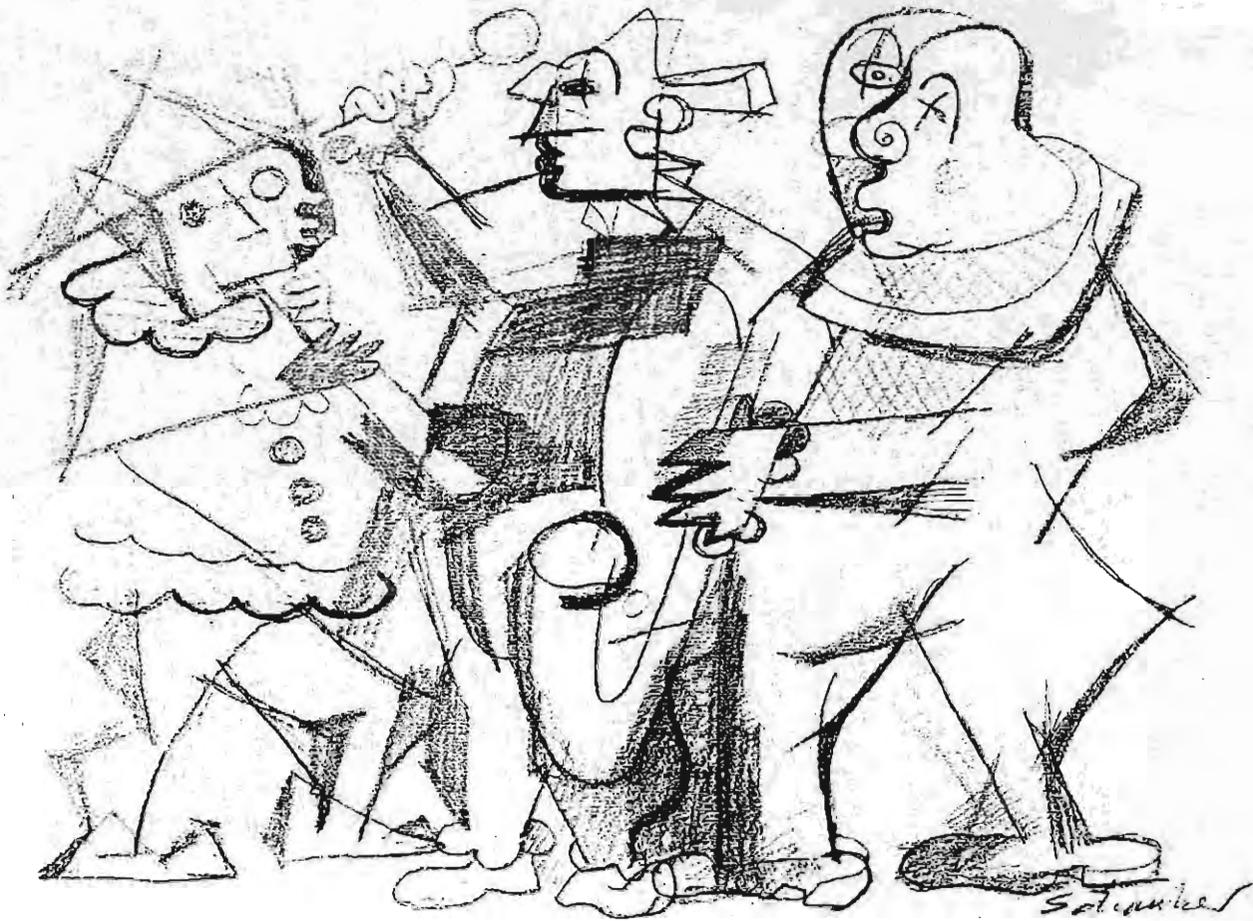
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Louis Schanker (1903-1981)
Abstraction, 1945
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 1/2 inches
signed & dated lower right



**Louis Schanker
A Retrospective**

September 8 - October 8, 1993

Wed., Thurs., Fri., - 12:00 noon - 4:00 pm
Sat., 10:00 am - 1:00 pm

RECEPTION

Sunday, September 26th
2:00 pm - 4:00 pm

presented by
Friends of Nassau County
Office of Cultural Development

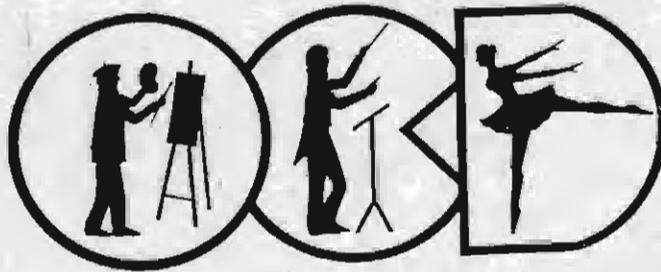
Chelsea Center, Route 25A, Muttontown, L.I.
(516) 624-7120

Thomas S. Gulotta
County Executive



Jerry Seckler
Executive Director

NASSAU COUNTY



THOMAS S. GULOTTA
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

JEROME E. SECKLER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

OFFICE OF CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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NEWS RELEASE

August 19, 1993

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PHONE: 624-7120

LOUIS SCHANKER: SIXTY YEARS OF EXPERIMENTATION!

The Nassau County Office of Cultural Development is pleased to announce the display of a one-man art exhibit, featuring the works of the late abstract artist, Louis Schanker.

Says Nassau County Executive, Thomas S. Gulotta, "For abstract painters in the 1930's, departing from realism was a revolutionary act. That was the message of Avant-garde artists, manifestos and organizations of those decades."

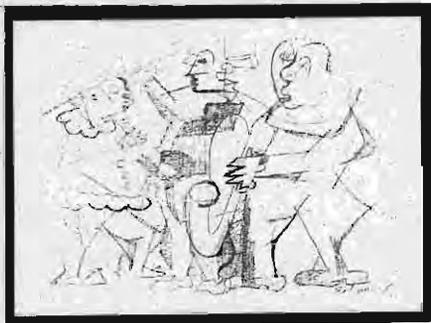
Louis Schanker, a native New Yorker, began his studies in 1923 drawing from plaster casts in the evenings at Cooper Union. He attended the Art School of the Educational Alliance and the Art Students League until 1927, where he then moved to Paris to study at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere. In 1936, Schanker was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists, where his wood-block design was used as the poster for the exhibition "The Ten" Whitney Dissenters, held at Mercury Galleries in New York. Schanker was then given a solo exhibition at the New School for Social Research in New York and was also exhibited with YKUF. He created a mural for the Hall of Medicine and Public Health at the New York World's Fair in 1939.

"Schanker's is an art which is important in understanding the development of the second wave of American abstraction which culminated in Abstract Expressionism," says Jerome E. Seckler, Executive Director for the Office of Cultural Development.

Louis Schanker's rare works will be shown at Chelsea Center, home of the Office of Cultural Development, where a solo exhibit will be held in his honor. The exhibit will begin on Wednesday, September 8th and run through October 8th. Doors open Monday through Friday from 12:00 noon to 4:00 PM & Saturdays from 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM.

Chelsea center is located on Route 25A in East Norwich. For further information, please call 624-7120.

THROUGH OCTOBER 8



LOUIS SCHANKER A Retrospective

Wed. - Fri. 12 - 4 pm, Sat. 10 am - 1 pm

Louis Schanker, a founding member of the American Abstract Artists in 1936. It was his woodblock design which illustrated the poster for "The Ten" Whitney Dissenters' exhibit at Mercury Galleries in New York City. Schanker created the outstanding mural for The Hall of Medicine and Public Health at the 1939 World's Fair.

To Study the art of Louis Schanker is to begin to understand the development of the second wave of American Abstraction, which culminated in Abstract Expressionism.

Abstract Art Show

The Nassau County Office of Cultural Development is pleased to announce the display of a one-man art exhibit, featuring the works of the late abstract artist, Louis Schanker.

Schanker, a native New Yorker, began his studies in 1923 drawing from plaster casts in the

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