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Human Concern in Contemporary Graphic Art

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HUMAN CONCERN IN CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC ART

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This paper will survey the development of the graphic arts, particularly etching, as a technique and as a medium through which the artist expresses his concern for one of the recurring themes in intellectual history, viz., the search for meaning in human existence. This theme is certainly not the only problem explored by the artists, either now or in the past, but is one toward which the writer has turned particularly in the area of etching. The confluence of both the technique of etching and concern with the problem of meaning seems particularly significant. This paper, however, will not make any attempt to suggest that in some mysterious way the technique of etching is especially suited to the exploration of the problem of meaning. All that will be attempted is to show the use made of this technique in handling a vexing problem which seems imbedded in the very tissue of life.

Three separate historical stages can be noted in the history of the technique of etching: the Gothic, the Expressionist and the contemporary. These periods are also notable for their concern with the problem of meaning.

The Gothic period saw the rise of worker organizations in the guilds. The town became the focal point of society. It was a period of intense religious feeling and of developing knowledge.

The Expressionists who broke through the barriers of a decadence in creativity at the turn of this century were faced with problems similar to those of the Gothic age. The Industrial Revolution had radically changed the way of life for all people it touched; the town and city were becoming politically and socially powerful. The artists of this period had a strong religious heritage, but the emphasis was being placed on the meaning and purpose of life now, not only a life to come. Psychology and philosophy opened the way to new insights into man's personality and capability.

In the mid-twentieth century the awareness among all men of common human aspirations has been the starting point for many artists. Whereas the world of Gothic man was characterized by mystery and was fundamentally unknowable, contemporary man's world is assumed to be knowable.

These three periods are particularly important in the history of printmaking as an artistic technique and as a means of creative expression. Prior to the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century, etching and engraving were used only as a means of metal decoration. With the ability to transfer the intaglio design to a second surface, the print as we now think of it came into existence. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, artists had almost completely ceased to regard the graphic arts as a creative medium, and printmaking degenerated into an illustration technique. In the waning years of the nineteenth century, etching and other graphic processes were reintroduced, explored and expanded technically and artistically by the group of artists historically termed the Expressionists. Interest in most printmaking

techniques, however, was only sporadic after the first wave of enthusiasm. The last twenty-five to thirty years have seen a resurgence which has brought all techniques a wide audience and reputation and stimulated many artists to explore some form of printmaking as an additional technique.

Printmakers today are usually artists in other media as well. They have explored and exploited various techniques that would have been considered highly unorthodox not long ago. Graphics have burst the bonds and restrictions of the folio art for which they were treasured at the outset of their popularity. They have escaped the category of illustration to which they had fallen in the nineteenth century. Today they are once again considered a valuable original art form, meant to be displayed and as valid as expression of the artist as painting, sculpture or literature.

The three periods discussed in this paper were chosen for emphasis of the high points of creative achievement in the field of printmaking; for their underlying theme, the concern for man and his existence; and also for what appears to be a common thread in the socio-political conditions which faced the artists.

Printmaking and the meaning of man's existence are of great interest to the writer. There is, however, no intention of entering upon an exhaustive survey of all prints, all printmakers, or all problems confronting man. The discussion is basically a background for the several prints which form the basis of Chapter V in this paper.

CHAPTER II

THE GRAPHIC RENAISSANCE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The etching today is no longer considered by the artist or the public as a sideline or as a method of illustration alone. An etching is not conceived and created as merely a personal notation, a substitution for drawing as a mode of artistic reference. It is not printed only to be stored in the artist's file or given as a memento to friends. Printmaking is a medium for creative expression. The finished print is the artist's statement brought to fulfillment, completed not only for exhibition as a technical work but to be displayed as a personal statement.

Regarding the work of a print or any art form, it is well to refer to the statement of Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy:

> The final judgment is of the degree of the artist's success in giving clear expression to the theme of his work. In order to answer the question, Has the thing been well said? it will evidently be necessary for us to know what it was that was to be said.[1]

In the print as in any other art form it is clarity of statement that is important, not just an attractive design.

Etching today is a composite technique making use of experiments with the medium which have been adding to the printmaker's repertory over the past fifty years. Etching no longer brings to

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[1]Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 17.

mind only the works of line, as created by Dürer and Rembrandt, or the tonal compositions of Goya; nor is a particular plate necessarily confined to only one or two techniques. The drawn line is combined with the line of a lift ground; the cross-hatched tonal area with the aquatint area. Plates are hollowed out by straight bite and have holes cut into them or etched completely through them which produce embossed white areas. The surface areas of the plate may be etched to such a degree that the print actually has a three-dimensional surface rather than merely implied depth. The linear components of the composition may be etched to such a degree that the inked lines stand above the surface of the print as a grid. Plates are cut in free-form shapes and printed alone or in combination.

These technical innovations of the twentieth century, and many other variations,[1] are important because they indicate a new freedom on the part of the artist and an intensive search for a more expressive statement.

The color print, either as the result of a combination of techniques or a combination of plates printed in succession, has gained considerable interest and acceptance despite the additional technical problems involved in accurate registration. The variety of surface and tone that is possible when one is using a single color against the surface of the paper, however, gives a directness of statement which has strong appeal for many artists.

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[1]In addition to the methods mentioned above, etched metal is combined not only with engraving, as was done in earlier periods, but with relief printing from metal, linoleum, wood and silk screen. Deeply etched plates are also printed uninked to provide a white on white embossed surface.

Evidently the pros and cons of color prints have a history almost as long as printmaking itself, for Albrecht Dürer, in a letter to Erasmus, praised the black and white print as follows:

> . . . what does he not express in monochrome, that is in lines of black? Light, dark, splendor, eminences, depressions; and, although they derive from one single printing, several aspects are presented to the eye of the spectator. These he arranges in the most significant lines, yet if you should add color, you would injure the work. And is it not more wonderful to accomplish without the blandishment of color?[1]

Etching techniques have changed and developed radically since Dürer's time, as indicated previously, but it is difficult to disagree with the last sentence quoted above.

A further change wrought by modern printmakers is an increase in scale. Plates are assuming ever larger proportions and would seem enormous compared to those of earlier periods. Naturally, the larger a print, the more easily it can be displayed in the manner of a painting. Also, the greater surface area allows for a bolder and more powerful means of expression which may be more suitable to the artist's theme or temperament. Part of the expansion in size has doubtless been a reaction against the earlier role of the print as illustration. It may also be that this increased size has contributed to the popularity of the color print, the effect of so large an area in black and white appearing too much for a colorist. However, this very expanse should provide the artist with a more powerful expression, and the use of color in etching often gives the impression of weakness of statement. The present

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[1]Quoted in Werner Haftmann, Alfred Hentzen, William S. Lieberman, German Art of the Twentieth Century, ed. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1957), p. 185.

scale is probably due to the simple fact that the artist is not only printmaker but also painter. The larger the scale of an artist's painting, the larger his prints; painters who work on moderately sized canvasses will more easily adapt to a smaller plate size. This increase in the scale of the print is also due to the new role of the print as an object of display. Other periods have produced large scale paintings but the print, then considered as a folio piece or illustration, remained small in scale.

One of the most exciting of the recent techniques developed in etching was originated by Rolf Nesch of the Expressionist group, a painter turned printmaker. Instead of relying solely on design etched through the ground into the metal, Nesch cuts various shapes of metal and screening and places these on top of the plate, inking the whole as for a regular etching. These added pieces of metal may be etched or left plain. By the very nature of the process his shapes must be relatively simple, and he often produces works of exceptional strength although at times the exotic surface detracts from the artist's statement. Nevertheless, Nesch's technical innovations are a stimulus to many creative and meaningful prints produced today.

Originally, the various pieces of the composition were selected and then soldered in place. Later, however, Nesch just placed the shapes on the plate prior to printing and often in the process of running an edition varied not only his palette but the arrangement of the compositional elements from print to print. Such variation, used also by Edvard Munch in his color woodcuts and lithographs, produces a print that is as original and unique

as a painting and is specifically designed for display.

Most of the artists who have been instrumental in the revival of printmaking as a means of creative expression and interested in devising new techniques came to this field from other areas, most notably painting. Munch and Nesch are both in this category, having already established reputations as painters before becoming acquainted with the possibilities of the print. While Nesch turned to printmaking and his metal collages almost entirely, Munch and most other artists continued to paint while producing etchings, lithographs and woodcuts as well.

Certainly the cause of etching and all printmaking owes a debt to Stanley W. Hayter, whose interest in redeeming the almost lost institution of the master printer and the print shop and in the experimental possibilities of the print led to the establishment of Atelier 17 in Paris during the 1930s. Under Hayter's guidance artists were trained in the craft of printing as well as in the art of the print, removing the division between these two areas. Virtually all of our contemporary techniques have been the result of work in Hayter's studio, and it is literally true that American printmakers today can trace their technical heritage and stimulus through two or three generations of Atelier 17 associates.

Ernst Kirchner, one of the Expressionists, has given perhaps the best explanation of the interest in printmaking shown by artists originally trained in or interested in other areas:

> Perhaps the urge which drives the artist to printmaking is partly due to the effort to fix in final form what in drawing remains loose and unpredictable. The actual technical manipulations release in the artist powers which do not come into play in the much easier handiwork

> of drawing and painting. The process of printing welds the previous and separate steps into a unity.[1]

The print today, particularly as it has increased in scale, has decreased in the size of its editions. This, of course, has an economic effect in making the individual prints more valuable by virtue of their scarcity, but it also relates to the fact that contemporary printmaking, from idea to matted edition, is wholly the work of the artist, just as a painting. The printmaker must be creative artist and competent artisan.

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[1]Quoted in Haftmann, op. cit., p. 195.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMON CONCERN OF THE GOTHIC AND EXPRESSIONIST PERIODS

Two major periods in the art of the past which account for the direction taken by much contemporary art bear a striking similarity to our own time and are of the greatest influence on this writer. The first of these is the Gothic era of Northern Europe, which extended from approximately the twelfth to the sixteenth century but showed its greatest vitality in the thirteenth century.

The Problems and Concerns of the Gothic Era

The expressive strength of the art of the Gothic period has often been related to twentieth-century expression. By far the best known proponent of this position was Wilhelm Worringer, an historian of the Gothic who was contemporary with the Expressionist movement at the turn of the century. Worringer held that the tendency to abstraction was always a result of profound disturbance in the outside world. He saw Gothic man as obsessed by his ignorance of the universe and seeking in art, first a means of negating life, and later a means of expressing life.

The Gothic period differed in several ways from the earlier Romanesque (c. 500-1150). In the latter period life was mainly rural, the outlook parochial, while in the Gothic an urban culture

was developing, the trade guilds were growing in numbers and power, and a scientific approach to knowledge brought the formation of the first universities. It was a time of revolution in the established order. The feudalistic agrarian society disintegrated with the rise of a commercial, money-based economy and the emergence of secular officialdom in the towns. In the founding of the first universities scholars had a counterpart to the commercial and trade guilds.

The role of the Church was also changing. It was constantly involved in political machinations to determine the supremacy of Church or State, doctrinal controversies and heretical splinter groups. The town cathedrals became the property of the citizens and, although they were presided over by the local bishop, there were no prescriptions as to how they should be designed or decorated. The local clergy were a political power associated with the secular officials and joined with them in the suppression of the masses. The design and decoration of the cathedrals was left in the hands of the architect in charge. Much of the work was contracted out on a piece-work basis to various shops which provided the decorative accents, probably often with no more than the dimensions of the space to be filled provided. The Church's official involvement in worldly affairs did not leave time for interest in the decoration of individual cathedrals, and if the decorations were termed symbolic at all it was most often after the fact.[1]

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[1]G. G. Coulton, Art and the Reformation, Part I, Medieval Faith and Symbolism (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), Chapter XIII, "Symbolism", especially pp. 250ff.

Mysticism was a vital influence in the Gothic period, and, if it did not involve the aspect of magic, it was greatly enhanced by a spirit of fantasy. Fantasy is evident even in later centuries in the revival of pagan ideas through the fairy tale and in Dürer's engravings of witches.

The religious and secular conflicts, the change in social structure brought about by the rise of the towns, and increasing nationalism took artistic form in the continuous line of the Gothic ornament. The line allowed no place for the eye to rest; its seething movement was symbolic of the cultural unrest of the day. The swirling line of the Expressionists and particularly of Munch is a direct descendant of the Gothic in its expressiveness and developed from a similar situation of great cultural change.

In portraying the human form the Gothic artist saw his figures not as men but as "images" of men, abstractions which continued and contributed to the basic expressive line of his cathedrals. The figures which form the columns at the entrance to the Gothic cathedrals are representations of biblical personages and secular financial contributors, but they stand at the portals much as a guard, protecting the site of worship from the non-believers and the uninitiated. Here, particularly, they take on a magical significance by virtue of the secular power they represent. This is a basic tie with the artists of the twentieth century who are also concerned with the "image" of man rather than with specific personalities.[1]

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[1]For a discussion of contemporary images see Peter Selz, New Images of Man (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959).

Worringer's position regarding the development of art in any age he stated as follows:

> Modern art research, however, . . . must accept as an axiom that the past could do all that it willed and that it could not do only that which did not lie in the direction of its will. . . . But what we . . . are always grasping as a difference between will and ability, is in reality only the difference that subsists between our will and the will of past epochs. . . .[1]

This is certainly a controversial position, especially when considered in the light of religious authoritarianism, but he probably only intended to defend Gothic art against the techniques of spatial perspective and high surface polish which became so important from the Renaissance onward.

One of the great religious controversies of this period revolved around the person and power of Satan, whose sphere of influence was the world. Thus, man's earthly life was thought of only as preparation for heaven. There was a growing belief, however, that the earthly life should be lived and experienced for itself and not merely as an apprenticeship for eternity.

The Revival of Human Concern in German Expressionism

At the turn of this century that phase of visual art referred to by the historians as German Expressionism developed in conjunction with similar expressionist movements in literature and music. German Expressionism, or, more accurately, North European expressionism, differed from previous currents in art in its concern with the world of the imagination and a subjective feeling toward objec-

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[1] Wilhelm Worringer, Form Problems of the Gothic (New York: G. E. Stechert & Co., 1910), p. 21.

tive reality. It differed also in technique. Line once again, as in the earlier Gothic period, became dominant, a line which was often violent, expressed rather than implied, and which swirled through the picture plane. Color, too, was an important feature of Expressionism. Bright and bold, thickly applied and rough in surface texture, it was in definite contrast to the "brown study" paintings of the nineteenth century.

But in addition to these technical changes in a static art there was also a thematic innovation far removed from Greek mythology and biblical illustration. The view of the nineteenth century toward the physical world was opposite to the view held in the Gothic period. With the discovery of the immutable laws of nature the natural world was at least theoretically knowable. All that remained was to tidy up man's knowledge of his universe. The wealth of knowledge about the outer world amassed by the physical scientists caused scientific inquiry to turn to the inner world of man as the locus of the unknown and the problematic. Attempts to conquer this territory were made through the romantic movement in literature, through the explication of man's feeling of absolute dependence in systematic theology, and by the psychologists who explored the inner recesses of consciousness. This concern for man's inner world has parallels in the Expressionist movement in art. The Expressionists were concerned with the present, not the past, with intense human feelings realized in the strong and sometimes violent emotions of love and hate, jealousy and fear, the eternal opposites good and evil, matter and spirit.

One of the most significant elements in this movement, a strong religious environment, is emphasized by Peter Selz.[1] The background of religious piety certainly had a strong influence on these artists; it gave to life an either/or emphasis which was translated in the paintings by strong line and color and even more dramatically by the black and white of the print. The religious environment at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was again, as in the Gothic period, one of social and political negotiation. It saw the beginning of the missionary movement which ultimately led to the World Council of Churches. It saw the beginning of the breakup of nationalism and increasing recognition of dependence rather than independence. In all areas there was a strong movement towards the homogenization of culture.

There was also, however, another factor which should be taken into account. The Industrial Revolution was responsible for a progressively mechanistic society. The machine performed man's labor, and man performed as a part of the machine. What was to happen to man's individuality? At this time fear was perhaps a dominant element in the consciousness of all men.

In the early Gothic era man had combined his art with fantasy as an almost magical protective device to overcome his fear of the unknown.[2] He used line as a fence to enclose his images, and broke into the images with this same line to produce a unified whole of abstract parts and destroy what he feared. In the early twentieth

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[1]Peter Selz, German Expressionist Painting (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1957).

[2]Worringer, op. cit., p. 59ff.

century man saw his enemy in terms more psychological than physical. Seeking to protect his dignity and individuality, the artist used his line to explore and define his fears rather than to isolate himself from them. It was typical of the Expressionists of this century to see man in solitude and loneliness, as he faced the problems of existence, yet in need of community with other men. The artists sought to declare man's individuality through theme or subject, idea or experience common to all men.

In exploring man's inner life the Expressionists sought to give visual form to emotional experience, and in so doing their work often had almost magical undertones. By giving a feeling of voluntary action to inanimate objects, as Munch did in his landscapes, the artist emphasized the emotional experience; objects were disoriented in space in the fantasies of Klee and Chagall to give a new reality.

Man was not, however, the only focal point of Expressionist creativity. The nineteenth century did not view the natural world as really terrifying because it was no longer considered as unknown or unknowable. The Expressionists found many analogies, however, between man's effect on himself and others and nature's effect on man, and in this context the natural world, also, was important for the new developments in art.

The development and acceptance of this new style, both in painting and in the graphic arts, owes much to the work of Edvard Munch, and his relationship to the contemporary period deserves special consideration for theme and technique.

Specific Contributions of Edvard Munch (1863-1944)

Munch once stated the task of modern art as follows:

> For Realism it was the façade that counted, for Impressionism the character. Now it is shadows and movements. . . . Such shadows the prisoner sees in his cell, those curious grey streaks of shadow which flee and then return, which slide apart and come together again like fans, bending, curving, dividing.[1]

Munch's works give a sensation of alienation and abandonment, as though all mankind were a prisoner looking out from his cell, for whom life is a confinement, a shadow of its possibilities.

The various sick room and deathbed scenes in Munch's paintings and prints develop the theme of the artist, that life is cruel but so is man. The isolated figure against a stark and ominous landscape becomes the prisoner which Munch saw man to be. In his figure groups, whether in landscape or interior, Munch emphasized man's alienation by giving his figures varying focal points, the group sharing only a physical community, each emotionally isolated by his own thoughts. Thematically, Munch's works are common to the experiences of all men, and his purpose seems to be to underscore what Hawthorne termed the "magnetic chain of humanity." Both the writer and the painter recognized man's dependence upon community with others.

Munch reflected his preoccupation with purpose in life by use of contrast: the living in community with the dying; man in community with nature. He captured these contrasts with sinuous line, in color and in black and white.

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[1]Quoted in Otto Benesch, Edvard Munch (New York: Phaidon Publishers, Inc., 1960), p. 9.

Munch's devotion to the theme of man's life is evidence that he felt man did not understand his own problems. Instead of looking on the physical facts of man's existence from the outside, Munch turned his attention to a view from within man. Thus, in the lithographs and paintings on the theme of death, the visitors to the deathbed are depicted as more involved with their own thoughts than with the dying person, and the object of their visit is shown with his own visions. Munch's portrayal of approaching adulthood in Puberty, the jealous lover in Jealousy, man overcome by fear in The Scream, show man's aloneness and alienation and have provided an artistic and philosophic heritage for our own generation.

CHAPTER IV

HUMAN CONCERN IN THE 1960'S

The art of the fifth and sixth decades of the twentieth century has shown exciting development in its concern for man's existence. In the Gothic period the physical world was unknown and man's primary concern was for survival. The scientific advances attained in the nineteenth century turned man's quest for knowledge to the inner world of his existence. In our own time, however, there is concern not only about the still unknown aspects of the inner world of man but a reintroduction of concern for the possible unknowability of the physical world. On the basis of Einstein's concept of the expanding universe, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Godel's Theorem,[1] there are, perhaps, the greatest similarities between the Gothic period and the mid-twentieth century. The Expressionist period becomes one of contrast with the other two.

Just as the Gothic artists and the Expressionists attempted

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[1]Stated on an elementary basis, Einstein's position is that the edge of the universe is rushing away from man at the speed of light and, therefore, by definition man can never catch up. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that in the exploration of inner space (i.e., the atom) we cannot know at the same time both the speed of an electron and its position so that there is always an unknown and unknowable factor in scientific experiments. The position advanced by Godel's Theorem is that within any one axiomatic system there are certain things which are not open to question, namely the axioms. By the very fact that they are not open to examination the certainty of scientific analysis is in doubt.

to define, understand and give meaning to the problems of man's existence in a time of change, the artist today is faced with changing concepts. The two major political systems dominant today have a greater impact on man and his world than did the regional squabbles of the past. Living in a world where all are neighbors, we are forced to admit that the neighbors are not always friendly. We exist in a society that would have been difficult to imagine at the turn of the century. We participate in a culture which has become the acme of conformity and interchangeability. What is to become of man? What is man to become?

These are pertinent questions and there is an all too obvious possibility. Man may well become little more than a machine, directed and controlled by the very machines he creates, and as interchangeable with another as the engine of an automobile. This is particularly so if he looks at life only from the outside. If we are to understand the meaning and purpose of life we must approach it also from within, in the manner of Munch and the Gothic artists. The exterior facts and features of existence must be seen in relation to and from within, body and soul, matter and spirit seeking a unification. The social realism and social criticism of the thirties and forties of this century in literature and art now appear to have been succeeded by a personal realism with just this goal in mind. It is concerned with the individual as before, but in a metaphysical sense, in terms of man's place in the universe, his individuality and his community with others.

Many contemporary artists are aware that the very nature of man's existence is at stake, that he cannot remain static. He

cannot stop change or progress. He cannot be a "catcher in the rye" but must continue to grow and develop and accept the responsibilities of life as presented.[1] These artists seek to stimulate mankind to consideration of the future and its possibilities.

As in the two earlier periods discussed, religion has taken a definite form in the mid-twentieth century, although it is perhaps too soon to see it in full perspective. The post-war resurgence of interest in church membership and attendance may be similar to the last great efforts in Europe to regain the solidarity and achievement of the Roman Empire. This popularity of religion, however, may presage the death throes rather than the resurrection of the church as it has been known up to the present time.

On the other hand, great strides have been taken in recent years toward creating a new religious atmosphere. Numerous mergers have occurred and are contemplated between the various protestant denominations, in contrast to the constant splintering which began before the Reformation. For the first time in about a century the science of theology is gaining in vigor and interest. People are once again giving thought to a religious concept, but it is based on the existence of man in this world rather than upon a spiritual and other-worldly existence. This is one of the features of today's climate that is being considered by many artists in their concern for and portrayal of man and his emotions.

Mid-twentieth century art portrays man as infinitesimal and

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[1]The problem of growth, change and adaptation to life has been dealt with by J. D. Salinger in his excellent novel, The Catcher in the Rye (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1945), through the adolescent Holden Caulfield.

as heroic. Man has been shown as of microscopic importance to the overwhelming problems of physical existence, and he has been depicted as towering over his physical confines.

Our contemporary art is not easily categorized. Some artists, of course, have been strongly influenced by others. For the purposes of this discussion, however, it is probably most practical to consider two categories, those using the human figure, and those who do not.

The artists who choose to develop their ideas on the basis of the figure itself are perhaps no larger a group than the other, but they appear to be more vocal. In their attempt to state the problems of man and the artist in our own time they appear to consider themselves as heralds of truth, awakening man to his condition, and as judges condemning man's lack of interest. They appear to agree with Otto Benesch, who wrote with reference to a Munch self-portrait of 1905, "It is clear from the painting that Munch saw the artist not merely as a Bohemian but also as a teacher, admonisher and judge."[1] These artists display not only a missionary zeal towards their position but a distaste for and distrust of those who choose a non-figurative theme.

In their portraits Baskin, Golub, Oliviera, Shahn and Lasansky attempt to show man's individuality as well as his human characteristics. They wish to deny man's interchangeability and emphasize his uniqueness among other men and the natural world. To support their position they most often isolate the figure, sur-

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[1]Otto Benesch, op. cit., p. 31.

round him with a void of space making him heroic by contrast, intimating alienation, man suffering and enduring a hermit-like existence without benefit of human contact, support or interest.

The artists of the second category deal not so much in allegory as in symbolism. They overlook the "warts" to take a vantage point on the inner man. A metaphysical concern with the individual has led many artists directly to abstractionism as they became involved with man's position in the world not only as an individual of free will but as a part of the natural order. These artists are engaged in a personal search; it is not dogmatic but is based on the simple fact of their community with the rest of mankind. The basic difference, then, between the artists of these two groups is a comprehensive one. The former are concerned with man's individuality and humanity alone, the latter with man's existence, the common humanity shared by all.

Specific Contemporary Contributions

In 1943 Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote the art critic of The New York Times, a letter which amounted to a manifesto, stating:

> We feel that our pictures demonstrate our esthetic beliefs, some of which are, therefore:
>
> 1. To us art is an unknown world which can be explored only by those willing to take risks.
> 2. This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.
> 3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way--not his way.
> 4. We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact

> of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.
>
> 5. It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess kinship with primitive and archaic art.[1]

Twenty years have passed since this letter was written, and in that time the styles of these artists have changed considerably, yet their current work is in no way a denial of what they said in 1943.

Here we have a concrete statement that indicates the turn of emphasis for at least some of the artists of today: "the simple expression of the complex thought." The abandoning of the human figure to express an idea forces the artist and the spectator to think. It stirs the imagination of both. It allows the artist freedom to develop his own symbols and forms and requires the spectator to consider not only the artist's viewpoint but to re-evaluate his own.

The idea that is an intangible mass, shapeless in the mind, is given an arbitrary form by the artist. The form may vary from work to work as an artist develops his idea and pushes to the limits of his ability. The idea may be repeated in a consecutive series or it may recur intermittently, but always the artist is searching to clarify it for himself and for the world. This was true of most of the Gothic artists, it was true of Munch, and it is true of many artists today. It is not the theme that changes

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[1]Quoted in Rudi Blesh, Modern Art USA: Men, Rebellion, Conquest, 1900-1956 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 226-227.

but the artist's conception and perception. His imagination and insight develop as he searches for clarification and, in our own time particularly, simplification. This is increasingly true of Gottlieb and Rothko.

Gottlieb's paintings went through a period of decorativeness that was almost baroque. Sign language and stick symbols overran the surface of his canvasses. Gottlieb, however, is waging the battle, not merely defending or retreating to a position under pressure. Simplification has been the by-word of his development over the years since the letter to The Times. "The simple expression" has resulted in reducing his symbolism from a labyrinth to a straight line, from many characters to a single characterization.

The image that comes to mind when Gottlieb is mentioned is that of a sun-like disk, compact and contained within itself, in combination with a spreading, fluctuating mass contrasting in color as well as in form. It may be a landscape, the hot living sun overlooking and overcoming the cold, undisciplined, dead earth, and it is then a simple expression of contrast to the complex billboard-strewn landscape in which we live. But whether it is intended to contrast the purity of natural landscape with man-made reality, or to contrast the calm and disciplined universe of the spirit with the destructive universe of man's material world, the important point is the fact of contrast. The basic statement of contrast is brought out in the open, whether sun and earth, order and chaos or matter and spirit. It is the raw material of contemplation that forces artist and audience alike to speculate, re-evaluate and act. According to a recent article, Gottlieb is look-

ing towards a universe which fuses "human emotion, man's basic individuality, with the physical laws"[1] which are basic to existence and community. It remains to be seen how Gottlieb will further simplify his statement and "give impact of the unequivocal."

In the last twenty years Mark Rothko's painting has undergone a metamorphosis also, at least as dramatic as that of Gottlieb. He has turned to the non-objective from the figurative. His development toward the "simple expression of the complex thought" has evolved in paintings of color, sometimes muted, sometimes brilliant, varying in tone from top to bottom or in rectangles one within the other. There are no hard edges to stop the eye, but, especially in the later paintings, the eye as well as the mind is carried upward in smooth transition. The effect is similar to that achieved by the Gothic line. The significance of this vast calm space is in the effect it has on the viewer, enabling contemplation through color alone of the immensity of the universe, the continuing process of life from generation to generation. Man is enveloped within the spatial universe and is thus a part of it. These paintings dissolve the frenetic culture of our age and force the spectator to look within himself for the patterns of existence. They deny the superimposed structures of culture and seek to fuse matter and spirit within man. The effect of these paintings on man is in the realm of the mystical; Rothko achieves a feeling of equilibrium within which man can grow and develop.

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[1] Martin Friedman, "Private Symbols in Public Statement," Art News, LXII, No. 3 (May, 1963), p. 33.

CHAPTER V

DIRECTIONS

The preceding chapters illuminate the historical background of a recurring theme in art, concern for man's existence, and also the high points of development in etching. The conclusion reached is that there is a difference only in degree between the theme of the contemporary artist and his Gothic predecessor while there is, in addition, a contrasting development in the Expressionist period.

The Gothic artists remain largely unknown by name, whereas the names of a great many important artists from more recent times are known. This has resulted in a general handling of the earliest period, where the prime emphasis of the discussion is directed to the theme and the cultural situation. The scope of this paper made it necessary to limit the discussion about recent artists to those whom the author felt were most significant for her own work.

The desire for a more powerful means of expression has influenced the present writer to pursue abstract form to complete the statement of an abstract idea. The need for clarification of complex problems has resulted in the non-objective taking precedence over the figurative. The purpose of abstraction is not to transpose natural appearance into pure formal structure but to give visual form to intangibles of idea and experience in order to attain greater understanding. The expression of an idea, a state of

mind, a cosmic event, does not require a naturalized image as a connecting link to the problem of man. It is a visualization of an intangible concept from within, perhaps a momentary state of mind, but it is an abstract problem to which the artist is attempting to give concrete form.

The artist is a creator. In the words of Paul Klee, "Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible." If all problems of man's existence must be conceived in the light of historical events, there is a self-limiting factor at work on any one artist. The view that man is essentially a creator is optimistic. It assumes that man's creative interest and ability is dominant. It does not, however, insist that man will not on occasion destroy or be misdirected in his efforts.

The artist who employs the realistic image alone in stating man's condition invites the conclusion that he is concerned only with the outward forces bearing on man's existence. He denies the inner man and his individuality. The material aspect of life is vital to man's existence, but the spiritual forces cannot be ignored. If art is to be geographically universal and appeal to the whole man, not his material instincts alone, the spiritual view demands equal time from the artists. In the words of Werner Haftmann:

> Contemporary abstract painting has provided many new methods of expressing what is most personal in man. Aspects of human existence spontaneously set in motion . . . a record of momentary states of mind and also of the dynamic process by which the picture itself came into being. The picture is a junction of many energic currents, in it their antagonisms achieve a tingling balance.[1]

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[1]Werner Haftmann, Painting in the Twentieth Century, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1960), p. 343.

It is not only balance of antagonistic currents within one picture that the artist is striving for, however, but a balance between the antagonisms of man and the universe.

Art is a question of the full development of the sensibility of the individual and is dependent upon that development. The work of any one artist may be read as allegory or symbol. As allegory the symbols the artist uses will have a one-to-one relationship with what he is stating. As pure symbol (i.e., when all the meaning is below the surface, as in non-objective works), the meaning may be expressed in various ways: in shape and form, color, static or vigorous line.

The several prints to be discussed in this chapter have not been completed with the idea of "following" any particular artist or school. They vary in size, although the range is limited, and no one set of symbols has evolved to a dominant position. They all, however, relate to each other, not only as the work of one person, but because they refer to the problems and experiences of man. There has been no intention to re-interpret religious doctrines in visual form but rather to give form to ideas of interest to the writer.

In Plate 1, Even the Woodland a Source of Terror, the terror is symbolized by the wild boar. He becomes the danger and fear which man must overcome in earthly existence to achieve physical and emotional security. In contrast with the pastoral sense of the woodland as a site of peace and beauty, the forest is also a symbol of the unknown, the unsettled and natural wilderness. It is the possibility of danger that man fears which is the basis for

his feelings of alienation and isolation.

Alienation is also the situation with which Lot's wife was confronted, and is the theme of Plate 2, The Remnant Outside the Covenant. Watching the destruction of her home and unable to abandon it for the unknown existence of the future, she is symbolic of the position of modern man watching the change in, if not the destruction of, the old institutions and unwilling or unable to comprehend what is happening or to adapt to new conditions. In this situation Lot's wife stands outside the accepted world, and outside that world she experiences chaos, terror and destruction. It is the basic concept of change that the individual is fighting, as Holden Caulfield does not wish to become a part of the "phony world" of the adults. The problem revolves around a lack of understanding of the prospects and possibilities awaiting in the future.

The title of Plate 3, He Danced His Did, taken from E. E. Cummings' poem "Anyone lived in a little how town," indicates not the self-satisfied individual serene in his material accomplishments, but the individual capable of finding satisfaction and meaning in the act of living without concern for success or recognition. On the basis of his philosophy he is able to move in the community of men without demanding understanding and understood by only a few.

Endymion's rejection of earthly love and understanding for love of the moon, Plate 4, Knowest Thou Not Cynthia?, is symbolic of man's abandonment of and withdrawal from this life in a search for perfection rather than continuing in the community of men in a search for understanding.

Man's basic need for community is the theme of Plate 5, The

Generation that Does Not Choose to be the Last. This group of unrelated individuals, sharing only a community of existence, face the common danger of destruction not only of themselves but of their world. It is a further emphasis of the need for communication among men as the common ground for understanding life and preserving the individual.

The creation story in Genesis refers to a great mist which arose from the earth and surrounded its surface, providing moisture for the plant life which had not yet penetrated the surface. Like the earth's vegetation, Plate 6, A Great Mist Arose, man needs to penetrate the mist which clouds his understanding of life and masks his need for others in the effort to take from his existence a fruitful and satisfying harvest.

Ancient myth becomes usable as modern symbol in Plate 7, The Phoenix. This mythical bird, which is supposed to have periodically burned itself and risen anew in youthful vigor from the ashes of the fire, has roots in the symbolism of the early Christian church as well as in Persia where it originated. As symbolic of resurrection and eternal life it has strong Christian emphasis, but it is also a universal symbol of continued existence from generation to generation, restoration and community through the old generation to the new, the life of the one bearing on the other.

The serpent has long been recognized as the symbol of the fall of man. Yet in Persian mythology the serpent in the form of a dragon, Tiamat--Guardian of Chaos, Plate 8, prevented creation and an ordered existence in the universe. It was necessary that

he be overcome for the continued existence of man. In this respect the slaying of the dragon is symbolic of the defeat of the forces of prejudice and personality, paving the way for the creation of understanding among men which allows for a community of existence.

In Plate 9, Jeremiah—Entrapped, form is given to the idea of man's entrapment within himself, his frustration at communication and his denial of community, as Jeremiah's warnings went unheeded and he was abandoned in the destroyed Jerusalem. Yet the way out is always there in the surmounting of individual prejudices. The path is not wide but it is within man and the destruction of antagonisms can be accomplished through understanding.

Symbolic of the pinnacles which man may attain in his maturing process within a civilization or within himself, Plate 10, Some Crazy Cliff, the plateau at the top is man's self-satisfaction with a particular stage of development, his desire to keep what he has rather than risk all in the interest of further development and accomplishment. The willingness to risk falling in order to attain understanding is that increase of perception which is necessary for man's continued existence.

The light that rules the day, the sun, Plate 11, The Greater Light, is symbolic of the continual regeneration of man, in the same way as the phoenix, by its daily rising to give light to the world of men. The sun, the day, light, have long been looked upon as symbols of purity and good, as the night is symbolic of evil. But the sun also casts a shadow, and it is often the shadows that man mistakes for reality, not realizing that his vision is obscured.

Complementary to the last plate, Plate 12, The Shadows of

Reality, symbolizes man living in the shadows, Munch's prisoner in his cell, seeing life as an indefinite mass changing with the movement of the light, unaware of the reality of life existing outside the shadows in the daylight of understanding.

In conclusion, there are two basic concepts relating to man's existence which concern the individual and the artist of any given time. The first is the fact of chaos and man's need to bring from this chaos an order which will allow his fulfillment as an individual and as a part of the community of man. The second is the fact of continuity in the existence of man, of his bond with the past and the future. This bond is spiritual as well as physical, just as the chaos of his existence is material and psychological. The establishment of order and the concern for continuity have been a part of all cultures, involving both religion and politics. Man, however, is usually concerned with his own material progress. The abstract ideals and universal goals of order and continuity are in the forefront of man's awareness most often only when they seem to be in jeopardy.

The problem of alienation from the community is basic to man's orientation in the twentieth century. The problem of unification is personalized in man and his solution to the conflicts of his own time provides the basis for the future.

If the artist is to assume the position which the historians have created for him, viz., that of the chronicler of his age, he must be aware of the situations which confront man in his time and become personally and intimately involved in the solution. ". . . Our ability at any moment to accept new knowledge is narrowly de-

limited by the existing state of knowledge. . . . The more we know, the more new knowledge we can accept." These words from George Kubler's book, The Shape of Time,[1] define the problem of the artist and all men in adapting to the present situation.

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[1]George Kubler, The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 65.

APPENDIX

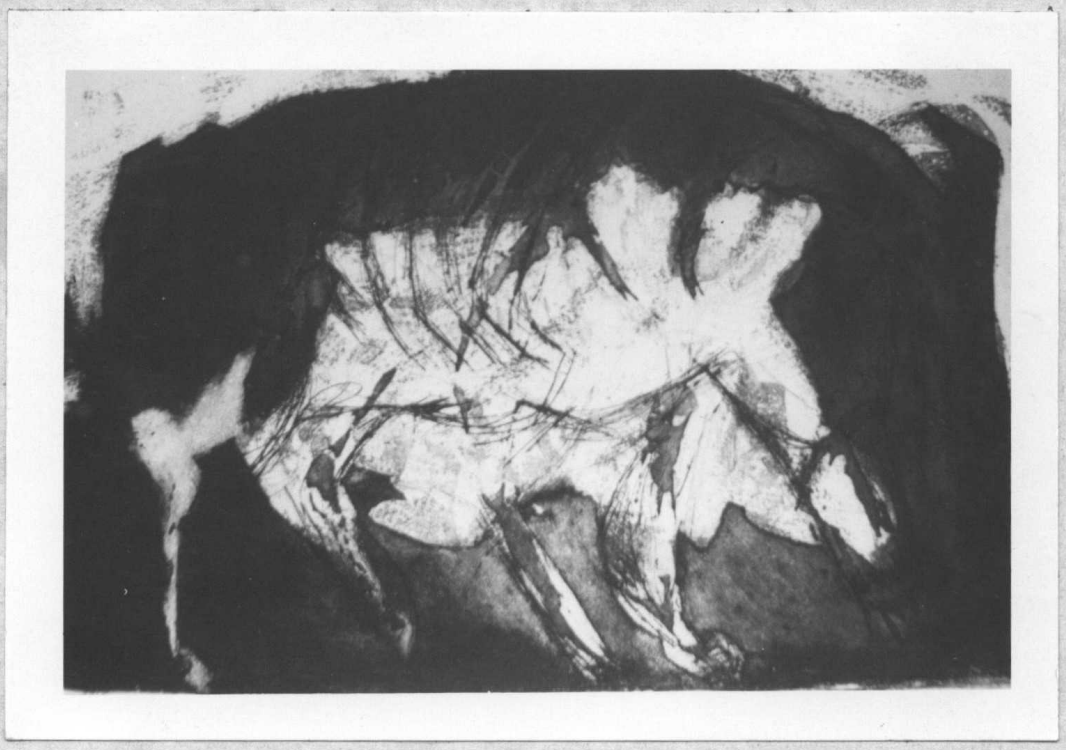

Plate 1
Even the Woodland a Source of Terror
Line etching and aquatint.

Plate 2
The Remnant Outside the Covenant
Line etching and Aquatint.

Plate 3
He Danced His Did
Aquatint and lift ground.

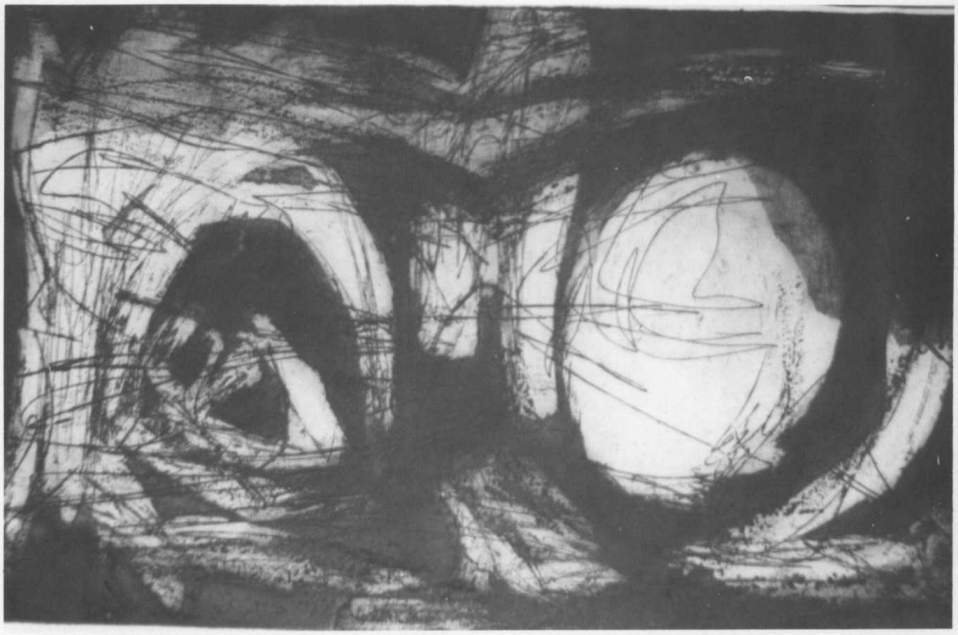

Plate 4
Knowest Thou Not Cynthia?
Line etching, aquatint and straight bite.

Plate 5
The Generation That Does Not Choose to be the Last
Line etching and aquatint.

Plate 6
A Great Mist Arose
Line etching, aquatint and straight bite.

Plate 7
The Phoenix
Line etching, aquatint, straight bite
and built up relief.

Plate 8
Tiamat—Guardian of Chaos
Line etching, aquatint and straight bite.

Plate 9
Jeremiah—Entrapped
Aquatint.

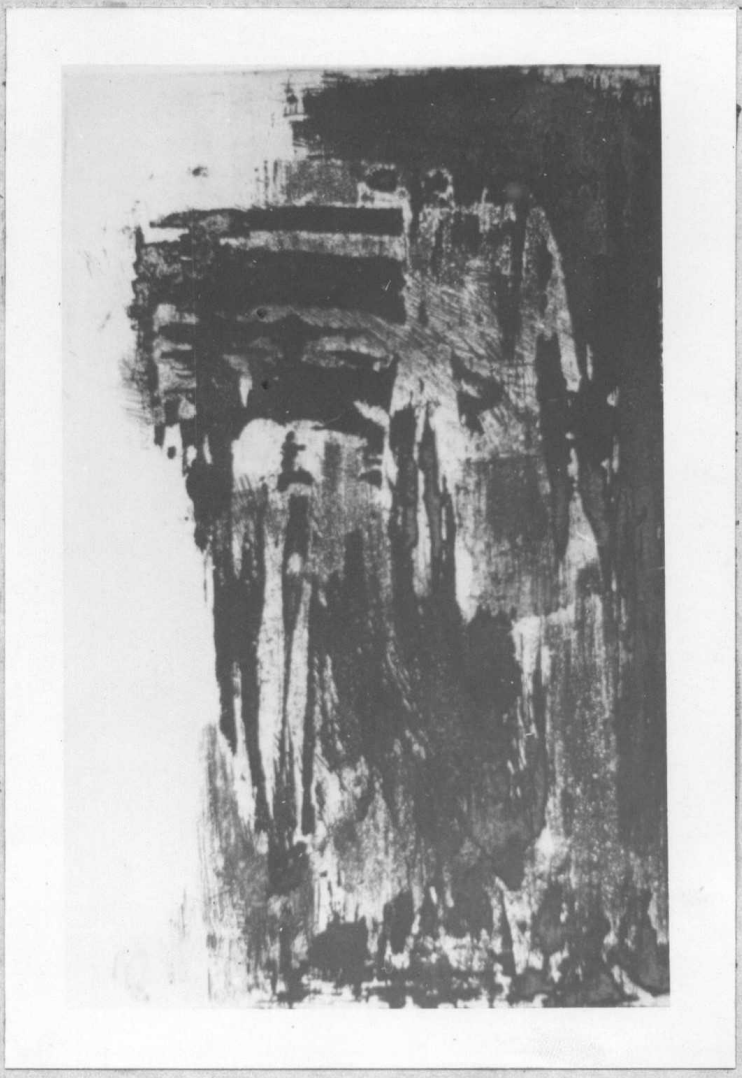

Plate 10
Some Crazy Cliff
Line etching, aquatint and straight bite.

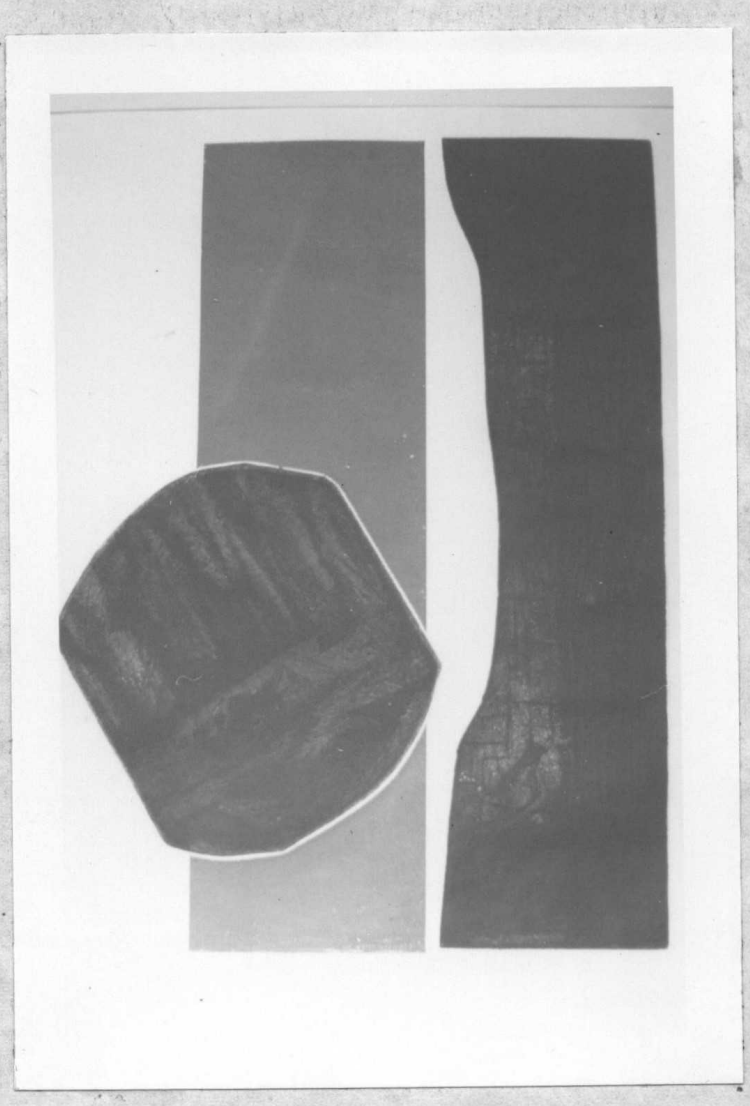

Plate 11
The Greater Light
Line etching, aquatint and relief color.

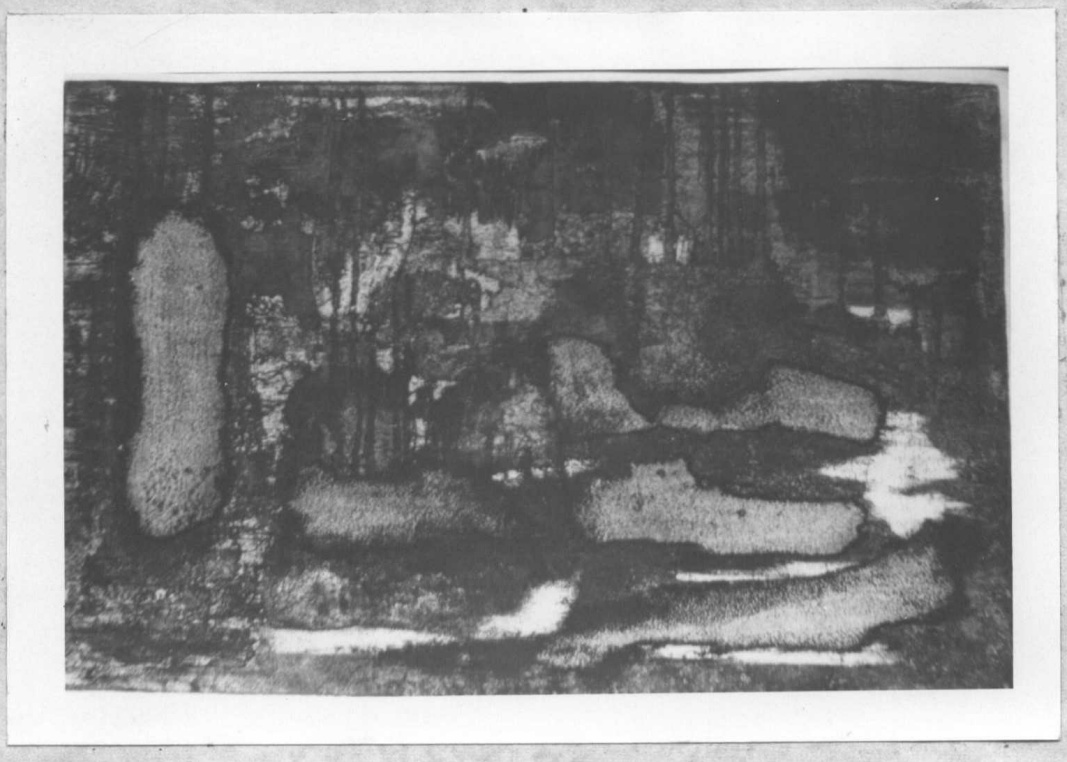

Plate 12
The Shadows of Reality
Soft ground line etching, aquatint
and straight bite.

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