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European Woodcuts Express Disillusion in Living Art Medium



"Nus." A Woodcut by Nanolo.

In the contemporary European woodcuts now being exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum—the first comprehensive American showing of this material—there is little that the conventional person will find understandable, little that the sentimental person will think beautiful or even bearable. These artists, who have taken a cynical, disillusioned, non-sentimental view of life, work in what has been called the new technique of the "wooden" woodcut. Every print in the Brooklyn display is at first glance unmistakably printed from carved wood and "not the reproduction or imitation of any other process." This, writes the director, "appears to be a triumph of the modern ideal in art; apparently woodblock printing must be accepted in the same company with architecture as an instance of modernism which works."

In explaining the technique of the "wooden" woodcut, the museum's *Bulletin* goes into the history of woodblock printing: "For 500 years printing from carvings in wood was used as a purely reproductive process. The intention was to make a picture that could be reproduced in quantity. Wood was used for this purpose before metal, and naturally hundreds of years before either photography or photo-engraving had made such a process as woodblock printing wholly impractical and purely a fine art. It is characteristic of naïve and religious art that it should cause the artist to suppress the materials with which he works as completely as possible—witness the painting of both ancient and medieval sculpture—in his effort to make something entirely different out of them. For 500 years no artist

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tried to make a woodcut in any other way for any other purpose than to make it print things that looked as much like drawings as possible.

"Then about 40 years ago a French cartoonist, Felix Edouard Vallotton, went self-conscious, saw the resources of the medium and began to make woodcuts that looked like woodcuts, just as the modern painters take care that their paintings should look like something made of paint and canvas, not like women or gods or heroes or anything else under the sun except paintings. There ensued a period in which reproductive wood engraving first became unfashionable and then, practically, a lost art, while woodcut whittlers made woodcuts that expressed the wooden quality and precious little else. Incidentally the commercial lithographers learned from the woodcutters and developed the modern poster.

"Before Franz Marc was killed in the war he strengthened woodcut design in his departure from pretty and representational decoration toward more rugged abstraction. A few of these whittlers in recent years have gone commercial and made book illustrations and advertising illustrations that look somewhat wooden, although many of these pictures are made on scratch board instead of on wood and are nothing in the world but ink drawings reproduced by photographic line cut. By this means the American public has learned to recognize easily the cheapest sort of woodcut quality."

It is not a pretty picture of life that is depicted in the Brooklyn Museum's woodcut exhibition. A pale emaciated man stares out between prison bars in "The Prisoner" by Christian Rohlf, leader of the Expressionists.

A prophet's head by Emil Nolde is that of an old man slashed down and cut into wrinkles of despair and grief. "Bathers," as Max Pechstein sees them, are not nymphs but naked, awkward and pitiful humans. Bare, sinewy little men drag fish and boats out of a breaking sea in "De Fischer" by J. F. E. Ten Klooster. "Mountain Top" by Ernest Barlach shows an old man on a mountain top leaning upward into the sky like a crag, as hard, weatherbeaten and fruitless as the rocks.

Almost all of these Frenchmen, Germans and Russians have concentrated their attention on human life. There is no pretty landscape, no picturesque architectural rendering, no still life, no sporting print. From a few prints the actual human form has been abstracted. One of these by Wassili Kandinsky "looks like a diagram of the contents of a madman's waste basket." The rest of the prints are chiefly tragic, mostly pitiful, occa-

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sionally derisive comments on the failure of man as an animal. Such are a neurotic woman by Max Beckmann; a vacuous girl by George Schrimpf; a woman of the streets by Franz Masereel; and a Moses by Gordon Craig which is like a sneer carved in granite.

Either to the heartless cynic or to the triumphant modern philosopher, says the Museum's *Bulletin*, "there is large decorative beauty of general design in all this work, a creation in light and darkness out of dust and shadows. Rugged, haggard faces and struggling figures carry the length of a room as stylish patterns. The technique of the contemporary woodblock is good for this."



"The Prophet," by Emil Nolde.