

Modernist West: Prints from the Robert G. Lewis Collection

The grandeur and vastness of the American West has long been an enticing subject for artists. This exhibition of fine art prints made in the American West during the 20th century spans pre-through post-WWII and offers us the opportunity to see the progression of Modernism across the United States. It also allows us to look back in time through the lens of artists who experienced the West during this tumultuous period in history.

The Modernism movement can be traced back to the New York Armory Show of 1913 and the introduction of post-impressionist works by European artists. This art not only shocked audiences but simultaneously reordered the foundations and rules of art making. Creating art outside the stricture of realism caught fire in the minds of American artists who felt the pull and freedom of this new form of expression. Through the depiction of subjects familiar to them, American artists soon remade this European movement into something uniquely their own.

The Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s brought hard times, especially for artists. Thankfully, the federal government funded public art projects, including Social Realist murals of hardworking Americans in stylized modernist forms, furthering the Modernist perspective.

Out of hardship came the rise of lithographs made popular in part because of their affordability. The New York gallery, Associated American Artists, opened in 1934 and began selling lithographs by Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, Grant Wood, and others. This art became known as Regionalism for the stylized modernist scenes of quintessential American activities. Print work incorporated elements of European abstraction, modernism, cubism, and surrealism, but with American subjects.

At the same time, the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (CSFAC) hired printmaker Lawrence Barrett to teach lithography and run their print studio. As a master printmaker, Barrett's work was equal to the greatest lithographers and his notoriety attracted artists Boardman Robinson, Charles Locke, Reginald Neal, Adolf Dehn, and many others for whom he pulled an extensive body of work. Likewise, in Denver, Harold Keeler opened a lithography studio and printed for himself, as well as Arnold Ronnebeck and Vance Kirkland.

With the rise of fascism and World War II, renowned European artists such as Hans Hofmann, Max Beckmann, Herbert Bayer, Werner Drewes, Joseph Albers, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and others immigrated to the United States. Their influence on a new generation of American artists was profound, in particular their knowledge of the principles of abstraction.

Stanley Hayter, who started Atelier 17 in Paris in 1927, and printed for Picasso, Miro, Kandinsky, and Giacometti fled at the outbreak of World War II. Upon relocating to New York City, Hayter opened Altelier 17 and soon began working with Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Mauricio Lasansky and others creating prints that melded old world techniques with Abstract Expressionism. Many of Hayter's students, as well as many of the expat artists from Europe, fanned out across America where they taught printmaking techniques to a new generation of artists.

The CSFAC was a draw for many European artists, such as Herbert Bayer, who moved to Aspen in 1946 and spent summers working with Barrett. Bayer's work done during this time shows the strong influence of the West and his shifted over time from surrealist abstraction to more environmental and topographical designs resembling the mountains, val-leys, snow fields, rivers, and clouds of his new home.

After World War II, the GI bill helped aspiring artists study at universities. Many veterans stationed at military bases in the American West decided to remain and enrolled in local universities. In response, Colorado universities invited top tier artists such as Max Beckman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Motherwell, Emerson Woelffer, and Roy Gussow to teach. The influence of these artists was profound; but too, the influence of the West left its mark on them as well.