
Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



1893-1907

Prelude

“The sky, lazily disdaining to pursue
The setting sun, too indolent to hold
A lengthened tournament for flashing gold,
Passively darkens for night’s barbecue.”

Jean Toomer-*Georgia Dusk*

In His Own Words

“I liked to draw... also adventure in the woods mostly by myself. I was especially fond of kites and swimming. As an older boy, I did not have much schooling, but I learned what education I have from reading books, listening to conversation and traveling.”

The Thrash Family

Dox Thrash is born to Gus and Ophelia Thrash in Griffin Georgia, a small town in Spalding County. Dox is the second of four children, brother Tennessee,



Cabin Days

c. 1938–39, carborundum mezzotint,
9 15/16 x 9 1/8 inches (25.3 x 23.1 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the
Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund.



Sunday Morning

c. 1939, etching, 8 7/8 x 8 inches (22.5 x 20.3 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the
Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund.

and sisters Agnes (Gussie) and Margaret Elinor. The Thrash family live on the outskirts of town in a former slave cabin built on a small rise of land overlooking the road running north to Atlanta.

Ophelia Thrash

Dox Thrash’s mother Ophelia Thrash is cook-house-keeper for a white family in Griffin named Taylor. She works every day of the week except on Sunday, when she only cooked breakfast. In the evenings, Mrs. Taylor often drives Mrs. Thrash home with food for her own family’s table. The seven-day schedule and provision of food is common practice for domestic workers in Georgia at the time. Ophelia Thrash is employed by the Taylors for her entire working life.

Memories in Print

Thrash's vivid memories of boyhood in rural Georgia are depicted in his prints of the sharecroppers' cabins, one-horse farms, and country churches that dotted the Southern landscape. His images portray life in a country town as impoverished but strengthened by family, community, companionship, and religion.

Early Education

Dox Thrash drops out of school after fourth grade, perhaps to earn money. Many African American children during that time work as unskilled laborers on cotton farms. By age 14, Thrash is already pursuing his dream to become an artist and he begins studying art through correspondence courses.

Alain Locke Was First

In 1907 Alain Locke is the first African American to receive a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University in England. Many years later Locke will play an important role in Dox Thrash's career. Not only did Thrash own copies of Locke's books about African American art, but he corresponded with the distinguished author personally.



Monday Morning Wash

1940, color carborundum mezzotint 11 x 14 inches (27.9 x 35.5 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund.

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1908-1910

Prelude

“To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the bright day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes gently
Dark like me.”

Langston Hughes-*Dream Variation*

In His Own Words

“I always wanted to be an artist, even when I was touring the plantation circuit in a dance-and-patter act with a fellow named Whistling Rufus.”



Hobo with a Satchel

c.1940s, wash over graphite, 7 5/8 x 9 7/8 inches (19.3 x 25.1 cm).

Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.



Whistling Rufus

Artist unknown. 1899, sheet music cover. Private collection.

Dox Thrash’s desire to be an artist motivates him to take mail-order art courses while on tour. His real hope, however, is to find an art school that accepts black students. Thrash will travel many miles to fulfill his quest.

Leaving Home

At the age of 15, Dox Thrash says goodbye to his family and sets out to find his way in the world. Harsh economic conditions and unchecked racial violence spur many southern blacks to leave home at this time. During the years that Thrash is on the road, 225 African Americans are known to have been lynched.

In These Years

In 1908, Jack Johnson defeats Tommy Burns to win the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship, becoming the first black heavyweight champion.

In 1909, Matthew Henson is the first African American to reach the North Pole.

“...on the peak of a huge paleocrystic floeberg the glorious banner was unfurled to the breeze, and as it snapped and crackled with the wind, I felt a savage joy and exultation.”

In 1909, on February 12, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded by a multiracial group of activists. The NAACP will be a champion of social justice and will ensure that the voices of African Americans will be heard.

In 1910, the NAACP publishes the first edition of its magazine, *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Crisis* will stand for “the highest ideals of American democracy and for reasonable, but earnest and persistent attempts to gain these rights and realize these ideals.” *W.E.B. Du Bois*.

In 1910, in the face of intense adversity, the NAACP begins its legacy of fighting legal battles addressing social injustice with the Pink Franklin case. The case involves a black farmhand, who unwittingly kills a policeman in self-defense when the officer breaks into his home at 3 a.m.



Happy Journey
c. 1939–40, Carborundum relief etching,
9 15/16 x 7 inches (25.3 x 17.8 cm).
Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of E. M.
Benson.

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1911-1916

Prelude

“Huh! de wurl’ain’t flat,
An’ de wurl’ ain’t roun’,
Jes’one long strip
Hangin’ up an’ down.
Since Norf is up,
An’ Souf is down,
An’ Hebben is up,
I’m upward boun’”

Lucy Ariel Williams-*Northboun’*

A New Day

Kymerly N. Pinder writes, “Thrash addressed the relationship between African American mobility and racism in a handful of works about the black migration from rural areas to the city....A composition titled *A New Day* focuses on a triangular grouping: a black woman holding



A New Day
c. 1942–44, ink and opaque watercolor with graphite,
10 x 13 inches (25.4 x 33 cm). Collection of John Warren,
Philadelphia.



Yacom

c. 1937, aquatint, 4 15/16 x 4 5/8 inches
(12.5 x 11.8 cm).

Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on
deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

a child, with a man kneeling below. The handles of a plow and a farmhouse are behind the figures, who look toward a cityscape. The hopeful expressions of the man and woman and the grinning face of the baby looking out at the viewer convey the optimism of the scores of African Americans who left the countryside to pursue better job opportunities, health care, and education in urban centers.”

Art School

Dox Thrash arrives in Chicago for the first time in 1911. He is 18 years old.

“ My ambition to be an artist caused me to settle in Chicago. Took various courses of art through correspondence schools and with private tutors, eventually entering The Art Institute of Chicago.”

Thrash begins evening classes at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1914. To pay for school, he works during the day at the American Bank Note Engraving Company as an elevator operator.

In These Years

In 1913, faced with strong pressure from his fellow Southerners, President Woodrow Wilson officially introduces the practice of racial segregation into the Federal Government. Horrified that an American President would sanction such a policy, the NAACP launches a public protest.

In 1914, World War I begins in Europe and Marcus Garvey establishes the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Jamaica. The UNIA later moves to Harlem.

In 1915, as a result of a drought and boll weevil infestation, the cotton crop is ruined. Nearly two million African Americans migrate northward to find work. This same year, the Klu Klux Klan is revived by a former minister in Georgia, Thrash's home state.

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1917-1918

Prelude

“These truly are the Brave,
These men who cast aside
Old memories, to walk the blood-stained pave
Of sacrifice, joining the solemn tide
That moves away, to suffer and to die
For Freedom-when their own is yet denied!
O Pride! O Prejudice! When they pass by,
Hail them, the Brave, for you now crucified!”
Roscoe C. Jamison-*Negro Soldiers*

War Begins

In 1917 the United States declares war on Germany and enters World War I.

Dox Thrash’s studies at the Art Institute of Chicago are interrupted when he joins the army in September. He is 24 years old.



At the Front

c. 1920s, watercolor, 7 5/8 x 8 3/4 inches
(19.4 x 22.2 cm).

Collection of Allen H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach, Florida.



Photographs of 92nd division

©GWPDA

Great War Primary Document Archive

Private Thrash

Dox Thrash undergoes training at Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois, and becomes a private in the 92nd Division, 183rd Brigade, 365th Infantry Regiment. In June of 1918, Thrash’s division ships out of Hoboken, New Jersey and lands in France. After eight weeks of additional training, the 92nd Division joins the American Expeditionary Forces on the front lines.

In the Trenches

On August 31, 1918, Thrash’s 365th Infantry Regiment moves the front line trenches forward,

despite being hit by shell shrapnel, mustard gas, and flame projectors. The following afternoon the enemy fires more than 12,000 shells into the trenches, but once again the 365th Infantry Regiment repels the attack and are commended for their efforts.



Photographs of 92nd division
©GWPDA
Great War Primary Document Archive

Advance on the Enemy

September 1918 marks the beginning of the great drive by the Allies to move the fronts forward. On the night of the 24th, in the rush for a place in the great offensive, thousands of soldiers find that rain-drenched and shell-torn roads cause their trucks to overturn, making forward movement almost impossible. In the chill rain of these dark nights, amid gas, shrapnel and explosive shells, Thrash's 183rd Brigade put down their guns to rebuild the roads and bridges. The advance continues.

Meeting the Enemy

In October of 1918, the 92nd Division moves to a sector along the picturesque Moselle River with

the intention of becoming the closest unit to German soil. The enemy stubbornly holds its ground, but the aggressive action of American patrols - night and day - result in the capture of many prisoners and major losses to the enemy. For Thrash's regiment, plans for the next major attack will come in Operation Order No.7

Operation Order No. 7

Operation Order No. 7 is issued to the 183rd Brigade on November 8, 1918. The attack is launched on the morning of November 10th. At 8:12 a.m. a pigeon carrier delivers the message that the Bois Vivrotte section has been completely occupied and prisoners taken. At 9:00 a.m. a message is received that Thrash's 365th Infantry is being heavily shelled at Bois Frehaut. Sometime during this day, Dox Thrash is gassed and suffers from shell shock.

The next morning on November 11, 1918, Armistice is signed and all hostilities are ordered to be ceased. Dox Thrash has been wounded in the last hours of the war.

After the War

Dox Thrash is taken to a military hospital in France where he recovers over the winter. When he is stronger, he entertains troops in the hospitals with his vaudeville act. When he returns to the United States in the spring of 1919, he will tour in vaudeville on the Plantation Circuit. That fall he will resume his studies at The Art Institute of Chicago.

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1919-1925

Prelude

“Lone and dismal; hushed and dark,
Upon the waves floats an empty bark.
The stars go out; the raindrops fall,
And through the night comes a ghostly call—”
Arna Bontemps-*Hope*

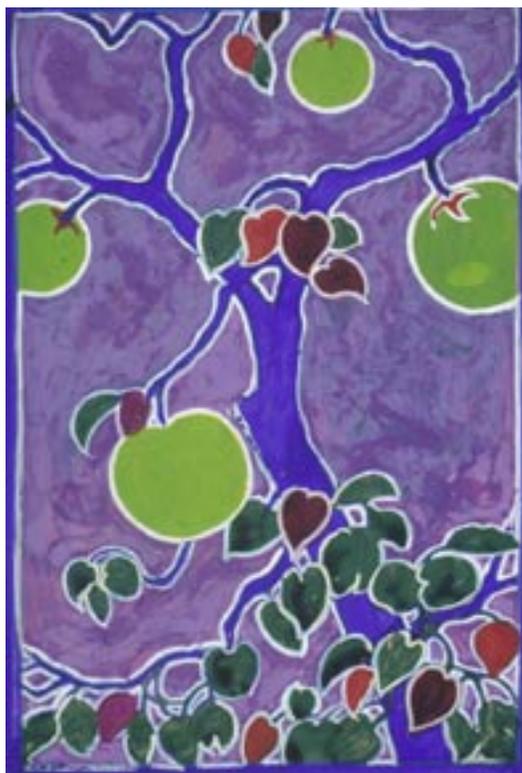
Lynching

Dox Thrash arrives home from World War I in 1919 at a time of great racial tension in the United States. 26 race riots break out in cities across the country that summer. 76 African Americans are lynched during this one year.

Kymerly N. Pinder writes, “Lynching was such an appalling problem that many artists addressed it in their work. In Thrash’s drawing *Lynching*, 1937–38, a mother



Lynching
1937–38. Photograph, reworked with graphite, of a lost wash drawing made for the Federal Art Project. Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.



Green Apple Tree
c. 1919–23, tempera, 9 1/2 x 6 1/4 inches (24.1 x 15.9 cm).
Collection of Allen H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach, Florida.

stands holding her child to the left of the lifeless torso ... In the South, lynchings could result from a suspected rape or sexual advance on a white woman by a black man...the display of a hanging, mutilated black body was a potent warning.”

Return to School

Dox Thrash’s service in World War I makes him eligible for government funding, which enables him to enroll full time at The Art Institute of Chicago in 1920. Thrash is a determined student and will attend classes continuously for the next three years — day, evening, and summer school.

Learning in Those Years

At the Institute Dox Thrash receives instruction in lettering, commercial art posters, decorative composition and mural design. During this time Thrash also studies privately with William Edouard Scott, an African American artist who attended



Leaf and Nuts

c. 1919–23, watercolor and red pencil,
6 1/4 x 4 5/8 inches (15.9 x 11.7 cm). Collec-
tion of Allen H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach,
Florida.

The Art Institute of Chicago several years before. Scott is to become an important role model for Thrash.

In His Own Words

“After my art education was completed, I was lured back to the open road, hobo-ing, working part the time on odd jobs. Such as, bell boy, dining car waiter, private car porter, mas- sager in bathhouses, black face comedian in carnivals, small town circuses, and vaudevilles. With the idea of observing, drawing and painting the people of America, especially the “Negro”.

Finding Home

After leaving school, Thrash lives for a brief time in Boston, Suffield (Connecticut), and Harlem, before arriving in Phila- delphia around 1926. “[I] Later departed from New York, for another cross-country journey but didn’t get any further than Philadelphia, and have remained here ever since...When I came to Philadelphia (I had a job in a bath house), I studied at the Graphic Sketch Club.”

In These Years

In 1920, prohibition goes into effect and the first black base- ball league, the National Negro Baseball League, is orga- nized.

In 1921, an anti-lynching bill is introduced into Congress, but is defeated. 3,117 African Americans are recorded as having been lynched between 1882-1921.

In 1923, African American Garrett T. Morgan patents the traffic signal.

During these years, the Harlem Renaissance begins, inaugurating a period of intense creativity among African American artists, writers, and musicians all across the nation.

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1926-1929

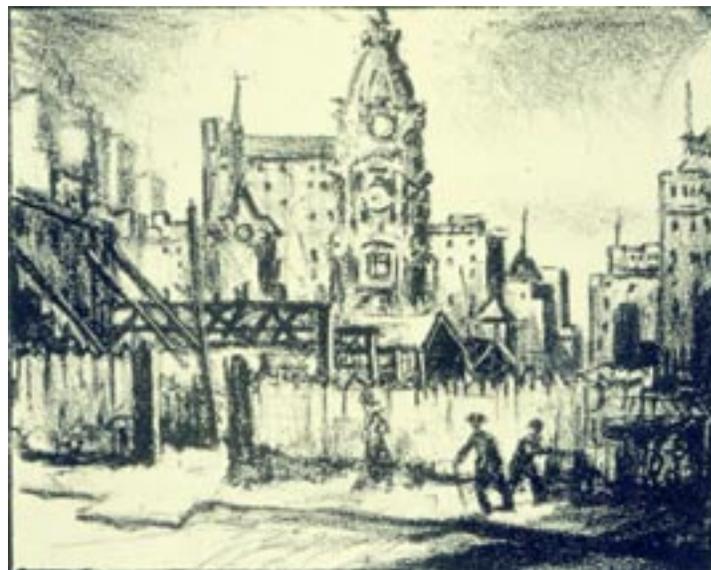
Prelude

“ South Street is not beautiful,
But the songs of people there
Hold the beauty of the jungle,
And the fervidness of prayer.”

Edward S. Silver-*South Street, Philadelphia PA*

Philadelphia

During his early years in Philadelphia, Dox Thrash makes two lifelong friends, both named Samuel. He meets Samuel Brown Jr., a younger artist who is the head of an informal art association for African Americans in Philadelphia called the Tra Club. Later Thrash and Brown will decide



View of Philadelphia with City Hall
c. 1939–41, lithograph, 7 1/8 x 8 3/4 inches (18.1 x 22.3 cm)
Collection of Allan H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach, Florida.



Morley's Court
c. 1939, etching 7 3/4 x 6 1/8 inches (19.7 x 15.6 cm)
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

to share a studio together. Thrash also makes friends with Samuel Reading, who runs a printing shop and advertising agency in West Philadelphia. Working from this shop, Thrash designs business logos and posters.

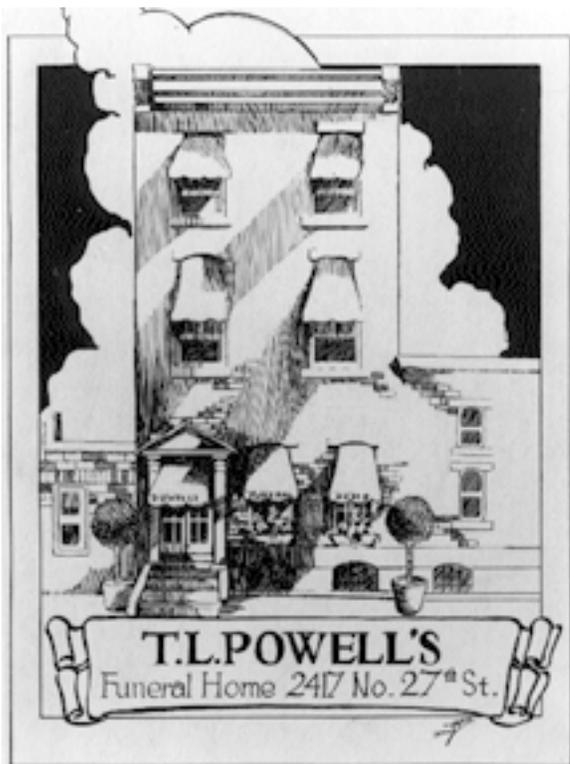
Emerging Art

The Harlem Renaissance continues to inspire African American artists and writers. In 1927, Henry Ossawa Tanner becomes the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition in New York.

One year later, the Harmon Foundation in New York will present the first in a series of juried exhibitions for African American artists.

Ready to Exhibit

At the end of 1929 Thrash writes a letter to the administrator of the Harmon Foundation's "Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes", Dr. George E. Haynes, to inquire about the deadline for submitting entries for the exhibition. Dox Thrash asks Dr. George E. Haynes: "Just what is the latest date that pictures will be received for the



Ad for Powell's Funeral Home
c.1930, photolithograph in blue ink, 7 1/2 x 5 7/8
inches (19.0 x 14.9 cm)
Collection of Allan H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach,
Florida.

3rd annual Art Exhibition of Negro Artists; also the number of pictures allowed each." His letter is dated December 17, 1929.

Haynes replies to Thrash the next day to regretfully inform him that the deadline of November 1 has already passed. Yet, he also offers encouragement to Thrash, telling him that having his work accepted for a future show will be a major step in his career. The Harmon Foundation will sponsor the exhibition of 14 of Thrash's prints at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940.

Allan R. Freelon

When Allan R. Freelon joins the Print Club of Philadelphia in 1929, he is the first person of color to become a member. Freelon and Thrash will later be colleagues and friends.

The Apartment

By 1929 Thrash has rented his own apartment in North Philadelphia at 2409 Columbia Avenue (now Cecil B. Moore Avenue). He is 36 years old

In These Years

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashes in New York. This event marks the beginning of the national economic crisis known as the Great Depression.

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1930-1932

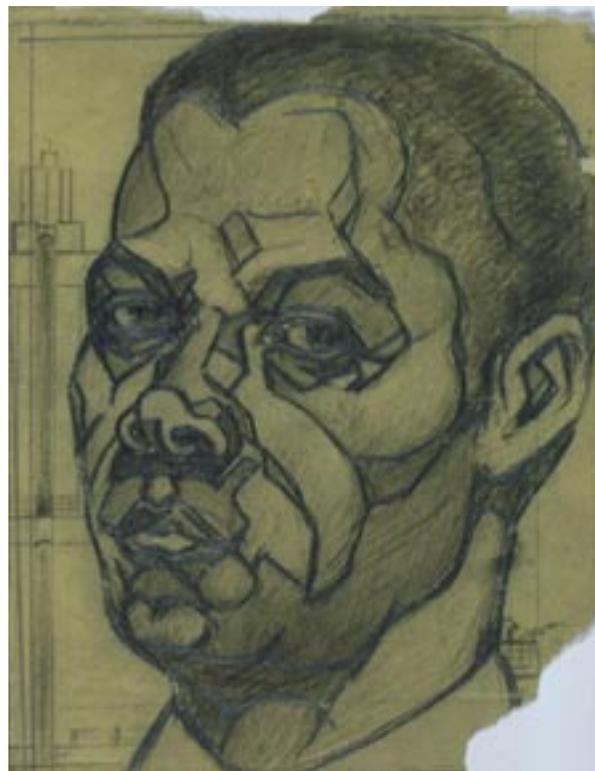
Prelude

“In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him and he saw himself- darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission.”

W.E.B Du Bois

Poster Design

Despite the economic hard times of the Great Depression, Dox Thrash begins to enjoy success in his adopted city as a commercial artist. In the spring of 1930, he designs a poster for the Second Annual National Negro Music Festival, held at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. The poster is the earliest known dated work Thrash is known to have made after settling in Philadelphia.



Self-Portrait

Early 1930s, graphite and brown pencil,
6 7/8 x 5 3/8 inches (17.5 x 13.7 cm).

Collection of Allan H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach,
Florida.



Tra Club Exhibition Announcement

1932, ink, 5 x 3 1/8 inches (12.7 x 7.9 cm).

Collection of Allan H. Nowak, Sunny Isles
Beach, Florida

Earl Horter

In Philadelphia, Dox Thrash becomes interested in printmaking and decides to master this new artistic skill. He enrolls in the Graphic Sketch Club (now the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial) to learn etching from Earl Horter, who was a prize-winning printmaker.

Like Thrash, Horter was both an accomplished watercolorist and a skilful graphic designer. Thrash soon becomes one of Horter's favorite pupils.



Photograph of a Poster Designed by Dox Thrash for the Second Annual National Negro Music Festival Held at the Academy of Music, Philadelphia, May 1930. Collection of Allan H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach, Florida

First Solo Exhibit

“Work of Dox Thrash To Be Exhibited”

The Philadelphia Tribune, October 8, 1931

Sam Brown and his *Tra Club*, sponsor 38-year-old Dox Thrash's debut as an artist in Philadelphia. For two days in October, the Southwest Branch of the YWCA is the setting of his first one-man show.

Reviews Are In

Four blocks from Dox Thrash's apartment at 2409 West Columbia Avenue live two of his closest friends, Hobson Reynolds and his wife Evelyn. Hobson is a prominent funeral director and a rising figure in African American civic circles in Pennsylvania. Evelyn is a society reporter for the *Philadelphia Tribune*. It is Evelyn who writes a review of Dox's first solo exhibition.

“Dox Thrash the artist, who held an exhibit at the Y. W. C. A. on last Sunday, is certainly deserving of commendable mention, for his work showed keen talent and versatility. The Tra Club of Philadelphia, too, must be praised for their vision in bringing to the public new people, who have a desire to grow in art and culture. Many of the city's smarter set were seen sipping tea and enjoying this young artist's works in oil and water paints at his recent exhibit.”

Second Exhibition

After his first exhibition in the fall of 1931, the spring of 1932 presents another opportunity for Dox Thrash to show his work. This time Thrash demonstrates his artistic fluency in the Graphic Sketch Club's 33rd Annual Exhibition.

Prints For Sale

By the end of 1932 Thrash is ready to offer his prints to the public. The priced checklist for the Tra Club exhibition of December lists three of his etchings:

The Forest Nymph-\$6.00

Soliloquy-\$5.00

Fanaticism-\$5.00

In These Years

The Great Depression continues to take a heavy toll: in one year alone, 1,161 banks fail, nearly 20,000 businesses go bankrupt, and 21,000 people commit suicide. Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected president on the promise of a “New Deal” for the nation.

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1933

Prelude

“Here we have Negro youth, with arresting vision and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow...”

Alain Locke-*Negro Youth Speaks*

Second Solo Exhibit

In the spring of 1933, Dox Thrash has a second solo exhibition at the Catharine Street YWCA. In her society column in the *Philadelphia Tribune* on May 11, “Eve Lynn” (Evelyn Reynolds) calls him “one of the city’s most talented artists.” She adds the comment that Thrash’s “distinctively racial impressions are accentuated by a lively imagination and a realistic power.”

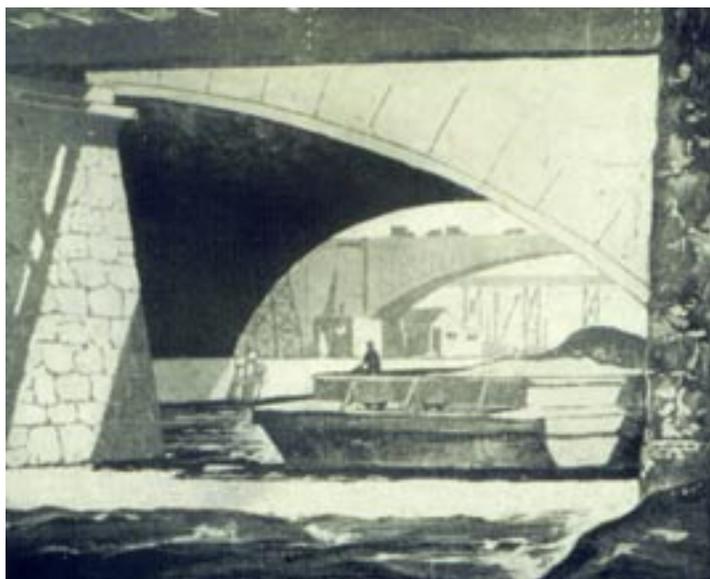


Second Thought

c. 1939, aquatint and etching.

8 7/8 x 6 15/16 inches (22.6 x 17.6 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund.



Schuylkill River Bridges

Early 1930s, aquatint.

8 11/16 x 10 3/8 inches (22.0 x 26.4 cm).

Collection of Robert J. Brand and Elizabeth Werthan, Philadelphia.

Schuylkill River

Meanwhile, at the Graphic Sketch Club Thrash’s teacher, Earl Horter begins using the aquatint process to make prints for the first time. Dox Thrash decides to learn the technique as well. An early aquatint by Thrash called *Schuylkill River Bridges* shows his technical command of the medium. The deliberately constructed series of alternating light and dark passages are built up in a succession of carefully timed, separate applications of aquatint tone.



Cat-Fishin'
c.1937–38, aquatint, etching, and drypoint,
8 1/8 x 10 1/4 inches (20.6 x 26.1 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on
deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Thrash and Whistler

James McNeill Whistler is one of Dox Thrash's favorite etchers and he advises his colleagues to study the works of this famous American artist if they want to excel as printmakers. Thrash has the opportunity for close study of Whistler's prints in an exhibit in the recently newly opened galleries of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art). Thrash himself owns a set of later reprints of Whistler's etchings.

Thrash and Homer

Cat-Fishin', an aquatint Dox Thrash makes in the late 1930s shows the influence of Winslow Homer. One of the best loved American artists of the 19th century, Homer is greatly admired for his sympathetic and dignified portrayal of African Americans. A major exhibition of Homer's paintings and watercolors at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art in 1936 gives Thrash the opportunity to see many of the artist's best works.

A Rite of Passage

Founded in 1805, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts is still Philadelphia's premier art school. Having work accepted for one of the academy's two annual exhibitions continues to be a rite of passage for many Philadelphia artists. In November of 1933, one of Dox Thrash's watercolors, *Miners*, is selected by the jury for the academy's 31st Annual Watercolor Exhibition. Thrash is 40 years old.

Sam Brown-First

At the close of 1933, economic hard times persist and the government responds by establishing the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). The program is designed to provide work-relief for artists. In Philadelphia, Samuel Brown Jr., Thrash's lifelong friend, is the first African American artist to sign on.

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1934-1935

Prelude

“Joy shakes me like the wind that lifts a sail,
Like the roistering wind
That laughs through stalwart pines.”

Clarissa Scott Delaney-Joy

Seasons Greetings

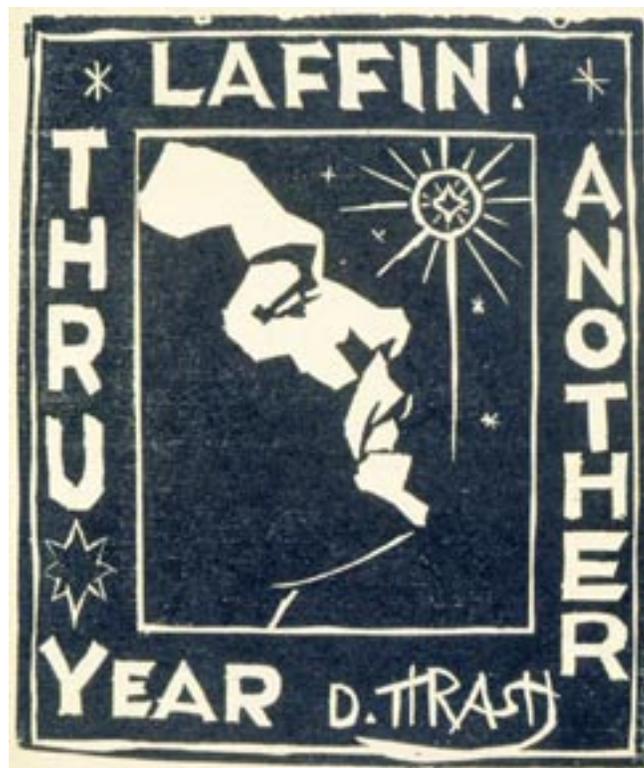
January 24, 1934

“Thank you for the most original and attractive Christmas and New Year card you were so kind as to send me this year.”

Mamie E. Davis

Senior Activities Secretary

YWCA Southwest Branch, Philadelphia



Laffin' Thru Another Year

Early 1930s, linocut.

5 5/16 x 4 1/2 inches (13.5 x 14.4 cm). irregular
Collection of Allan H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach, Florida.



Hobo Jungle

c. 1937–38, aquatint,

4 13/16 x 5 1/4 inches (12.2 x 13.4 cm).

Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

Dox Thrash, with dashing style, and a winning sense of humor, designs a block-printed holiday card to ring in the year 1934. A number of Thrash's block prints from this period survive. The low cost of the blocks and the minimal equipment required to make prints from them is no doubt an added attraction for Thrash during the difficult times of the 1930s, when every penny counts.



Harmonica Blues
c. 1937–38, etching and drypoint,
5 x 4 inches (12.7 x 10.2 cm).
*Federal Works Agency, Work Projects
Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia
Museum of Art.*

A One-Man Show

1934 begins for Dox Thrash, now in his early forties, with a one-man show at the Graphic Sketch Club. The exhibition features a group of watercolors. His good friend, Samuel H. Reading writes a glowing article of the exhibition in the *Philadelphia Tribune*. This and a few other newspaper reviews provide the last record of Thrash's activities at the Graphic Sketch Club.

FAP is Born

In the summer of 1935 the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) becomes the Federal Art Project (FAP). Mary Curran is appointed to run the Pennsylvania branch out of a gallery in Philadelphia. Two years later, Dox Thrash will come to her defense when controversy surrounding the Philadelphia FAP begins to mount.

In This Year

Langston Hughes's play *Mulatto* is banned in Philadelphia by officials who fear it will spark racial unrest. The play follows the life of four mixed-race characters who return to the South after being educated in the North. The play offers a frank portrayal of the difficulties of racial prejudice experienced by the children of white and black marriages.

According to articles in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the banning of the play splits Philadelphia's black community and becomes a stimulus for the airing of general grievances against racial injustices. The main thrust of the criticism of the play in the press concerns its morality; one community leader is quoted as stating: "*The play was a lewd piece of work that debased Negro womanhood*".

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1936

Prelude

“I am thankful for my bit of sky
And trees, and for the shifting
Pageant of seasons.
Such beauty lays upon the heart
A quiet,
Such eternal change and permanence
Take meaning from all turmoil
And leave serenity
Which knows no pain.”
Clarissa M. Scott-Solace



Head Study

c. 1937–39, Etching,
8 x 5 inches (20.3 x 12.7 cm).
WPA Sample Book A (January 1939),
Philadelphia Museum of Art.

An Entrepreneur

In the mid 1930's, Dox Thrash is operating a sign-painting business out of Hobson Reynolds's funeral home at 2044 Ridge Avenue, four blocks from his apartment. This freelance work and his World War I veteran's pension allow him to survive during the challenging economic times.



Ebony Joe

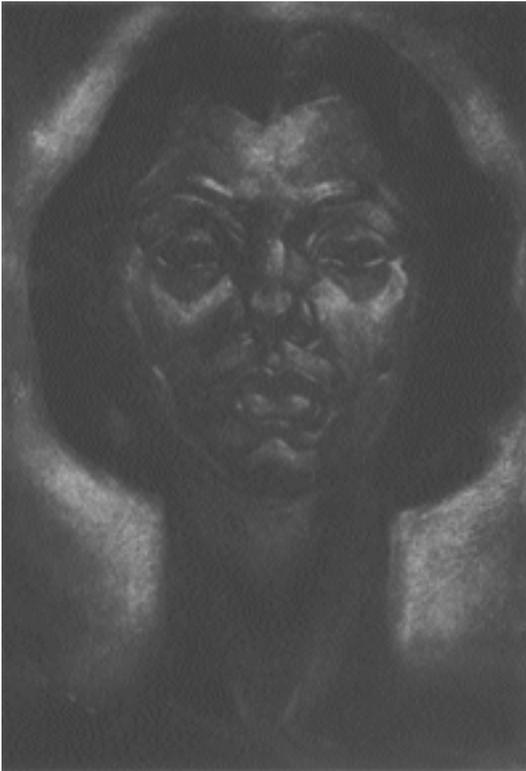
c. 1939, lithograph.
9 7/8 x 8 1/8 inches (25.1 x 20.6 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects
Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia
Museum of Art.

Endings and Beginnings

1936 is a year of endings and beginnings.

In the spring of this year, Dox Thrash's mother, Ophelia dies in Spalding County, Georgia. She has worked for almost her entire life as a cook and housekeeper for a white family.

Later in the year, Thrash's good friend Sam Brown, introduces him to the woman with whom he will share the rest of his life, Edna McAllister. The portrait *Miss X*, is possibly intended to be Edna McAllister.



Miss X
c. 1940
Carborundum mezzotint, reworked, over traces of previously etched image
9 7/8 x 6 7/8 inches (25.1 x 17.5 cm).
Possibly intended to be an engagement portrait of Thrash's future wife, Edna McAllister.
Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

Thrash Writes Locke

In 1936, Alain Locke publishes a new book, *Negro Art: Past and Present*. Locke is a staunch advocate for the reflection of personal experience in the work of black artists. After meeting Thrash in 1940, Locke sends Thrash a copy of this book and receives a letter of thanks from the artist:

"I think it is a masterpiece...and I shall always treasure it among my most prized possessions. I feel honored for having made the acquaintance of a man so cultured as yourself, which has been proven by your remarkable writings."

Portraits of Dignity

Kymberly N. Pinder writes, "Thrash is deservedly well known for the striking portrait heads he made, which bestow individuality and dignity on his sitters. He would have been aware of the need to counteract the negative representations of African Americans."

W.E.B. Du Bois speaks of a visual culture for blacks:

"We are instinctively and almost unconsciously ashamed of the caricatures done of our darker shades. Black is caricature in our half conscious thought and we shun in print and paint that which we love in life. . . we remain afraid of black pictures because they are the cruel reminders of the crimes of Sunday "comics" and "Nigger" minstrels. Off with these thought chains and inchoate soul-shrinkings, and let us train ourselves to see beauty in black."

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



1937

Prelude

“The atmosphere becomes a veil of shadows; the wind undulates it as if the spirit of nature breathed meditatively through the changing hour...”

William S. Braithwaite- *Twilight: An Impression*

Dox Thrash-First

In April of 1937 the Fine Print Workshop is formed in Philadelphia as a freestanding division of the Federal Arts Project (FAP). It is housed above *Benny the Bum's* nightclub at 311 Broad Street.

Dox Thrash is the first African American assigned to the new workshop. He is later joined



Boats at Night

1936–37, aquatint. 7 3/8 x 11 7/16 inches (18.8 x 29.0 cm)

The Free Library of Philadelphia



Dox Thrash Demonstrating Carborundum Plate Preparation

Photographed by Staats, 1945. Graphic Arts Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institutions.

there by Claude Clark, Sr., Zebulon Johnson, and Raymond Steth. Black artists working in other divisions of the FAP in Philadelphia are Hewlett Brown, Samuel Brown, Jr., Humbert Howard, Donald Peterson, Franklin Syres, and John Brantley Wilder.

Working at the FAP

Unlike other fine print workshops operated by the FAP, such as that in New York, the printmakers in Philadelphia were not assigned a quota of works to submit by a specific deadline. Because it was a federally funded program, the works of art produced were not to be sold, but were instead allocated for exhibition at such public institutions as schools, libraries, government offices, and museums.

A Letter to the FAP

When the FAP in Philadelphia is under attack by a group of artists within the WPA, Dox Thrash sides with the administration and writes the following letter to Ellen Woodward at FAP headquarters in

Washington on July 8, 1937:



Dox Thrash at Printing Press in the WPA Fine Print Workshop
Undated. Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell Gallery, Philadelphia.

“I have been employed by the Federal Art Project of Philadelphia under the supervision of Miss Mary Curran and her staff, Mr. Hood and Mr. Gardener. As a negro artist I would like to commend the entire staff for their impartial and fair treatment to all those employed. My work in this department has been shown every consideration, and I am writing this letter in appreciation for the aid given and beneficial results I have obtained therefrom. Feeling that words of commendation are as necessary as words of condemnation I do not hesitate to write this.”

Boats at Night

In the fall of 1937 the Chester County Art Association and the School Board of West Chester, Pennsylvania sponsor “*Exhibits in Posters and Prints: WPA Federal Art Project, Pennsylvania*”. Dox Thrash exhibits four works, including his aquatint, *Boats at Night*.

John Ittmann writes, “...the moody sky and single figure in *Boats at Night* pay tribute to one of Winslow Homer’s most famous paintings, *The Gulf Stream*, which shows a lone black man on a battered boat adrift on a shark-infested sea. Thrash would have been able to study this and other paintings and watercolors by Homer showing African Americans and African Caribbeans in a major exhibition of Homer’s work held at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art in 1936 to

commemorate the centennial anniversary of the artist’s birth.”

In His Own Words

“I got some of the carborundum powder they used in grinding lithograph stones and rubbed it into a copper plate with an old flatiron. I got a queer rough surface. Well, this fellow Mesibov looks over my shoulder, and says, ‘Hey, I bet you could work lines into that.’ I took a burnisher (a knife-like tool) and sketched a nude.” Dox Thrash

Fellow WPA artists Hubert Mesibov and Michael Gallagher soon join Thrash in his experiments and the three artists are credited with perfecting a new printmaking process. Now known as the carborundum mezzotint, during the 1940s Thrash will call his own prints “opheliagraphs” in honor of his mother.

Pyramid Club Founded

1937 marks the founding of the Pyramid Club, a social club for African Americans in Philadelphia. The club is named by one of its founders in reference to Egypt as the ancient civilization of people of African descent. Dox Thrash is one of a handful of artists asked to join the club and his name appears on the first published membership roster in 1941.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



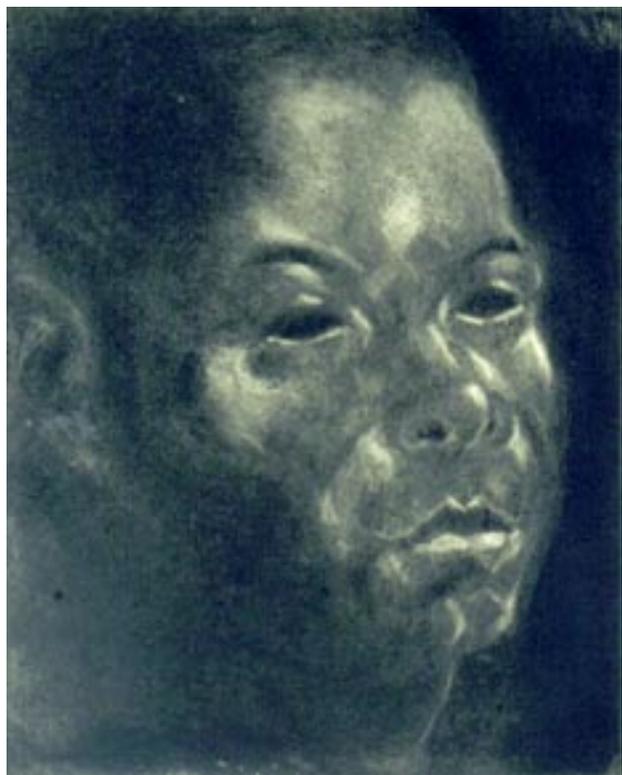
1938

Prelude

“Lovely, dark and lonely one,
Bare your bosom to the sun
Do not be afraid of light
You who are a child of night.”
Langston Hughes-*Song*

Carborundum Prints

After a short period of experimentation in late 1937, Dox Thrash, Hubert Mesibov, and Michael Gallagher proudly introduce three carborundum prints in the largest exhibition to date of work produced by Pennsylvania’s FAP artists.



Mr. X (first version)
c. 1937–38, carborundum mezzotint.
6 9/16 x 5 3/16 inches (16.7 x 13.2 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects
Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia
Museum of Art.



Life
c. 1938–39, carborundum mezzotint ,
10 7/8 x 8 13/16 inches (27.6 x 22.4 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects
Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia
Museum of Art.

The exhibit opens in late January 1938 at the Pennsylvania (now Philadelphia) Museum of Art. Thrash’s carborundum print is a self-portrait, which he titles *Mr. X*.

Press Reports

Apart from two items in a local art magazine, writers for the Philadelphia press fail to notice the presence of a new medium in the exhibition at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art. The novel process will not be noticed by reviewers until the fall, when an exhibit opens at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., in October. This is the most comprehensive exhibition to date of prints created by FAP artists in work-

shops across the country. It includes 30 carborundum prints produced by Thrash and his colleagues in the Fine Print Workshop in Philadelphia. The new carborundum printmaking process is mentioned in all the reviews of the show and brings increased attention to the Fine Print Workshop artists.

Carborundum Relief Etching

A further development arises from the discovery of carborundum as a useful material for printmaking: Hugh Mesibov is inspired by the exhibition William Blake's relief etchings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art to use carborundum to make his own relief etchings. This method is quickly adopted by Dox Thrash and other artists of the Fine Print Workshop.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

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1939

Prelude

“The glory of the day was in her face,
The beauty of the night was in her eyes.
And over all her loveliness, the grace
Of Morning blushing in the early skies.”

James Weldon Johnson-

The Glory of the Day Was In Her Face

Carborundum Prints Reviewed

Dox Thrash, Michael Gallagher, and Hubert Mesibov all start to receive attention in local circles for their carborundum prints. A joint exhibition of prints by Thrash and Gallagher in late February at the A.C.A. Gallery in Philadelphia earns them an extensive review from Dorothy Grafly who has been tracking Thrash’s career since the early 1930s:



Twenty-fourth Street and Ridge Avenue

c.1937–39, etching,

10 7/8 x 8 3/4 inches (27.7 x 22.3 cm).

Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Mary Lou

c. 1939–40, carborundum mezzotint over traces of previously etched image, 9 15/16 x 6 7/8 inches (25.2 x 17.5 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund.

“The work of Dox Thrash has been maturing rapidly since his association with the Federal Art Project workshop. Always, however, he has revealed an imaginative and emotional strain, even when, as a newcomer, he exhibited years ago in a series of Negro art shows sponsored by a Y. W. C. A. in the southern part of the city. The deep atmospheric tones possible in the carborundum [mezzotint] are particularly congenial to Thrash’s emotional yet sensitive understanding of life.”

This exhibition is also reviewed in March by Alain Locke, who calls Thrash “one of our most skillful technicians” in printmaking.



Heave!
c. 1939–40, etching,
8 7/16 x 9 15/16 inches (21.4 x 25.2 cm).
The Free Library of Philadelphia.

A Busy Spring

In the spring of 1939 Dox Thrash has a full schedule. Thrash and future studio partner Samuel Brown, Jr. are included in the exhibition *Contemporary Negro Art* at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Sam Brown also accepts an invitation to the White House, where Eleanor Roosevelt has put his painting *The Scrubwoman* on display.

As part of National Negro History Week, Thrash exhibits work at the Philadelphia School District Headquarters and in Darby, Pennsylvania.

A Rising Star

During the summer of 1939 exhibition reviews show that Dox Thrash's star is continuing to rise.

At Howard University in Washington, D.C., Thrash's 10 prints make him the most represented artist in an exhibition of prints by Federal Art Project artists from New York, Illinois, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

At the M. H. De Young Museum in San Francisco, Thrash has 2 carborundum prints in a major exhibition of works by FAP artists. The exhibition entitled *Frontiers of American Art* is scheduled to coincide with the San Francisco World's Fair.

Presidential Review

A copy of the pamphlet *Art in Use: A Brief Survey of the Activities of the Pennsylvania Art Project of the Works Projects Administration*, published in August, is sent to President Franklin Roosevelt on September 25, 1939. The pamphlet makes special mention of the carborundum print and quotes a review by Dorothy Grafly that praises the activities of Dox Thrash and his workshop colleagues:

"Thanks in good part to the progressive discoveries of the Philadelphia W.P.A. print workshop, new life has been injected."

In This Year

In September of 1939 World War II begins in Europe.

Langston Hughes's controversial play, *Mulatto*, which had been banned in Philadelphia two years earlier, finally opens at the Walnut Street Theater on December 4, 1939.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

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1940

Prelude

“...And finally, after a time, it occurred to me that what I was seeing was a community just like any other community. The same pattern, only a different shade.”

Melville J. Herskovits-*The Negro's Americanism*

Honor Roll

In February 1940 Thrash and fellow artist Allan Freelon are included in the *Philadelphia Afro-American* annual *Honor Roll*. Under the heading “*Artist Makes Discovery*,” Thrash is praised for having “discovered the first new print making process in the last hundred years.”



News Corner

c. 1939–40, aquatint and etching,

6 1/2 x 4 5/16 inches (16.5 x 12.5 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund.



The Pyramid Club Building as it Appeared on the Day it Opened to the Public, October 13, 1940. Photographed by John W. Mosley. Reproduced from the Pictorial Album: The Pyramid Club, First Anniversary, October 1941, copy in the Charles L. Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia.

Thrash and McAlister

The society column for the *Philadelphia Tribune* on April 4, 1940 reads:

“*Bits by Bernice: Dox Thrash Feted,*”

“Mr. and Mrs. William L. Hartsfield entertained at dinner on Sunday, March 31st, in honor of Dox Thrash the artist and Miss Edna McAlister, his fiancée.”

After four years of courting, Dox Thrash proposes to Edna McAlister. They are married later in the year.

A New Pyramid Club

On an unusually warm 80 degree Sunday in October, before an audience of 1,500 curious Philadelphians, the Pyramid Club opens it's new doors at 1517 West Girard Avenue.

With a mission and a name firmly in place, the officers of the Pyramid Club have purchased a three-story, 20-room brownstone mansion at the cost of \$5,500. In addition to \$4,000 contributed by members, the club obtains a mortgage from the black-owned North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. The club spends an additional \$9,000 on remodeling.

In His Own Words

“When you regard work in the cold terms of dollars and cents chopped into specific hours between nine and five, with the idea in mind of doing precisely what you're paid for and nothing more, you are merely “holding down a job.” When you go into it, and give it all you've got, you find yourself with a “career” on your hands! That's the major difference between those who forever stay on the bottom rung and “work for a living,” and those who eventually become part owner, if not total owner in a business.”

Due Recognition

Two years after its public debut, Dox Thrash receives official recognition for his contribution to the discovery of the carborundum printing method.

The first page of a *The Carborundum Print*, technical pamphlet published by the WPA on September 10, 1940, states, “The artists who collaborated in developing the process are: Dox Thrash, Michael J. Gallagher, and Hubert Mesibov.”

In an article in the *Philadelphia Record*, Joseph Shallit writes that “the prize exhibit these days at the W.P.A. Art Projects Headquarters . . . is Gallagher, Mesibov and Thrash.”

A review of Thrash's color carborundum relief etchings in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* recognizes him as one of the inventors of the carborundum process.

In the December issue of *The Crisis*, Jerry Wood has an article titled “A New Print Process”. He singles out Thrash as “one of America's leading Negro artists.”

To top off the year, five of Thrash's prints are illustrated in a new book by Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art*, which is published in December.

In This Year

For a third time an anti-lynching bill is defeated by Congress in 1940. The NAACP reports that 351 African Americans have been lynched since the defeat of the first bill in 1921.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



1941

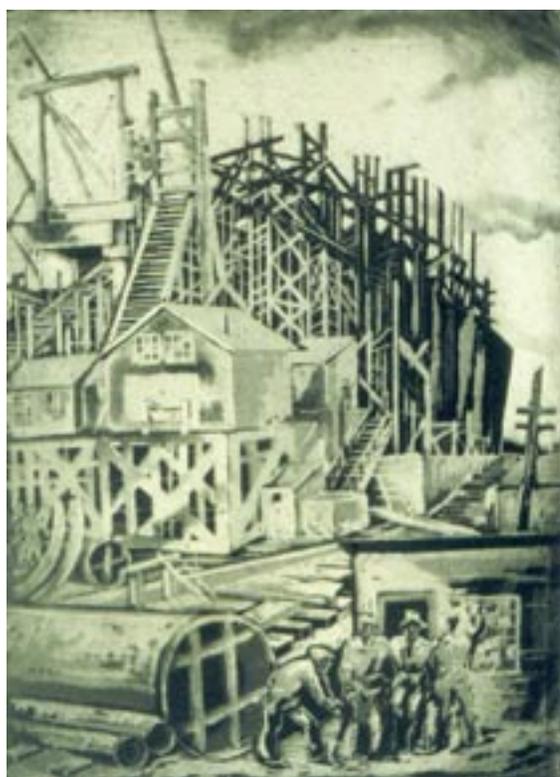
Prelude

“My father is a quiet man
With sober, steady ways;
For smile, a folded fan;
His nights are like his days.”
Countée Cullen-*Fruit of the Flower*

Dox Thrash -News

“WPA Artist Discovers New Print Process for Reproductions”

The year 1941 starts off with more acclaim for Dox Thrash. In an article in the *Philadelphia Afro-American*, Thrash is given sole credit for “one of the most important developments in the technique of fine print reproduction since Aloys Senefelder invented lithography in 1796.”



Shipfitters
c. 1941, aquatint.
10 3/8 x 7 1/2 inches (26.3 x 19.1 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Morning Paper
c. 1941, etching ,
6 15/16 x 4 15/16 inches (17.7 x 12.6 cm).
Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

A Featured Speaker

Dox Thrash is the featured speaker at the January meeting of the Chris J. Perry Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Elks. Thrash is himself a member of this lodge, which bears the name of the founder of the *Philadelphia Tribune*. This lodge was established in North Philadelphia by Thrash’s good friend Hobson Reynolds, who presides as “Exalted Ruler.” The topic for the meeting is “*The Negro’s Contribution to Art*”.

A Cultural Leader

At this time Thrash begins his long association with the Pyramid Club, an African American social club that had just opened in December 1940 in an imposing mansion at 1517 West Girard Avenue.



Dox Thrash Signing an Impression of his Aquatint Shipfitters, June 26, 1941.

Photographed by Jerome Rolland. Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The club provides Thrash with a network of civic leaders and art collectors with the ability to support his work.

Here he also has the opportunity to meet with other nationally prominent artists, as well as critics, and gallery owners. As one of the senior artists in Philadelphia's African American community and the co-inventor of a new printmaking technique, Thrash is accepted as a cultural leader among this circle of art professionals and club members.

We Too Look at America

On a Wednesday afternoon in May, the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago holds its gala opening ceremonies. The fanfare centers on a speech by Eleanor Roosevelt, which is broadcast nation-wide over the radio. Another exciting feature of the program is a live performance by *Wings Over Jordan*, a boy's choir in Cleveland, piped in over the airwaves.

Alain Locke, who has the honor of introducing the First Lady, is also the organizer of the inaugural art exhibition titled: *We Too Look at America: A National Exhibition of Negro Art*. In this exhibit, Dox Thrash is once again represented by more works than any other artist.

75 Years of Freedom

Dox Thrash, now becoming widely recognized as a leading African American artist, participates in an exhibit at the Library of Congress celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Emancipation. The exhibit is titled "*75 Years of Freedom*". It is 75 years since the 13th Amendment banning slavery was added to the Constitution of the United States.

Sold!

An African American women's group who admire a watercolor by Thrash in a traveling exhibition purchase it for the permanent collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art. Titled *Griffin Hills*, the watercolor is a landscape of the countryside near Thrash's Georgia boyhood home.

In This Year

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Japan attacks Pearl Harbor and sinks five American battle-ships. The next day Congress declares war on Japan and the United States enters World War II.

“WPA Artists to Turn to Defense Work”

“In view of recent developments, the Work Projects Administration Art Program has offered the complete services and facilities of its workshop at 510 S. Broad Street, to the city and its plans for civilian defense. The shops are completely equipped for posters, charts, maps, and pamphlets that will be needed in the organization of adequate plans for defense against air-raids and other immediate dangers.”

The Philadelphia Tribune, December 20, 1941.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

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1942

Prelude

“There is an exaltation of man’s life,
His hidden life, that he alone can feel.
The blended fires that heat his veins within,
Shaping his metals into finest steel.”

Claude McKay-*My House*

A Patriot

A patriotic veteran of World War I, Dox Thrash is one of the first artists in the Fine Print Workshop to take up the new wartime theme that is mandated for the Federal Art Project in Pennsylvania by the government in Washington.



Defense Worker

c. 1941, carborundum mezzotint over etched guidelines, 7 5/8 x 6 1/2 inches (19.4 x 16.5 cm).

Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Dox Thrash in the Sign Shop of Sun Ship, Chester, Pennsylvania

c.1942–45, photographed by John W. Mosley.
Dolan-Maxwell Gallery, Philadelphia

Claude Clark, Sr., a workshop colleague, later speaks of Thrash as having been a “super patriot” who did not share the same concerns as some of his younger colleagues:

“Many of us belonged to the union and he seemed to feel that it was patriotic to stand across the street from the union hall and tell how many employees from the art department, the art section, went into that meeting. He seemed to feel that this was his duty. In other words he - as a political person – he didn’t seem to be that close to us. We could excuse him for that. Many times we’d say, ‘Well, his work speaks’ and leave it at that.”



Dox Thrash and Claude Clark in the Fine Print Workshop, Philadelphia Federal Art Project, c. 1940
Photographed by Myron Krasney. Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Exhibits of 1942

Thrash is honored with the largest exhibition of his career:

Exhibition of Graphic Arts by Dox Thrash: Etchings, Aquatints, Lithographs, and Carborundum Prints

The display is held in the Founder's Library at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where Alain Locke is a professor of philosophy. Consisting of 30 prints, the exhibition showcases Thrash's versatility as a printmaker and is divided into five sections by medium.

April 19–May 10: Thrash participates in the *Exhibition of Paintings by Negro Artists of America* at Atlanta University, in his home state of Georgia.

June 6–September 13: Thrash exhibits work in *Philadelphia Printmakers* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Letter to Washington

Like many FAP artists, Thrash leaves the Fine Print Workshop and turns to the thriving civil defense sector and looks for work at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Unlike most of his colleagues, however, Thrash is turned away. In an indignant letter to the Fair Employment Practice Committee in Washington, D.C., Thrash describes the insulting treatment he received:

“On May 26, 1942, I applied at the Philadelphia Navy Yard Labor Board for an application as an insignia painter in the airplane department. This position was posted as being open for competitive examinations. I was informed that this job was not available for members of my race. It was made very clear to me that there were other positions that I might be accepted for but not this one. It was also stated to me that it made no difference whether I was a veteran or not, and that his word was final. I was also told that even if I filed an application that I would never get as far as the examination. I did however obtain an application blank and am filing same with the Philadelphia Labor Board at the Navy Yard, but am writing you this to say that I am vitally interested in the outcome of this war and am not concerned in racial prejudices. I want to serve in the capacity for which I am best fitted, that is why I asked for this blank. I shall expect to at least be given a chance to compete with others for the job.”

The Next Generation

Although Philadelphia's Fine Print Workshop received widespread attention for having developed the carborundum technique, the new method will ultimately have but a short history. FAP print workshops in New York and elsewhere succeed in bringing color lithography and the color silkscreen method to the fore of American printmaking. It is these two techniques, already well established as commercial printing processes, that are picked up by young artists after World War II.

As the scale of the modern prints works produced by the next generation grows ever larger, the print techniques discovered in Philadelphia's Fine Print Workshop remain linked to the traditional small size of the etchings by old master printmakers, such as Rembrandt and Whistler. The carborundum mezzotint and the carborundum relief etching will mainly endure in the many surviving examples created by Dox Thrash and his colleagues.

The End of the FAP

The Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) has been sponsored by the Federal government during the final years of the Depression. From the outset, the programs are under pressure to keep costs down, while employing as many artists as possible to produce works of art that will avoid public controversy. The money for the programs is voted on by Congress, which carefully monitors spending levels and public opinion. This continual need for Congressional approval fosters an on-going sense of impermanence and anxiety about the future of the programs.

Once the national economy is revived by the defense industry of World War II, relief work is no longer necessary and the Federal art programs are discontinued as quickly as possible. In December 1942, the Federal Arts Project is abolished by presidential decree, to take effect on June 30, 1943. Altogether, 30 FAP artists have created more than 100 carborundum prints during the existence of the FAP, practically all of them produced in Philadelphia.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



1943-1944

Prelude

“Her vanity-case mirror revealed how exactly the long pendant earrings matched her red coral beads and how perfectly becoming the new close bob was, and assured her for the tenth time that Egyptian rouge made her skin look lighter. She was ready.”

Rudolph Fisher- *Harlem Sketches-Majutah*

Legacy

James A. Porter publishes *Modern Negro Art* in 1943. In the final chapter he claims to have “purposely reserved until the last ... the exceptional art of Dox Thrash of Philadelphia.”



Saturday Night

c. 1944–45, etching.

9 13/16 x 7 7/16 inches
(25.0 x 18.9 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Katherine Levin Farrell Fund.



A Useful Imagination (facing right)

c. 1942–44, color carborundum mezzotint and carborundum relief etching

9 7/8 x 6 7/8 inches (25.1 x 17.5 cm).

Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

Porter writes:

“Thus the sporadic efforts of the Negro artist in the graphic arts have borne extraordinary fruit at last in the remarkable work of Dox Thrash. The question ‘What Negro artist has risen above the level of the ignorant peasant?’ can be answered decisively with the achievement of this single contributor to the artistic printing processes in America.”



Dox Thrash at the Opening of the Pyramid Club's 4th Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Prints, and Watercolors.

Photographed by John W. Moseley,
Charles L. Blockson Collection,
Temple University, Philadelphia.

Pyramid Club Unity

In 1944 entries for the Pyramid Club's 4th Annual Exhibition are by invitation only, owing to "war conditions with accompanying difficulties of transportation, curtailment of shipping, problems of assembling juries, etc." Although the Pyramid Club membership is limited to African Americans, its art exhibitions are integrated from the beginning.

According to Humbert Howard, the club's art director, "It was an idea of integration. It was the growth of living together, just what you see here. You didn't have to make any excuses, you just painted well and you were selected."

Saturday Night

Thrash has 9 works on display at the Pyramid Club's 4th Annual Exhibition and the catalogue carries a brief biographical sketch and a full-page illustration of his tempera painting *Saturday Night*.

Kymberly N. Pinder writes: "As the title suggests, the young black woman in *Saturday Night* is pressing her hair with a heated comb in preparation for an evening out. The empty chair in front of her may have been recently vacated by her last customer or by a family member whose hair she had coifed in her kitchen. The long and arduous task of making coarse, tightly coiled hair straight to mimic current white hairstyles was often a communal event during which women gossiped and entertained. Those who were efficient and good at it could earn some extra income. Now, past midnight, this hairdresser has turned to herself, a bit weary but not too tired to hit the town. "

The Crisis

The May 1944 issue of *The Crisis* is devoted entirely to Philadelphia. A witty article boasts of the contributions made by its citizens, "many of them out-rivaling the oft-touted achievements of Harlem." Thrash is named as one of the city's brightest stars in the arts in a list that includes artists Allan Freelon, Henry Jones, and Meta Warrick Fuller, as well as singer Marian Anderson and writer Alain Locke.

Solo Exhibit-49 Works

At their clubhouse on Rittenhouse Square, the Philadelphia Art Alliance mounts a one-person exhibition devoted to Dox Thrash's work.

Although the exhibition announcement in the Art Alliance's Bulletin makes a point of emphasizing Thrash's involvement with the "new" carborundum process, Thrash requests that he be allowed to show oils and watercolors along with his prints. The titles of 49 works appear on the exhibition checklist. Priced between \$20 and \$100, the first eighteen titles are watercolors and oils. Smaller watercolors, drawings, and prints are priced from \$4 to \$12.

A Useful Imagination

John Ittmann and Kymberly N. Pinder both write about *A Useful Imagination*, one of the prints in the Art Alliance show. Ittmann calls this color carborundum relief etching of a headless nude "Thrash's most daring entry into the realm of surrealism."

Pinder observes: "In this color print a classically draped, bronze-colored, headless nude female combs the hair of the dismembered head she is holding. The face is pale and heavily made-up, and the black hair provides a striking contrast with the bright red background. Beside the figure is a magazine, open to a page that in the black andwhite print shows pictures of women's heads. The work's title comments on the unattainability of the ideal of beauty found in fashion magazines."

In These Years

During this time period, race riots break out in Harlem and 46 other U.S. cities; in Detroit, white mobs riot for 30 hours, killing 25 African Americans.

Still with no anti-lynching law passed by Congress, Lillian Smith, a white southerner, publishes her anti-lynching song lyric, *Strange Fruit*, which will become a classic when it is recorded by Billie Holiday.

In 1944, the first warship named for an African American, the SS Leonard Roy Harmon, is launched in Quincy, Massachusetts. This same year black women are accepted into the US Navy for the first time.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



1945-1946

Prelude

“The cycle of seasons, the tidals of man
Revolve in the orb of an infinite plan,
We move to the rhythm of ages long done,
And each has his hour-to dwell in the sun!”

Georgia Douglas Johnson-*Hope*

A Birthday Review

In the spring of 1945 Dox Thrash is the featured artist in the Pyramid Club’s 5th Annual Exhibition. Samuel Putnam, a writer for the *Daily Worker*, gives Thrash a rave review.

“An Outstanding Philadelphia Artist Also Paints Navy’s Battlewagons”

“...Without any exaggeration I can say that there is



Mr. X (second version)

c. 1944–45, carborundum mezzotint over etched guide lines, printed in brownish-black ink.

8 5/8 x 6 7/8 inches (21.9 x 17.5 cm)

Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.



Dox Thrash at Fincken Printing Press
Photographed by Staats, 1945. Graphic Arts Collection,
National Museum of American History,
Smithsonian Institutions.

something about Dox Thrash that reminds me of Picasso. It is not merely his strength of line, his powerful draftsmanship, his ability to do what he pleases with color; it is, rather, his constant quest of new methods and techniques, his unceasing experimentations, his wide range of interests. His oil entitled *Saturday Night*, depicting a Negro girl curling her hair beside the cook-stove, while in no way imitative, is as strong in drawing and composition as any of the great moderns and in addition is filled with the poetry of the artist’s own people.”
March 22, 1945 (Dox Thrash’s 51st birthday)



The Pyramid Club's Annual Exhibition in 1946
Reproduced from "Pictorial Album: The Pyramid Club,
First Anniversary,"
October 1941, copy in the Charles L. Blockson Collection,
Temple University,

The Summer of '45

In May 1945, World War II ends in Europe. Dox Thrash leaves his wartime job at *Sun Ship*, a private shipyard on the Delaware River, and is hired by the Philadelphia Housing Authority as a house painter.

During these years, Dox Thrash buys house at 2340 West Columbia Avenue (now Cecil B. Moore Avenue) and keeps his apartment at 2409 West Columbia Avenue. He turns the apartment into a studio and shares it with his friend and colleague, Sam Brown.

Museum Exhibits

As 1945 turns to 1946, the Philadelphia Museum of Art features work by Dox Thrash in back-to-back exhibits: *Color Prints and Color Printing* (November 27 – January 1) and *Drawings by Philadelphia Artists* (February 17–March 17). In the first of the two exhibits, Thrash is recognized as one of the three Philadelphia artists who invented the carborundum process.

Jury Chairman

In 1946, Dox Thrash serves as chairman of the jury of selection for the Pyramid Club's annual art exhibition. The club's presentation of a wide range of social, intellectual, and cultural events is recorded in its annual pictorial album. Photographs in the annual album document a lively assortment of parties, lectures, picnics, fashion shows (including one in which Thrash's wife, Edna, an experienced dressmaker, participates), society weddings, awards to celebrities, professional meetings, along with snapshots of the annual art exhibitions.

Pharaoh's Gallery

During these years, the thriving Pyramid Club renovates the rooms in the clubhouse. Carrying the Egyptian theme throughout the building, the rooms are appropriately named: Alexandrian Court, Nile Room, Sahara Room, Cleopatra's Boudoir, Suez Salon, Pharaoh's Temple Gallery, and Oasis Gallery. Dox Thrash, who studied mural painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, helps with the decoration.

In 1946 Thrash and art committee chairman Humbert Howard set aside the Pharaoh's Temple Gallery for the work of artist members. Thrash and Howard each display six oil paintings.

Fall 1946

Dox Thrash joins the Philadelphia Print Club (now the Print Center) in the fall of 1946 (with the encouragement of his friend Allan Freelon, who had been hired earlier in the year as the technical advisor in lithography for the club's newly instituted experimental workshops).

In These Years

In August 1945, an atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, Japan and the Japanese surrender eight days later.

1945 marks the year that gospel singer Mahalia Jackson records *Move On Up a Little Higher*, which quickly becomes a hit song nationwide. *Ebony* magazine appears for the first time on American newsstands. A first run of 25,000 copies rapidly sells out.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



1947-1949

Prelude

“Happiness is usually a result of a perfect balancing of work-time, play-time and rest-time.”
Mary McLeod Bethune- *The Problems of the City Dweller*

Join the Club

In 1947 the Philadelphia Print Club lists Thrash’s name as a new member in the “artist” category. Here Thrash would have been able to attend the monthly workshops run by Stanley William Hayter, the British-born artist who was the leader of the postwar collaborative printshop movement. Only one of Thrash’s printmaking projects can be said to reflect the British artist’s improvisational approach to printmaking, Thrash’s two closely



Girls in Costume (yellow version)
c. 1946–48, color carborundum relief etching, printed from two plates.
6 x 7 inches (15.3 x 17.8 cm).
Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

related carborundum relief etchings titled *Girls in Costume*.

Girls in Costume-1

John Ittmann writes: “The two versions of *Girls in Costume*, one with a yellow background and one multicolor, represent a departure from the procedures for making color prints that Thrash had been following thus far. This departure suggests that they may have developed in the environment of the experimental workshops at the Print Club.”

“The version with a yellow background was the easiest to execute, since here Thrash merely had to draw his full design on a single plate, using the carborundum relief etching method that allowed him to draw with unaccustomed playfulness. To print this version, Thrash first smeared a blank plate with yellow pigment and printed it on a sheet of paper. He then inked the plate carrying the design in black, touched it up with red, and printed it on top of the yellow.”



Girls in Costume (multicolor version)
c. 1946–48, color carborundum relief etching, printed from two plates.
6 x 7 inches (15.3 x 17.8 cm).
Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

plate with yellow pigment and printed it on a sheet of paper. He then inked the plate carrying the design in black, touched it up with red, and printed it on top of the yellow.”

Girls in Costume -2

John Ittmann writes: “For the multicolor version of Girls in Costume, Thrash again made use of the free and easy drawing style afforded by the carborundum relief etching method. This time, however, he drew different portions of his design on two separate plates, so that the two parts fit together as a complete composition. This could happen only when the two plates were printed on top of each other. The plate inked in color is printed first, and then the plate in black is printed on top.”



Oyster House or Shanty
c. 1944–48, Carborundum mezzotint over etched guidelines
8 1/4 x 7 1/4 inches (20.9 x 18.4 cm).
Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

The Smithsonian

In the fall of 1948 Thrash is given a one-man exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution. This exhibition is the last major print show of his lifetime. The exhibit features 23 carborundum prints, 9 aquatints and 4 etchings.

Pyramid Club Debate

In the winter of 1949 Thrash takes part in the Pyramid Club's *9th Annual Exhibition*. His carborundum mezzotint *Oyster House* is illustrated in the catalogue.

The Pyramid Club's continuing policy of integrating black and white artists in its annual exhibitions causes one group of artists to complain publicly that the prime spots in the exhibition are too often assigned to white artists, who already have many more venues throughout the city to display their work.

Humbert Howard, the curator of the show, rebuts this claim, arguing that the inclusion of “prominent white artists gave ‘prestige’ to the show” and that “all of the topflight colored artists in the area had been invited.”

In These Years

In 1947 Jackie Robinson joins the Brooklyn Dodgers. He is the first African American to play major-league baseball.

In 1948 President Harry S. Truman abolishes racial segregation in the United States military. This same year the US Supreme Court decides to grant blacks the right to study law at state institutions.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered



1950-1955

Prelude

“The wind was a carefree soul
That broke the chains of earth,
And strode for a moment across the land
With the wild hallo of his mirth.”

Gwendolyn Bennet-*Wind*

A Puzzle

Dox Thrash’s activities as a printmaker during the 1950s remain a puzzle, since no record of his having exhibited any prints after his 1948 Smithsonian show has come to light. Three prints exist – a lithograph, a linocut, and a woodcut – to indicate Thrash’s continued participation in the Print Club experimental workshops. Here he has access to specialized presses and tools for these techniques, as well as the advice of specialists.



Photograph-Postcard of Dox Thrash in an Art Gallery in Paris. Postmarked December 1951. Dolan/Maxwell Gallery, Philadelphia.



THE DYNAMID CLUB
PRESENTS

The Philadelphia Concert Orchestra

*Arrangement of Musical Instruments
(Horns and Drums)*

c.1952, woodcut, reproduced on the cover
of concert program,
5 1/16 x 6 15/16 inches
(12.8 x 17.7 cm).

Paris

In 1951, at age 58, Dox Thrash returns to France, perhaps in the company of his good friends Hobson and Evelyn Reynolds. Although his itinerary is not known, a postcard portrait taken of the artist in a modern art gallery in Paris attests to his interest in the contemporary art of Europe.

Pyramid Club Lives

Throughout the 1950s the Pyramid Club will function as the most important venue for African American artists in Philadelphia. As the artist Paul Keene put it, “there were very few places to show for black artists, so we had to make our own way.” In 1952 Dox Thrash participates in the Pyramid Club’s *12th Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture*.

A Place of Honor

As an elder of the black art community, Thrash continues to a place of honor in the Pyramid Club. In 1954 he chairs the club’s *14th Annual Exhibition of Oils, Watercolors, and Prints*. For many years he also serves as Sergeant-at-Arms.

A Fall Exhibit

In late 1955, Thrash exhibits 35 works in the Pyramid Club's *1st Annual Fall Review of Paintings and Sculpture*. He is given credit in the catalogue, along with Samuel Curtis and Wilbert Wilkins, for the decoration of the galleries.

In These Years

In the summer of 1950, the United States enters the Korean War. Gwendolyn Brooks becomes first African American to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize in poetry and Althea Gibson is the first to play tennis at the U.S. Open.

In 1951, African American surgeon John Gibbon Jr. designs the first heart-lung machine.

1952 marks the first year in its history that no lynchings are reported by NAACP.

In 1954, black novelist James Baldwin publishes his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The US Supreme Court rules that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.

In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama Rosa Parks refuses to relinquish her bus seat to a white passenger and is arrested. As a result of that action, Martin Luther King, Jr. organizes a boycott of the city's bus system. This boycott will last for more than a year, demonstrating the unity and determination of Montgomery's black residents and inspiring blacks everywhere.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

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1956-1959

Prelude

“Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid. And all vital art discovers beauty and opens Our eyes to that which we previously could not see.” Alain Locke- *The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts*

Pyramid Club Exhibits

In 1956, at 63 years of age, Dox Thrash serves on the Fine Arts Committee and takes part in the *2nd Annual Fall Review of Paintings and Sculpture* at the Pyramid Club. In the fall annual of 1957, he exhibits a painting with the inspiring title *Pillar of Strength*.



Alain Locke and Allan Freelon at the Pyramid Club
Photographed by John W. Mosely. Reproduced from Pictorial Album: The Pyramid Club, First Anniversary, October 1941, copy in the Charles L. Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia.



Seated Nude
c. 1940s–50s, watercolor,
18 x 12 inches (45.7 x 30.5 cm).
Collection of Dr. Constance Elaine
Clayton, Philadelphia.

1958

Dox Thrash retires from his job with the Philadelphia Housing Authority and has more time to devote to his art.

In the fall of this year, the Philadelphia Museum of Art installs an exhibition of WPA prints called *Federal Art Project: Twenty Years After*. Dorothy Grafly, who has kept track of Thrash’s progress since the early 1930s, praises him in a review, along with the co-inventors of the carborundum print, Hubert Mesibov and Michael Gallagher. In her review of the exhibition, she describes their prints as “outstanding”.

Flamingo Apartments

In 1959 Thrash and his wife Edna sell their house at 2340 West Columbia Avenue (now Cecil B. Moore Avenue) and move to the Flamingo Apartments, a high-rise building at 1220 North Broad Street. The apartment is around the corner from the Pyramid Club. Around the same time, Thrash and Sam Brown give up the apartment they share as a studio at 2409 West Columbia Avenue, which Thrash had been renting since 1929, and move their studio a few blocks away to 2313 Ridge Avenue.

Pyramid Club Discord

In July 1959 the Pyramid Club faces discord between the old and the new members. Ralph Matthews, a veteran black newspaperman, sums up the problems:

“For more than 30 years the organization has weathered many storms, but the present crisis seems to be the most serious with a lot of old-timers disgruntled and threatening to wash their hands of the whole shebang. So acute is the rift among the top brass that only race pride and memories of its historic past can be called upon to seal the breach. Everybody is whispering and grumbling but nobody is talking out loud.”

The Reclaimed Nude

Kymberly N. Pinder writes, “Thrash’s sensitivity to issues concerning African American women...is also present in his many nudes. The artist created more than a hundred nudes over the course of his career, and a cursory survey of them reveals the many styles in which he worked, from Art Deco to Social Realism.... The virtual absence of the black nude in American art before the 1970s makes Thrash’s work extremely important. His repertoire of nudes is greater than those of the few other African American artists who dared to tackle the exposed black body.”

In These Years

In 1957, the United States Congress passes the first civil rights bill since 1875.

The same year, tennis champion Althea Gibson becomes the first African American athlete to win the U.S. Open and Wimbledon championships. Charlie Sifford is the first black to win a major professional golf tournament at the U.S. Open in Long Beach, California.

In 1958, *A Raisin in the Sun* opens on Broadway. It is a tale of the modern black family in America by 29-year-old Lorraine Hansberry. Willie O’Ree is the first African American to play professional hockey.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

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1960-1965

Prelude

“A shadow am I
Growing in the light,
Not understood
As is the day,
But more easily seen
Because
I am a shadow in the light.”
R. Bruce Nugent-*Shadow*



City Street Corner

c. 1950s, aquatint (original copper plate).
8 1/16 x 6 inches (20.4 x 15.3 cm).

National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.



Glory Be!

c. 1941–42, Carborundum mezzotint and etching
7 3/8 x 9 7/8 inches (18.7 x 25.1 cm).

Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

End of an Era

The Pyramid Club extends Thrash’s career as an artist to nearly the end of his life. Although his work is included in many exhibitions during the 1940s and 1950s, in Philadelphia and other major cities, the Pyramid Club is Thrash’s most dependable venue for more than two decades as the only gallery in Philadelphia owned and controlled by African Americans.

In 1961 and 1962, the dispute between the old and the new guard at the club continues. While the arguments are being publicly aired, many prominent members are dropped from membership for failing to pay dues. In one month alone, July 1961, 100 hundred members are ousted. At this point, the board announces that the \$120 initiation fee for new members has been abolished, although membership will continue to be by invitation only.

The new policy is only partially successful and attracts few new members. The decline continues and debts mount until April 1963, when the Internal Revenue Service padlocks the club building for failure to pay Social Security and withholding taxes for employees in 1961 and 1963.



Dox Thrash Demonstrating the Fine-print Process to a Group of Schoolchildren in the Fine Print Workshop 1941, photographed by Jerome Rolland. Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

End of a Life

On April 19, after judging a children's poster contest at the Hawthorne Housing Projects at 12th and Catharine Streets in Philadelphia's Center City, Thrash is rushed to the hospital after suffering a heart attack in a taxi on the way home. He dies in the waiting room. Services are arranged at funeral home owned by his longtime friend Hobson Reynolds. Dox Thrash, the proud veteran of World War I, is buried in the United States National Cemetery in Beverly, New Jersey.

Reflections on Thrash

Kymberly N. Pinder writes, "Whether presenting a portrait of a strong black individual, an unflinching image of racial violence, or a frank celebration of the black female body, Thrash was confronting America's cultural history through his art. His interweaving of the human, the personal, the historical, and the political resulted in a highly individual and culturally important body of work."

In These Years

In the summer of 1963, 200,000 marchers descend on Washington D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr., addresses the massive crowds:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed - we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

In 1964 the Civil Rights Act is passed into law, outlawing segregation in public facilities and racial discrimination in employment and education.

In 1965, in Alabama, hundreds of civil rights sympathizers march from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King, Jr., as part of the ongoing African American struggle for equal rights. Soon after, Congress passes the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which greatly increases the number of southern blacks allowed to register to vote

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Printmaking

Carborundum Mezzotint

Dox Thrash pioneered the technique that became known as the carborundum mezzotint. Gritty silica crystals, known by the brand name *Carborundum*, were originally used to prepare lithographic stones. In this method they are used instead to thoroughly scratch or roughen a metal plate.



Carborundum Mezzotint. Carborundum powder and treated plate.

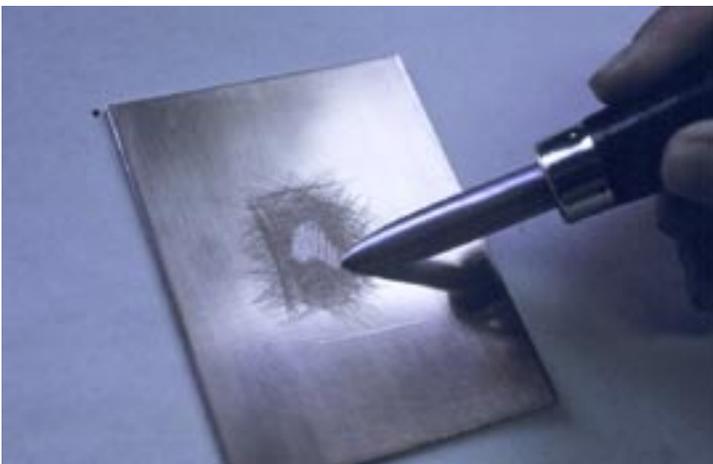


Dox Thrash Demonstrating Carborundum Plate Preparation Photographed by Staats, 1945. Graphic Arts Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institutions.

To make a carborundum mezzotint, an artist first roughens the entire surface of a copper plate with Carborundum, a commercially produced abrasive. The image is created by using burnishers and scrapers to remove some of the roughness from the plate. When inked, a plate prepared in this way will produce a broad range of velvety tones ranging from pale gray to deep black.



Mary Lou
c. 1939-40, carborundum mezzotint over traces
of previously etched image,
9 15/16 x 6 7/8 inches (25.2 x 17.5 cm).
Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with
the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund.



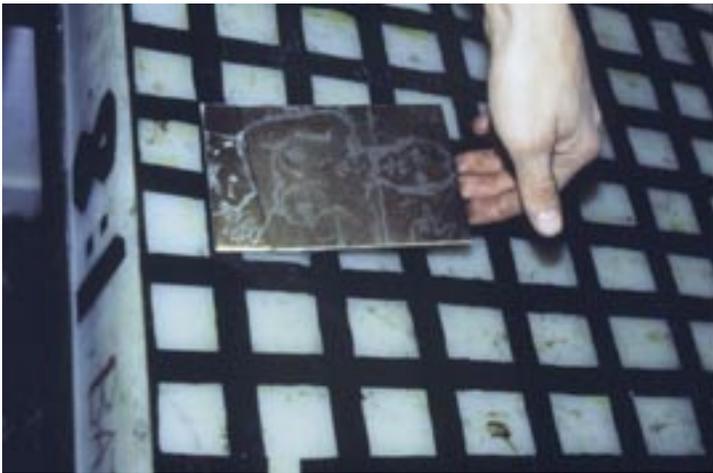
Carborundum Mezzotint. Burnisher on plate treated with Rocker.

Carborundum Relief Etching

To make a carborundum relief etching, an artist uses acid-resistant varnish to draw an image on a copper plate that has already been roughened all over with Carborundum. After the plate is immersed in an acid solution, the broad lines of the protected drawing stand out in relief above the deeply bitten background so that they can be inked and printed.



Happy Journey
c. 1939-40, carborundum relief etching,
9 15/16 x 7 inches (25.3 x 17.8 cm).
Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of E. M.
Benson.



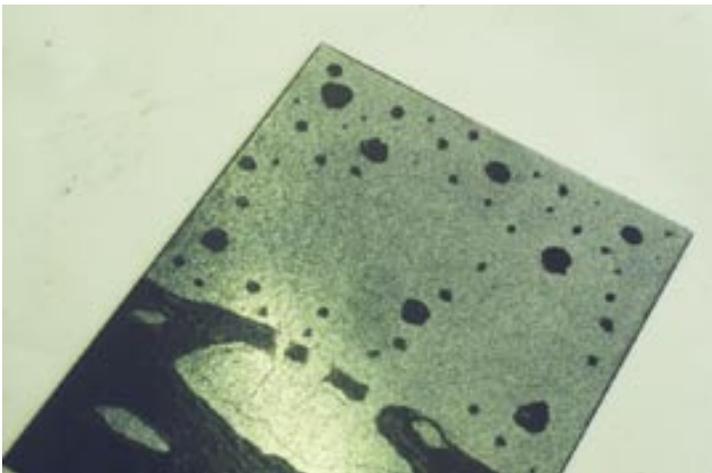
Carborundum Relief Etching Relief etching being treated in acid bath.

Aquatint

A method of etching used to create broad areas of even tone. The technique was developed in the 1760s to imitate the look of wash drawings. Different tones of light and dark can be produced depending on the density of the particles, the length of time the plate is in the acid bath or the strength of the acid.



Hobo Jungle
c. 1937-38, aquatint,
4 13/16 x 5 1/4 inches (12.2 x 13.4 cm).
Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.



Aquatint prepared plate.

Drypoint

A technique in which a sharp, pointed tool called a *drypoint needle* is used to scratch fine lines directly into a metal plate. During printing, the fragile ridge of metal raised alongside the incised line, known as the *burr*, retains extra ink, creating soft, blurred lines.



Cat-Fishin'
c.1937-38, aquatint, etching, and drypoint,
8 1/8 x 10 1/4 inches (20.6 x 26.1 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, on
deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Drypoint needle scratching metal plate.

Etching

Etching uses acid corrosion, rather than direct gouging, to cut designs into a metal plate. Typically, the plate is first coated with a waxy, acid-resistant material, or ground. A sharp, pointed etching needle is drawn through the ground to expose lines of bare metal. The plate is then immersed in dilute acid, which bites the metal only where it has been exposed by the etching needle.



Etching tools and techniques.



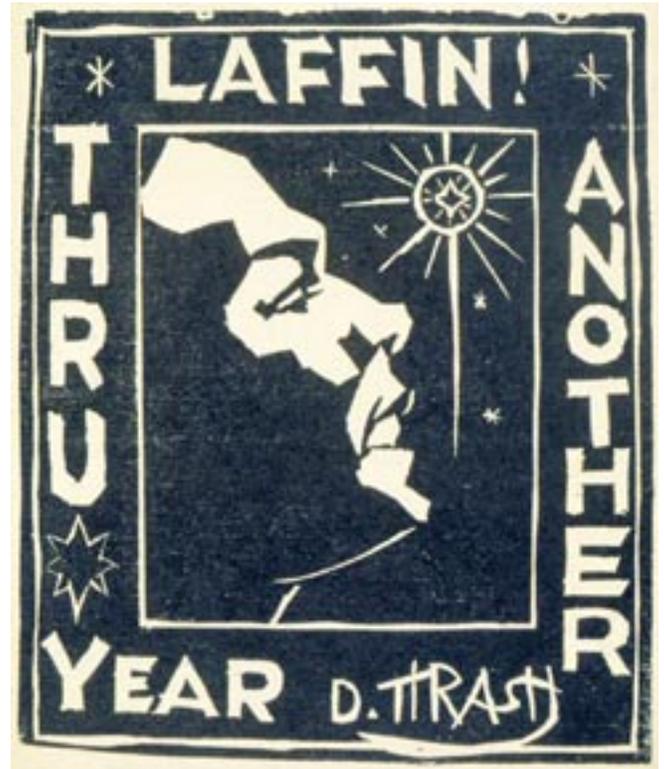
Morning Paper
c. 1941, etching,
6 15/16 x 4 15/16 inches (17.7 x 12.6 cm).
Collection of John Warren, Philadelphia.

Linocut

Linocut employs knives, and gouges to cut away areas from linoleum. While it is easier to carve than wood, it is less durable when printing multiple impressions.



Carved linoleum block.



Laffin' Thru Another Year

Early 1930s, linocut.

5 5/16 x 4 1/2 inches (13.5 x 14.4 cm) irregular.
Collection of Allan H. Nowak, Sunny Isles Beach,
Florida.

Lithograph

Lithograph means, literally, stone drawing. The artist uses a greasy crayon or other material to draw on stone or metal. Relying on the fact that grease repels water, the stone is kept damp as greasy printer's ink is applied, so that the ink will only adhere to the image area.



Drawing on lithograph stone with crayon.



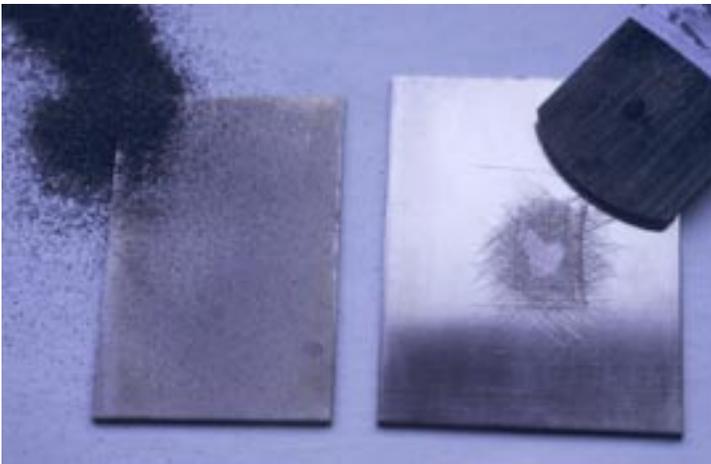
Ebony Joe
c. 1939, lithograph.
9 7/8 x 8 1/8 inches (25.1 x 20.6 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects
Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia
Museum of Art.

Mezzotint

A tonal print made by roughening a metal plate with an instrument called a rocker, (Dox Thrash used Carborundum powder to roughen the plate). A design is smoothed out with a polishing tool called a *burnisher*. The polished portions print light, whereas the roughened portions hold the ink and result in a rich, velvety black.



Life
c. 1938-39, carborundum mezzotint,
10 7/8 x 8 13/16 inches (27.6 x 22.4 cm).
Federal Works Agency, Work Projects
Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia
Museum of Art.



Carborundum powder prepared plate and rocker prepared plate.

Woodcut

The oldest and simplest method of printmaking, woodcut employs a chisel-like tool to cut away areas from a plank or block of wood. The raised portions that have been left uncut are inked and printed.



Cutting away wood from wood block.



*Arrangement of Musical Instruments
(Horns and Drums)*

c.1952, woodcut, reproduced on the cover
of concert program,

5 1/16 x 6 15/16 inches (12.8 x 17.7 cm).

Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of Ronald Rumford, 1999.

Dox Thrash: Revealed

a companion site to the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit:

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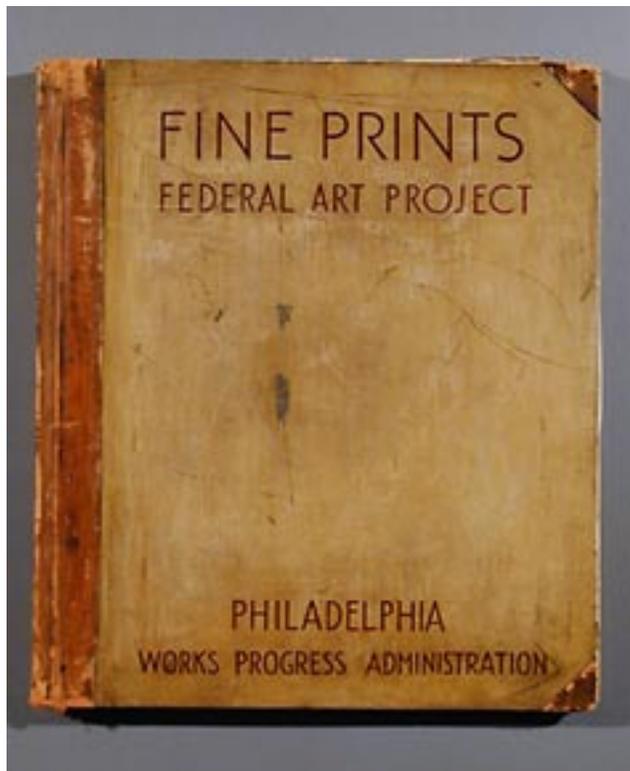
Rescuing a Print

Conservation Treatment Of *Abraham*, A Print By Dox Thrash

Many of the prints selected for the exhibition *Dox Thrash: An African American Printmaker Rediscovered* came to the Philadelphia Museum of Art collection in two large sample albums of prints produced by the WPA Fine Print Workshop in Philadelphia between 1936 and 1941.



An open album with *Abraham*, an etching with dry-point by Dox Thrash, remaining adhered to this album page. Three other prints have been removed, the residual discolored adhesive indicating their former placement on the page.



A WPA sample album at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The rubber cement adhesive used to adhere the prints to the album pages had discolored severely over time. In preparation for the current exhibition, Museum conservators removed prints from the albums and treated them to diminish the disfiguring adhesive stains.

Examination

Abraham, the etching with drypoint shown here, was one of the prints that was examined and treated. As seen above, the discolored rubber cement had penetrated from the back of the print through the paper so that it was visible on the front as a deep orange-brown stain in the top right of the printed image.



The back of *Abraham*.

On the back of the print, broad smears of discolored rubber cement had formed a thick crust on the paper surface.

Transmitted light shows translucency where adhesive had penetrated into the paper, as seen to the right of the hat and in both bottom corners.

Before treatment began, the print was examined carefully in various types of light. Transmitted light (light shining through the paper) shows variations in paper thickness and translucency.

Transmitted light shows translucency where adhesive had penetrated into the paper, as seen to the right of the hat and in both bottom corners.



Abraham, c. 1936-37

Etching and drypoint 6 1/4" x 4 3/4"

Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration on long-term loan to the Philadelphia Museum of Art from the Fine Arts Collection, U.S. General Services Administration, Washington, D.C.





Raking light (light shining across the paper at a low angle) is useful for revealing aspects of the surface of a work of art.

Treatment Procedure

Raking light emphasizes texture of the surface and the characteristic undulation or “cockling” of the paper.



Scott Homolka at a microscope in the Museum’s Paper Conservation Laboratory.



Conservators often make use of a stereobinocular microscope for purposes of detailed examination and treatment.

A detail of the adhesive crust as seen through the microscope can be seen to the immediate left.

Adhesive crust on the back of the print as seen through the microscope, photographed at 1.7x magnification.

In the first step of the treatment of this print by Dox Thrash, the conservator gently scrapes away the adhesive crust from the surface of the paper using a small scalpel. A detail of the scraping procedure as seen through the microscope can be seen below. After scraping, a considerable amount of adhesive still remains embedded in the paper.



A scalpel blade used to reduce the adhesive crust as seen through the microscope, photographed at 1.7x magnification.



A conservator using a scalpel to reduce rubber cement on the back of a print.

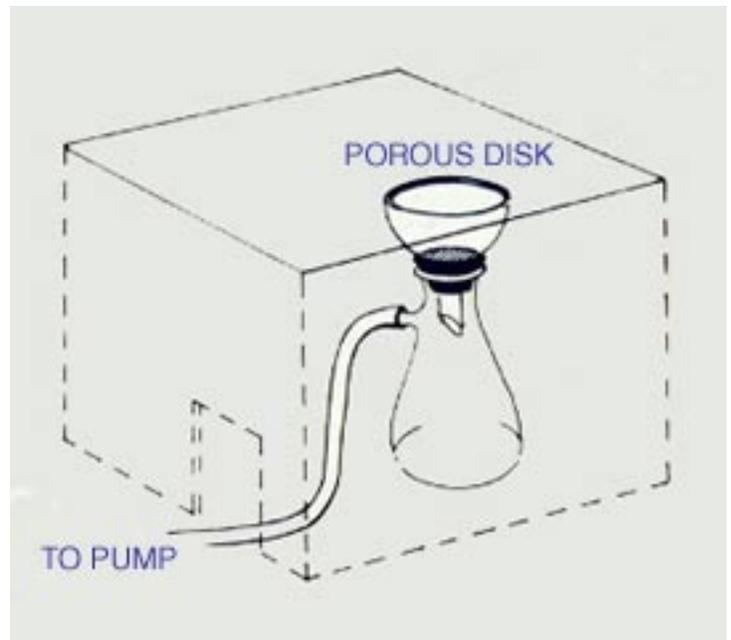


Diagram of suction disk set-up, showing the porous disk and the hose leading to the vacuum pump.

The next treatment step involves the use of organic solvents to reduce adhesive that had penetrated into the paper. In this case, the conservator employs an apparatus called a suction disk, which consists of a 3-inch diameter porous disk set into a rigid working surface that supports the print during treatment. To create suction, hoses connect the disk to a vacuum pump. Tests carried out prior to actual treatment indicate which solvents will be most effective in removing the adhesive without altering the appearance of the paper.



Mr. Homolka working in a fume hood.

After the adhesive has been rendered soluble by the application of solvent, the suction disk gently pulls the softened adhesive out of that area, without affecting the surrounding paper. The conservator is shown bending into a fume hood, which safely evacuates solvent vapors.

During treatment, the stained area of the print is placed over the disk, which has been masked with black plastic to tailor the area of suction to the stain being treated. The conservator might spend up to 15 hours on an adhesive removal treatment such as this.



Conservator applies solvent to the adhesive stain with a small sable brush, while the print is positioned over the suction disk.

Gentle suction pulls the softened adhesive from the print into an underlying blotter.

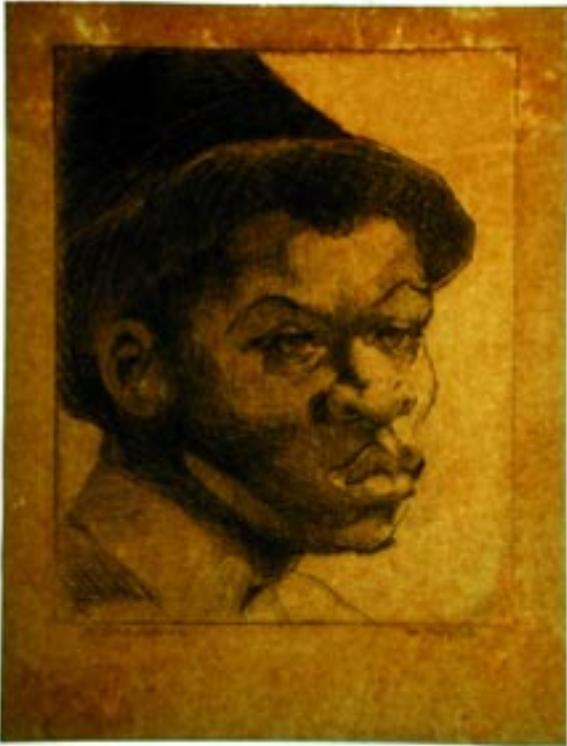
Other specialized techniques allow the conservator to prevent the adhesive from spreading into the surrounding paper, and may include selective application of a second solvent around the stain.



Adhesive drawn from the print is visible in the blotter as a ring of orange-brown discoloration.

Looking at *Abraham* Before and After Treatment

Before conservation treatment, transmitted light shows greater translucency where the adhesive has penetrated into the paper.



Transmitted light after treatment.

After treatment, viewing by transmitted light reveals that translucent areas in the paper caused by embedded adhesive are greatly reduced, indicating that most of the rubber cement has been removed from the paper.

Before treatment, broad smears of discolored rubber cement formed a thick crust on the back of the print.



Transmitted light before treatment.



The back of *Abraham* before treatment.



The back of *Abraham* after treatment.

After treatment, the adhesive crust has been removed, leaving faint brown stains in the paper, that are visible only from the back.



The front of *Abraham* before treatment.

Before treatment, the discolored rubber cement had penetrated from the back of the print through the paper, where it was visible on the front as a deep orange-brown stain in the top right of the printed image.



The front of *Abraham* after treatment.

After treatment, the disfiguring rubber cement stain on the front of *Abraham* has been removed successfully, and the print is ready for exhibition.

Credits: Nancy Ash, Faith Zieske, Dana Tepper and Scott Homolka, conservation treatment and text Joe Mikuliak, photography.