

"The Spontaneous Gesture:
Prints and Books of the Abstract Expressionist Era" by Clinton
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The Spontaneous Gesture: Prints
and books of the Abstract
Expressionist Era. By
Lanier Graham.
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96 pages, 91 illustrations.*

LANIER GRAHAM endeavors in this exhibition catalogue to correct misconceptions about the nature and extent of Abstract Expressionist printmaking between the mid-1940s and the end of the 1960s, and to provide an overview of gestural prints produced in Europe and the United States during those decades. It is his thesis that Abstract Expressionism in America and *L'Art informel* and *Tachisme* in Europe should be viewed as

closely related manifestations of a similar impulse. He divides his catalogue essay into three sections: a discussion of gestural and automatist printmaking in Europe and America during the late 1940s, a country-by-country account of printmaking in the 1950s, and a review of the 1960s, when "printmaking underwent a dramatic change in status—from being considered a minor art form to being regarded as a major art form by the avant garde" (p. 28).

While discussing the gestural prints of the 1940s, Graham gives primary attention to the work of Jackson Pollock in New York and of Wols and Jean Fautrier in Europe. The potential of their work, he notes, was never realized: Wols died in 1951, Pollock in 1956, and Fautrier "stopped making prints for almost a decade"; thus "a springtime (was) not followed by a summer" (p. 13). It is Graham's view that gestural printmaking developed "independently on both sides of the Atlantic between 1945 and 1948, with artists on neither continent being aware of what their counterparts were doing" (p. 5). "In 1948," he later adds, "American and European artists began to learn of each other's work, but this knowledge did not become widespread for four or five years. During the early 1950s Paris remained the 'capital' of modern art" (p. 12).

This view appears overstated. The emigre artists who came to New York from Europe during the wartime years included such figures as André Breton, Max Ernst, and Andre Masson, who exerted a direct influence upon a number of American artists. S. W. Hayter not only encouraged Americans to make prints but also transmitted automatist concepts. The Chilean-born artist Roberto Malta worked both in Europe and New York, and Adja Yunkers brought a wealth of European printmaking experience to New York when he arrived in 1947. Indeed, it can be argued that there were ample conduits through which information was transmitted, and that Paris lost its prewar dominance much earlier than Graham suggests.

In his discussion of the 1950s, Graham provides useful information about the CoBrA group (from Copenhagen-Brussels-Amsterdam), best known among them Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, and Asger Jom; the French artists of the postwar period—foremost Pierre Sou-

lages; the German group ZEN; and gestural printmaking in Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In the process, Graham gives welcome attention to artists whose work is too little known: Camille Bryan in France, Emil Schumacher in Germany, and George Miyasaki in the United States. Others are omitted. Graham does not mention either the prints of Arshile Gorky or his protege Hans Burkhardt; he implies that Mark Tobey began making prints in 1960, although some of Tobey's gestural prints date from the mid-1950s.

A somewhat longer section of Graham's essay is devoted to the 1960s. Although the story of "the explosion of enthusiasm" which swept the print forward in the 1960s has frequently been told, Graham adds valuable insights into the work of Sam Francis, Willem de Kooning (see also his article on de Kooning in TTP 11:10-25), and Lee Krasner—an artist whose importance as a print-maker has too long been overlooked. He correctly notes that many Abstract-Expressionist artists found it difficult to make gestural prints in color, but again overstates a point. American artists, he writes, "for the most part produced monochrome prints during the 1960s" (p. 24). True, some worked only in black and white, but many others used color with great effectiveness, among them Garo Antreasian, Matsumi Kanemitsu, Frank Lobdell, Carl Morris, Walasse Ting, Hugo Weber, and Emerson Woelffer, all of whom made prints at Tamarind Lithography Workshop, Los Angeles, during the 1960s.

Whatever the omissions—and they are understandable in an exhibition catalogue of necessarily limited size and scope—Graham has provided ample evidence that a substantial number of

superb gestural prints were made at mid-century and that they amply merit further study.

It is ironic that American museums should have left it to the Australian National Gallery to lead the way in this field. Through this fine catalogue and the great strength of its collection, amassed during the 1980s, the ANG sets a standard for others to follow.