

Harry Bertoia, Printmaker *Monotypes and Other Monographics*



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Wayne State University Press Detroit 1988

1. Introduction

Recognized throughout the United States and in many parts of Europe for his furniture designs and welded-metal sculpture, Harry Bertoia also produced an important body of work in the printmaking field which is less well known, but even more remarkable.¹ It consists of monotypes and other unique forms of the graphic artist's craft made throughout his career, from 1940 until his death in 1978.

Taken in historical context, the Bertoia graphics of the 1940s represent one of the earliest sustained interests in the monotype and related printing techniques in this country in modern times. Their origin preceded by more than a decade the general revival of interest in printmaking in the United States, which occurred in the late fifties and sixties. It preceded by twenty-eight years the intensification of interest in the monotype in the United States evidenced by the proliferation of exhibitions of works in that medium after 1968. As prints go, they tend also to be larger in actual dimensions than most monotypes produced before the 1960s, although in the early years there is considerable variation in the size of Bertoia's works, and some are quite small indeed.

Many of the planographic printing techniques developed by Bertoia are unique to the point of defying positive identification, having been developed in his studio by experimental methods. Although he had no contact with others in the field, the few printmakers who have seen his works are impressed by his results in color and tonal values and are often frankly puzzled as to how they were achieved. It is hoped that study of them in these pages may reveal their secrets and inspire the creation of new techniques by monotypists of the end of our century. The importance of many of the prints as unique works of art has been recognized over the years through acquisition by museums in various parts of the country.

Each Bertoia print is unlike any of the others, since none was reproduced in an edition. They are never reproductions of other, larger works in another medium.

Rather, each is a spontaneous, individual work of art, born afresh each time out of the whole cloth of the artist's imagination, brought to life in a matter of minutes or hours, not days. Historically speaking, the entire group of graphics done from 1940 to 1978, numbering well over a thousand, may represent the largest body of unique prints ever produced by a single artist—an artist, be it mentioned, whose major source of income was derived from another medium, sculpture.

Bertoia learned the technique of monotype by trial and error, as do most artists who take up the medium. Not only was he self-instructed in printing techniques generally, but throughout his forty-year career he never made the acquaintance of—let alone worked with—any other printmaker. Although graphics workshops were set up in a few cities under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration of the Federal Government, professional printmakers and art-printing shops of the Parisian ilk were nonexistent in the United States until the coming of Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17 to New York City in 1940. This studio, which attracted the war-displaced European surrealists and a few U.S. artists (such as Alexander Calder and Jackson Pollock briefly, and Mauricio Lasansky more influentially), was devoted to intaglio printing, a very different technique from that adopted by Bertoia. No doubt he was aware of Hayter's work through articles such as one in a 1941 issue of *Art News* that reproduced some of the Englishman's paintings and prints.² There is no question that they both used some aspects of surrealist automatism to help form their images, but Bertoia's printing methods as well as his intent (and, consequently, his results) were unlike Hayter's. Hayter used automatism to set the overall linear pattern for each of his prints, then elaborated on it in a variety of controlled ways. Bertoia often let his hand wander from