



Leo Meissner (American, 1895 – 1977), *Solo*, ca. 1930, wood engraving (2016.4.35)

The exhibition on view highlights a generous gift of over 400 works on paper, all donated in 2016 by Gil and Deborah Williams. What began as a conversation and an offering of a few dozen prints led to more conversations and many more prints, drawings and photographs. Although Gil and Deborah Williams may be best known locally as booksellers, they are known in museum circles for having kindly lent pieces for exhibitions in Binghamton, Ithaca, Syracuse and other areas. Their personal collection consists of thousands of works on paper, ceramics, stereocards and paintings – not to mention books. To visit their home or book warehouse is to be overwhelmed. But Gil is no mere collector of objects. Since his early years as an undergraduate studying art history, he has visited and spoken with a great many of the artists whose works he has collected. Every print has its own anecdote or special significance. Thus, the works of art that he and Deborah have donated are truly personal. We are deeply appreciative of the trust and support that this gift represents.

Binghamton University Art Museum
Binghamton University
Binghamton, NY 13902
Binghamton.edu/art-museum

WORKS ON PAPER BETWEEN THE WARS

FROM THE COLLECTION OF GIL AND DEBORAH WILLIAMS

January 26 – March 16, 2017

Binghamton University Art Museum

Irvin Hoffman (American 1901 – 1989), *The Unsung Hero*, 1942, etching (2016.4.159)



WORKS ON PAPER BETWEEN THE WARS

Americans saw a great outpouring of artistic production in the decades between World War I and II. Today, we are perhaps most familiar with the mural projects associated with the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). A short drive from Binghamton University will take visitors to see two murals depicting local history located in the post offices of Endicott and Johnson City. Less known are the thousands of prints – etchings, wood engravings, lithographs, and silkscreens – that artists created with the support of the federal government. With funding from the WPA in 1935, the Federal Art Project (FAP) began supporting artistic endeavors, including graphic projects that employed 250 printmakers in 16 divisions across America. Their output was impressive; about 11,000 designs resulted and went to adorn schools, hospital, and other public buildings.¹

Running concurrent and even prior to FAP-funded printing projects were several gallery-based associations that supported the production and sale of prints. The Associated American Artists brought printmakers together to sell their works in non-gallery venues such as department stores and by mail-order at a modest price to middle-class buyers. This focus on supporting printmakers during the Depression dovetailed with a tradition of artists' associations and clubs that can be traced to the etching revival of the late nineteenth century. Based in large cities such as Brooklyn, Chicago and Rochester, these societies of etchers sought to exhibit members' work, conduct workshops and, in general, promote the production and standards of quality printmaking.

When taking a decades-long sweep of American art, works on paper easily fall into long-established genres such as landscape, portraiture, and still life, but artists often adapted these familiar subjects to express contemporary concerns. Here, artists use finely etched lines to celebrate recently erected skyscrapers and lithograph crayons to depict the Herculean muscles of hard-working men. Prints detail busy docks, children at play, and struggling small towns. Like the filmmakers and authors of the period, some artists revel in the beauty of America's scenic lands, while others empathize with folks who show signs of being down at the heels. There was a sense of mission among many of these artists who pushed for the mass production of prints. Artist Elizabeth Olds went so far as to advocate "prints for mass production," that the government should print and distribute art in the same manner they dispensed public reports and manuals.²

Just as there were continuities, revivals, and innovations of subject matter, so too did printmakers continue to be inspired by Whistler's etchings, revive the woodcutting techniques of German masters, and repurpose silkscreen printing. Some artists pushed lithography into new areas with fresh expressive possibilities as they incorporated tusche washes and manipulated surfaces with razor blades and sandpaper. Other artists such as Harry Gottlieb transformed silkscreen printing. Silkscreening changed conceptually: from a purely commercial medium to "serigraphy," a printing method used by fine artists in the studio. This effectively raised the status of screenprinting and cleared paths for Rauschenberg, Warhol, and other artists to follow with their inventive approaches later in the century.³

With this exhibition, the Binghamton University Art Museum continues a practice that emerged between the world wars of making art easily accessible to the public. In the period before World War II, artists worked under the WPA to change prints from being precious pieces to be viewed in exclusive company to being made available for children in schools and visitors to hospitals, public offices, and even prisons. The subject of the prints and drawings on view express the nostalgic desires of people at the time, but they also reflect deeper concerns of many Americans during this period. A cozy country homestead or a glorious windswept plain is countered with an image of a weatherworn farm couple whose melancholic gaze spelled the Great Depression. Artists using both reliable and innovative print methods explored a great range of subject matter to address the interests, anxieties, hopes, and fears of their fellow Americans. The exhibition on view highlights a time of transition in this country when artists broke with European models to bring a new distinctiveness to printmaking in America.

Diane Butler

Director

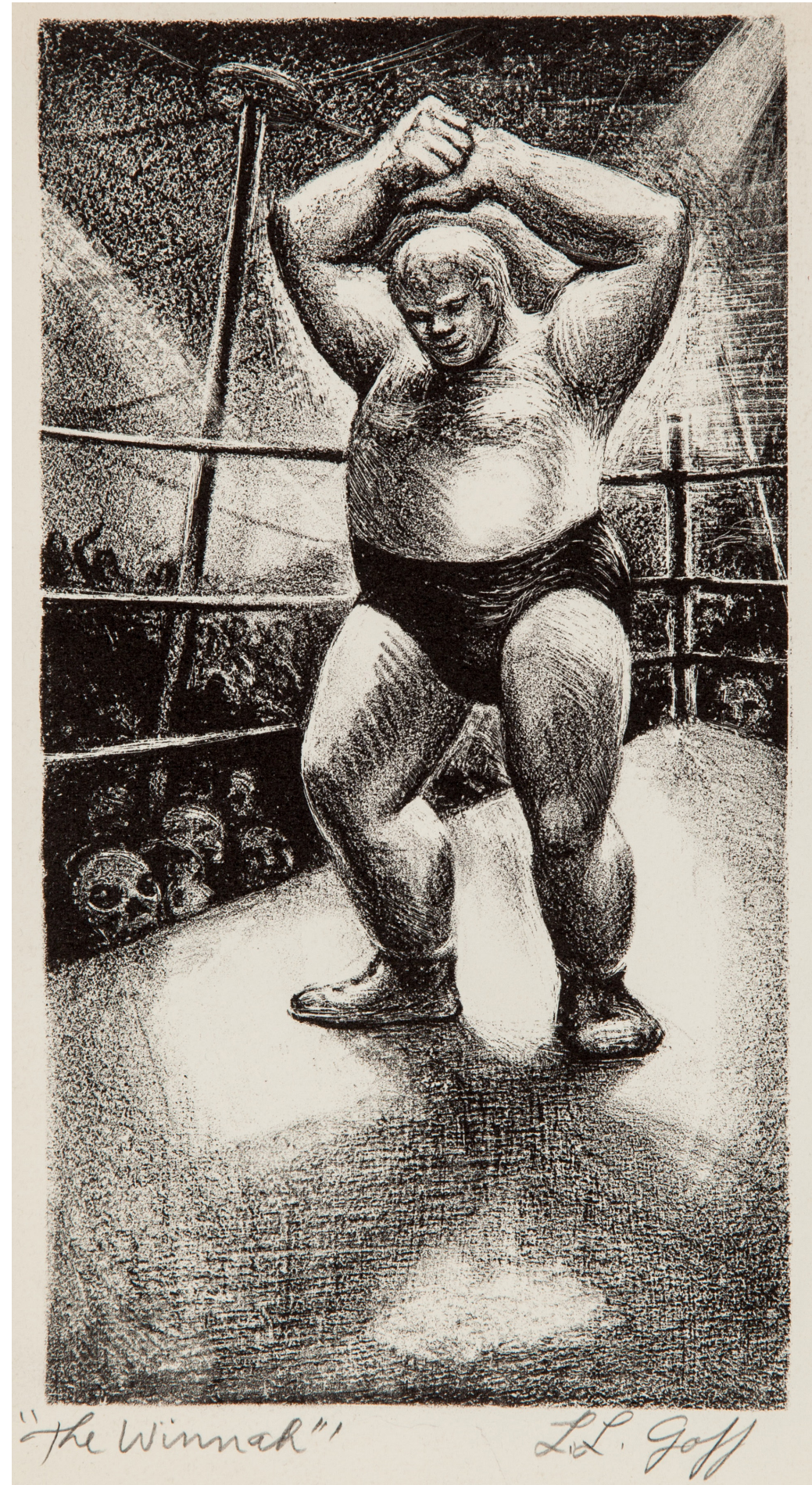
¹ Francis V. O'Connor, *WPA/FAP Graphics* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 5.

² Elizabeth Olds, "Prints for Mass Production" in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 144.

³ Mary Francey, *Depression Printmakers as Workers: Re-defining Traditional Interpretations* (Salt Lake City: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 1988), 17.



Reynolds Beal (American, 1866 – 1951), *Untitled* (New York Harbor), 1931, etching (2016.4.65)



Lloyd L. Goff (American, 1908 – 1982), *The Winnah*, ca. 1940, lithograph (2016.4.205)