



Dining Room, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, Rockaway, New York. North wall murals by Louis Schanker, 1937.



Lobby, WNYC Radio, Municipal Building, 1 Centre Street, New York. Fresco by Louis Schanker, 1939.



10 Study for dining room mural north wall, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937. Detail.



7 Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937.



2 Cops and Pickets, 1936. Woodblock print.



17 Hockey Players, 1940. Color woodblock print.



*Jai-alai*, 1939. Color woodblock print

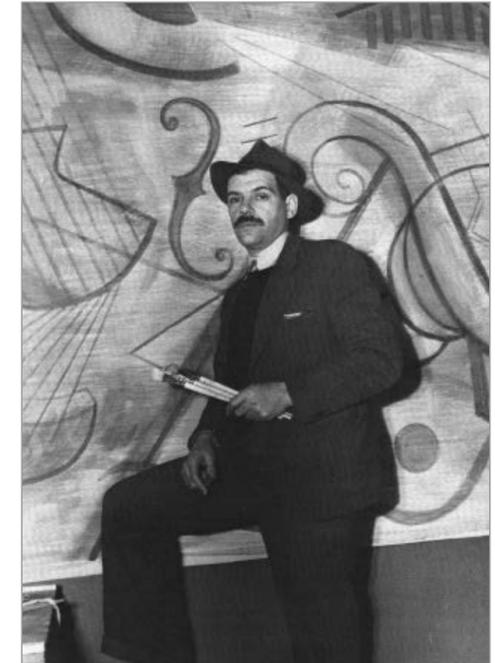
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## Louis Schanker The WPA Years



Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

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## Louis Schanker, Modernist Muralist and Master Printmaker

Greta Berman

As I was thinking about writing this essay introducing the artist Louis Schanker (1903-1981) to the public—or, more accurately, re-introducing him—I had a dream. One doesn't usually begin a catalog essay by describing a dream. But Schanker's imaginative murals and mural designs had lodged firmly in my mind since first seeing them when I was a young graduate student some 45 years ago.

I dreamed that a large, colorful Schanker mural had been uncovered. Surrounded by art deco furnishings, the mural's red and black lines swirled and swiveled gently over a multicolored abstract background. Like any fine mural, it fit perfectly into its environment. The huge, riveting, musically evocative painting reminded me strongly of the mural Schanker created for Radio Station WNYC, but with a twist. There were additional geometric and biomorphic shapes that looked like those he incorporated into his lost World's Fair Mural of 1939-40. Reminiscences of Kandinsky, Gorky, and Arp came to mind.

Although it is still possible to see Schanker's *Music* in situ, on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor of New York City's Municipal Building, where Radio Station WNYC used to be, dreams may be the only way we can see the artist's other murals. Fortunately, we do have his mural studies and preliminary sketches, and these reveal both his working methods and the unique nature of his contribution. In the present show, you can see three studies for WNYC, and four for Neponsit Beach Hospital, as well as a few untitled drawings of musicians, ideas for the *Music* mural which were not incorporated into the final work.

Louis Schanker began his art training at a young age, taking night and Sunday classes at The Cooper Union from 1919-1923. After traveling throughout the United States, from 1931-32 he lived in Paris, where he attended the conservative Académie de la Grande Chaumière. But he idolized the Impressionists, especially Renoir and Degas. In 1933 he lived in Mallorca, where he began to paint Cézannesque landscapes and works inspired by Cubism and the School of Paris. He also recalled that his rectangular heads and heavy outlining were influenced by Georges Rouault. These are the bare outlines of his training, leaving out numerous details of his rich life.

After returning to the United States, Schanker was employed by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), a New Deal program designed to relieve unemployment during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He was one of four artists—the others were Stuart Davis, Byron Browne, and John Von Wicht—selected by

Burgoyne Diller, the head of the Mural Division, to decorate New York City's WNYC Radio Station. A WPA/FAP publication of 1939 described how, "working as a group, these artists planned the decoration of the entire studio, coordinating architecture, interior decoration, furnishings, and the murals as one modern functional utility."

The muralists fulfilled the intended plan of coordinating a group effort, with Schanker's standing out as the most conventional of the lot—at first glance. But now, looking at it from a greater distance, I see it as unique, a forerunner of abstract expressionism, in a number of ways. The vague gestural figuration drawn over the colorful abstract background looks ahead to action painting more than the geometric works of Browne and Von Wicht. And the textural surface adds to the feeling of movement. Looking at a photo in situ, it is apparent that the artist thoughtfully planned his mural to blend in with the setting, enhancing it with curves and grace. Schanker's mural was cutting-edge at the time. Indeed, he can be considered in many ways an avant-garde artist, though he never abandoned representation completely, at least during the WPA years.

Diller, a pioneer abstractionist himself, found it necessary to justify his choice of modernist murals to a conservative New York City Art Commission not especially friendly to abstract art. As he explained it:

Louis Schanker, Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937

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This is the first time that abstract murals have been painted for a radio station, although they are particularly suited for use in a modern broadcasting studio, where everything must contribute to quiet and the uninterrupted function of the broadcast. The studio itself is a sound-proofed, air-conditioned room, which must permit concentration during the performance of a program. The abstract mural is the best answer to these requirements, since it does not serve to distract the observer, but rather exercises a soothing influence through the proper use of form and color.

In telling the officials that abstract imagery would be less distracting than traditional figurative murals, Diller did his best to soft-pedal modernism. It should be remembered that mural art was a public and very visible art form, though few members of the public would be likely to see the radio station murals. And while we now

know that the notion of a uniform "WPA style" is misguided, representational art was still much more acceptable to the average taxpayer.

Schanker also painted a series of murals for the Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital in Rockaway Beach, Queens. These delightful murals were intended to cheer up the severely ill children with whimsical pictures of clowns, circus performers, and musicians. One particularly charming ink and watercolor sketch (#11) depicts a giraffe, a seal twirling a ball on its nose. There is also a trapeze artist flying through the air, an elephant, and several clowns, one with an accordion. Study #10 shows the process by which the artist had to design the murals around the available spaces. And study #12 features some acrobats, while a watercolor sketch (#13) depicts a large clown presenting two monkeys, one playing a fiddle and the other strumming a guitar.

The studies have graphed lines underneath, used for scaling up the images to be transferred onto the walls. There is an archival photo that shows how the murals were originally installed around the children's dining room. Although the subject matter is different and the style is more conventional, the colors and eddying lines are echoed in his *Music* mural for WNYC. Sometime during the late 1970s, the hospital was converted into a senior citizens home, and all records of the murals appear to have been lost. Unfortunately, this story is all too common when it concerns WPA murals. The relatively recent recognition of WPA murals at Harlem Hospital is a happy exception—though many of those murals have also disappeared. (See http://iraas.columbia.edu/wpa/ for a history of those murals and their restoration).

In addition to displaying a number of Schanker's mural sketches, the present exhibition demonstrates how his mural concerns carried over into his printmaking. In fact, his oeuvre has an absolutely identifiable character, no matter what the subject or medium.

As a printmaker, Schanker holds an important position. He was supervisor of the graphic arts section of the WPA/FAP in New York City during the late 1930s, and went on to teach printmaking at the New School, and then at Bard College from 1949 until his retirement.

A primary recurring element in the artist's oeuvre is rhythm. All his subjects, no matter whether they are musicians, athletes, or even policemen and pickets (his few protest works) exhibit a strong sense of marked tempo. Two woodblock prints from 1936 depict struggles between cops and striking workers. Strangely, there

appears to be more emphasis on rhythm and harmony than on struggle. But perhaps it is not so odd, as this fugal push and pull, this yin-yang quality, pervades nearly all of his works. The larger print and the drawing for it (#1 and 2) show a powerful mounted policeman, surrounded by rectangular picket signs, bending down to assault the striker. Another print depicts a confrontation between one picket and a cop. These prints are followed neatly by a 1937 oil painting of two musicians (#4). While the cops wield batons, the musicians hold bows. You might be forgiven for almost confusing the cop and picket with the bassist and violinist.

A couple of related musician studies in gouache and crayon (#5) segue into the beautiful studies for string ensembles (#7-9) that Schanker tinkered with, but ended up not using, in his final WNYC mural. These musician studies are followed by drawings of polo, hockey, football, and jai-alai players. Every Schanker musician, worker, and athlete depiction is characterized by an imaginative, playful quality. The 1939 woodblock and the prints of the 1940s tend to be more abstract than the earlier works, but they retain the rhythms of his earlier works.

Schanker's incredibly time-consuming process involved many blocks, often separate ones for each color, influenced by Japanese print techniques. It is fascinating to see how the artist converted the ink and watercolor drawing (#14) for *Polo* into the colored linoleum block print. And #19 a, b, c, and d illustrate his method step by step: first a 3-panel ink drawing, then a tracing, then a block, and finally the finished print.

As noted, Schanker had the good fortune of being employed by the New Deal's WPA/FAP for a number of years. He was also a founding member of the avant-garde group known as "The Ten." (The most famous members included Adolph Gottlieb, Ilya Bolotowsky and Mark Rothko.) In a 1938 exhibition, this group expressed their strong opposition to what they viewed as reactionary contemporary American representational art.

Today, Louis Schanker takes his rightful place as an abstract/modernist pioneer during the 1930s and 1940s, a transformative time for art in the United States. This exhibition demonstrates some of the breadth and technical mastery necessary for his success.

Greta Berman, PhD, a professor of art history at the Juilliard School, is the author of *The Lost Years: Mural Painting in New York City Under the WPA Federal Art Project, 1935-1943*.

### Checklist of the exhibition

All works are lent by the artist's family

- Cops and Pickets*, 1936  
Ink on paper, 10 1/8 x 13 1/8 inches
- Cops and Pickets*, 1936  
Woodblock print, 10 x14 ¼ inches
- Cop and Picket*, 1936  
Woodblock print, 11 ¼ x 8 ¼ inches
- Musicians*, 1937  
Oil on linen mounted on wood, 12 x 9 ¾ inches
- Two studies for *Duet*, 1937  
Gouache and crayon on paper, each 6 x 5 inches
- Sketch and print, *Duet*, 1937  
Left: pencil on paper, 8 x 11 inches  
Right: color woodblock print, 6 x 4 ¾ inches
- Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937  
Gouache on paper, 9 x 14 ¾ inches
- Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937. *Illustrated below*  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 8 x 29 ½ inches
- Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937.  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 17 ¾ x 6 inches
- Study for dining room mural, north wall, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 17 x 24 inches
- Study for dining room mural, south wall, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 9 1/8 x 24 ¼ inches

- Study for dining room mural, west wall, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 4 ½ x 6 inches (image)

- Drawing for dining room mural, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 9 x 12 inches

- Drawing for *Polo*, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 13 ½ x 18 ¾ inches

- Polo*, 1937  
Color linoleum block print, 17 ¾ x 20 ½ inches

- Jai-alai*, 1939. *Illustrated on the back cover*  
Color woodblock print, 10 x 14 inches

- Hockey Players*, 1940  
Color woodblock print, 14 x 11 7/8 inches

- Polo Players*, 1940  
Color woodblock print, 11 ¾ x 14 inches

- Polo Players* and *Football*, 1940-41  
Process group:
  - Three-panel ink drawing, 10 ½ x 22 5/8 inches
  - Polo Players* tracing, 9 x 8 inches
  - Polo Players* wood block, 7 7/8 x 7 ¼ inches
  - Polo Players*, woodblock print, 7 7/8 x 7 ¼ inches

- Football* and abstract design, 1941
  - Wood block, 7 7/8 inches
  - Monochrome proof, 10 x 8 ½ inches (sheet)
  - Multicolor proof, 12 x 8 ¾ inches (sheet)

- Carved porch post from the Schanker house in Sag Harbor, early 1960s  
Pine, 87 ½ x 5 ½ x 5 1/2

