

# BENTON SPRUANCE (1904-1967)

WILKES COLLEGE ARCHIVES  
Eugene Shedden Farley Library



ALUMNI MEMORIAL GALLERY  
LEHIGH UNIVERSITY  
BETHLEHEM, PA

Sept. 11 to Oct. 17, 1977

READING PUBLIC MUSEUM  
AND ART GALLERY  
READING, PA

Nov. 6 to Dec. 18, 1977

SORDONI ART GALLERY  
WILKES COLLEGE  
WILKES-BARRE, PA

Jan. 7 to Jan. 31, 1978

THE HAHN GALLERY  
8439 GERMANTOWN AVE.  
PHILADELPHIA, PA

Nov. 8 to Nov. 30, 1978

LEHIGH UNIVERSITY

## EXHIBITIONS & COLLECTION

Fine Arts Dept.; Chandler-Ullmann Hall; Bldg. #17; Bethlehem, Pa. 18015 215/691-7000-Ext. 736

### BENTON MURDOCH SPRUANCE (1904-1967)

EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY LEHIGH UNIVERSITY  
EXHIBITIONS & COLLECTION, FINE ARTS DEPT.

#### PURPOSE:

The exhibition is designed to give the viewer an opportunity to view a chronological selection of black and white and multi-color lithographs of a very prolific artist and master printer who can be called a pioneer in the field of fine art lithography in America.

#### PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS:

Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pa.

Reading Public Museum and Art Gallery, Reading, Pa.

Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

The Hahn Gallery, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.

#### CATALOG GUEST ESSAY:

Richard Redd, Professor of Fine Art, Lehigh University

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

Acknowledgement for assistance in the preparation of this exhibition is extended to the following: The Hahn Gallery for lending all the work on display and assisting in the preparation of this exhibition; the Spruance Family for their kind cooperation; Professor Richard Redd for initiating this show, encouraging its progress and writing the guest essay; Barbara Ehram and Jonathan Genkin for photographing the works; Judith Goldworm for the catalog and general preparation of this exhibition.

Ricardo Viera

Lehigh University

Director Exhibitions & Collection

Chairperson pro-tem Fine Art Dept.





"Burning Harpoon" 1966



Benton Murdoch Spruance died suddenly ten years ago in December in his sixty fourth year at the height of his creative powers, honored as an artist, revered as a teacher and beloved as a man. He made his first lithograph in 1928 and by 1967 over 500 more.

Lithography has been, with many artists a side dish to the major course in painting or sculpture. The painter who develops his ideas on canvas elaborates upon them or extends them in the stone. And so it continues with many artists doing lithographs today. Spruance worked in other media; oil, watercolor, etching, woodcut. But to lithography he brought his full resources, energy, and depth as an artist. While recognizing the enormous influence of June Wayne and the Tamarind Press, it can still be said that as much as any other artist and master printmaker of his generation, he established lithography as the major artistic medium it has become today. For him lithography was a moveable feast.

His symbolist approach to subject matter, which can be documented as early as 1934, assumed a dominant role in the following decade as he turned more frequently to literary sources for inspiration. The Bible, Homer and the Greeks were wells to which he would return for refreshment and renewed inspiration. Religion, fantasy and myth provided much of the text for an art which he refined to stand independent of the word and narrative purpose.

Spruance had to find his own personal path absorbing lessons in form from the post-impressionists, the influence of George Bellows, the environmental anecdotes of the American Scene, Cubism and Surrealism as sidecuts or detours on the way. His mastery of lithography parallels his development as an artist to a point in the 1950's where the command of his technique is total and commensurate with his artistic vision.

Like so many artists of his generation, Benton Spruance nurtured his art in the human concern of the 1930's. He was foremost a humanist whose art engaged the range of passions from joy to despair. When one thinks of Spruance, one recalls the tradition of Rembrandt, Goya and Daumier. The social conscience of the depression years, while it informed his art, did not confine him to social realism but provided instead the base which would broaden to universal themes in the nineteen fifties. In this respect he shares a common bond with his contemporaries, Ben Shahn, Rico LeBrun and Mauricio Lasansky, to name but three eminent kindred spirits.

Spruance's fruition came slowly, unlike that of Bonnard and Vuillard, who as color lithographers in the 1890's leapt to total command in a short span of time, for they had the immediate example of Toulouse-Lautrec, who liberated color lithography in Paris from commercial graphic design.

A Cresson Fellowship from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts provided Spruance's means of studying in Paris in 1928. Hanging around the atelier of master printer Desjobert, he made contact with artists who brought their stones to the printery, ultimately becoming useful as an interpreter for the master so that an informal apprenticeship resulted, in which he gained the rudiments of lithographic technique. Fortunately upon his return to the United States, he met an old German master





"Ahab Aloft" 1967



printer, Theodore Cuno, who provided the means in Philadelphia for his continuing development as a lithographer. The development is steady and progressively refined and sophisticated: black and white prints in the 1930's expand to two, three and four color prints in the '40's and ultimately to as many as nine color registers of great subtlety. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1950 stimulated another advance in technique accompanied by a maturing of his personal expression. After 1953 he did most of his own printing, working first in the print studio at Beaver College where as a professor and chairman he taught the range of painting, printmaking, and art history. His distinguished teaching career at Beaver and the Philadelphia College of Art, marked him as a man as fully committed to the education and service of others as he was to his own artistry. He was president and policy maker of Artist's Equity in Philadelphia and, as a member of the Philadelphia Art Commission, helped implement the policy of earmarking for art, a certain percentage of all public architectural construction. Perhaps only an artist as fully engaged with the life of his times, could touch the broad range of humanity which lives in his prints.

The themes which he dramatized are universal ones: love, hope, courage, faith, dignity, and the survival of the human spirit. In an era in which homage was paid to the virtues of form often at the sacrifice of content, Benton Spruance did not waiver from his basic vision. His dramatis personae were, more often than not, larger than life. On the hero and heroine — Jacob, Theseus, Job, Joshua, Prometheus, Orpheus, Magdalene, Ariadne and fittingly in culmination, Moby Dick and Ahab — are focused the nobility or folly of character which illumines all life.

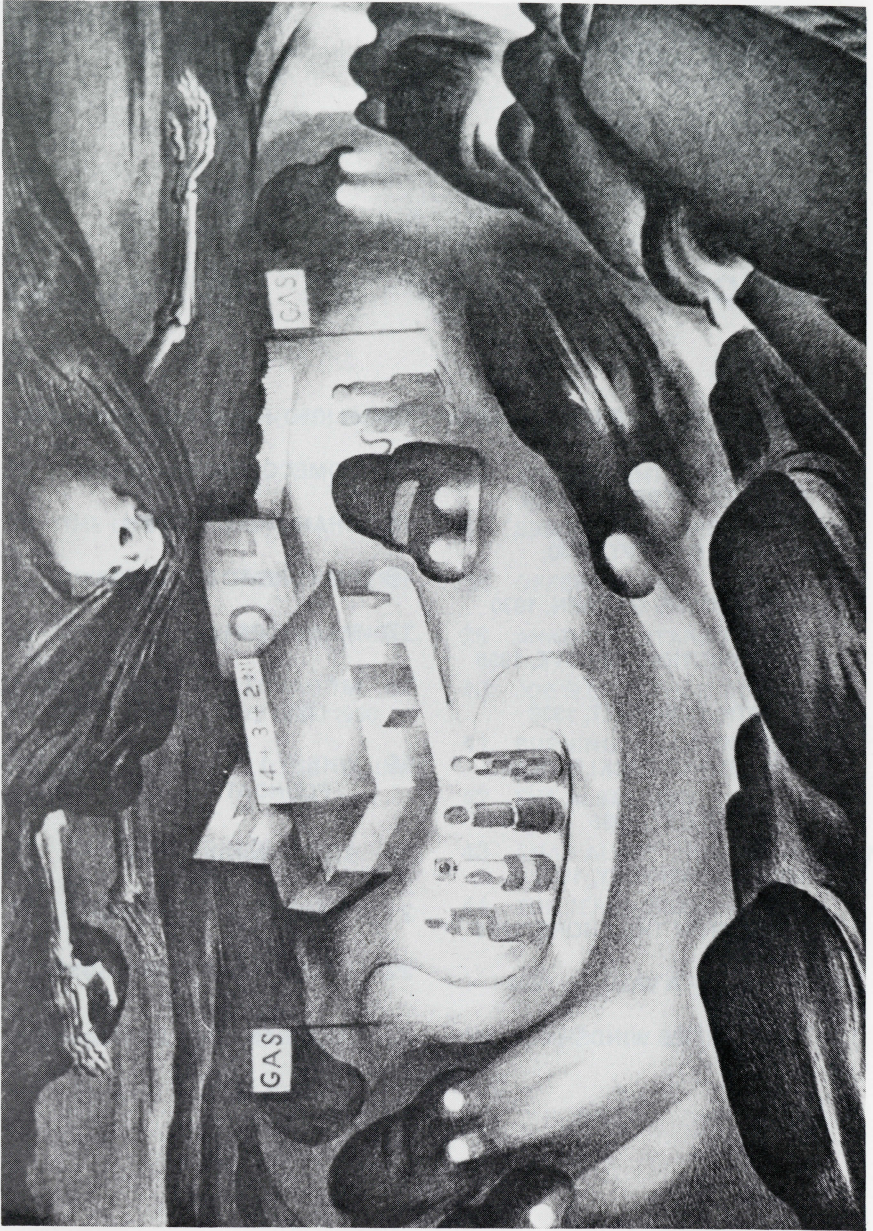
Were it possible to present the oeuvre of Spruance in full breadth, a larger sampling than the forty some works in the present exhibit would be essential. The decade leading to the pivotal period after 1950 shows the trial, testing, and search for a personal statement. After 1950 Benton Spruance knew his way and would create his most individualistic images. His forebears in American Art, were not Eakins nor The Eight but Albert Pinkham Ryder, Melville's younger contemporary. The sublime emotion of Ryder's "Toilers of the Sea" is evoked in the "Passion of Ahab" series in which Spruance blends narrative, romance, and symbolism of the highest creative order. Unhappily the series was his last.

This makes the second one man show of Spruance's prints at Lehigh University, the first held in 1959 in the no longer extant Linderman Library Art Gallery. The artist was noted for a lifetime habit of generosity with his prints. Lehigh's Collection benefited from this largesse as did so many other institutions and his many friends as well.

I am indebted to the late Carl Zigrosser whose biographical essay in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts 1967 catalogue provided factual information, and to Mrs. Roslyn Hahn who rekindled my interest in Spruance's lithographs and my belief that, once more, it was time to reaffirm Benton Spruance's contribution to American Art.

Richard Redd  
Lehigh University





"Road from the Shore" 1936

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## CATALOGUE

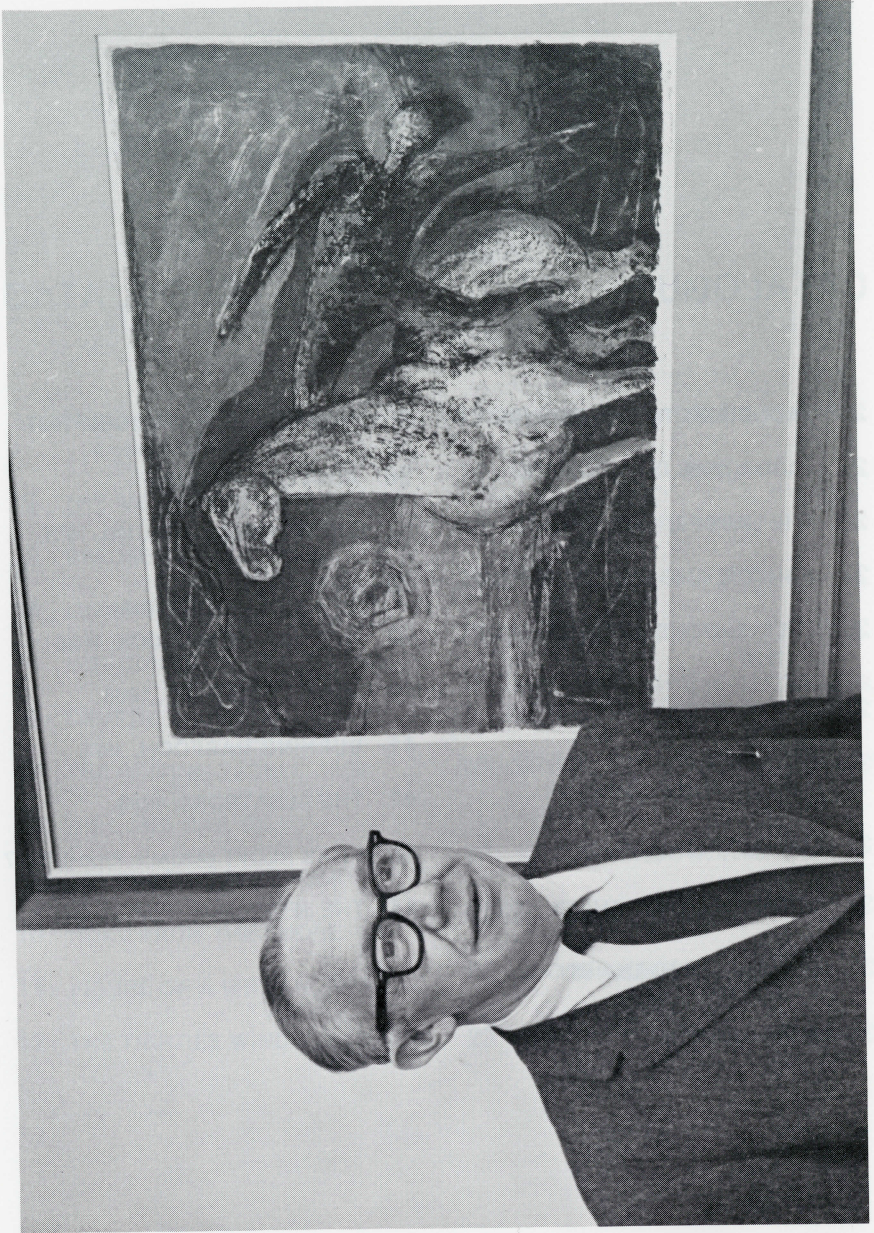
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 THE PEOPLE WORK SERIES (in 4 parts), 1937 | 13 FLIGHT FROM THE BEACH, 1938              |
| 2 THE WEB OF DREAM, 1959                    | 14 HOMECOMING, 1935                         |
| 3 REPOSE IN EGYPT, 1940                     | 15 CHANGING CITY, 1934                      |
| 4 LUXEMBOURG GARDEN, 1930                   | 16 PRELUDE TO REST, 1935                    |
| 5 INTRODUCTION TO LOVE, 1935                | 17 MAGDALENE, 1956                          |
| 6 CAUSTIC COMMENT, 1936                     | 18 MY HAND I LAY UPON MY MOUTH, 1951        |
| 7 THE DRIVING TACKLE, 1932                  | 19 WHEN I LAID THE EARTH'S FOUNDATION, 1952 |
| 8 GIRL AND CAT, 1935                        | 20 STUDIO WINDOW, 1965                      |
| 9 TOUCHDOWN PLAY, 1935                      | 21 ORPHEUS IN HELL, 1962                    |
| 10 ROAD FROM THE SHORE, 1936                | 22 JACOB AND THE ANGEL, 1950                |
| 11 FIGURE OF A WOMAN, 1939                  | 23 JACOB AND THE ANGEL, 1952                |
| 12 THE THIRTIES WINDSHIELD, 1939            |   |



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## CATALOGUE

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|----|---------------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------|
| 24 | JACOB AND THE ANGEL, 1954             | 35 | TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL, 1967        |
| 25 | JACOB, 1956                           | 36 | ADOLESCENT, 1948                  |
| 26 | THE LADDER, 1962                      | 37 | SUBWAY PLAYGROUND, 1951           |
| 27 | ARIADNE AND DAEDALUS, 1965            | 38 | OFFERING, 1955                    |
| 28 | JULY 3rd THE BLOODY ANGEL,<br>1960    | 39 | AHAB AND STARBUCK, 1966           |
| 29 | GETTYSBURG, THE CUT, 1960             | 40 | JOB'S LEVIATHAN, 1966             |
| 30 | GETTYSBURG, LITTLE ROUND<br>TOP, 1960 | 41 | BURNING HARPOON, 1966             |
| 31 | ICARUS MOURNED, 1961                  | 42 | THE ALBATROSS, 1966               |
| 32 | TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL, 1967            | 43 | AHAB ALOFT (Artist's Proof), 1967 |
| 33 | ORPHEUS IN HELL, 1962                 | 44 | THE JEREBOAM, 1966                |
| 34 | ANGEL WITH SWORD, 1966                |    |                                   |



Benton Spruance in 1961 at his one man exhibition, courtesy of the Spruance family



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## BENTON MURDOCK SPRUANCE

- 1904 Born in Philadelphia, Pa. . . Orphaned at an early age.
- 1923 Won his first award - for an etching "The Bridge"
- 1924-25 Studied architecture at University of Pennsylvania. Supported himself as a draftsman
- 1925-29 Scholarship to the Pennsylvania Academy
- 1928-29 Academy award for Cresson Traveling Scholarship used in Paris workshop of Edmond and Jacques Desjobert
- 1930 Atelier of cubist painter-theorist Andre L'Hote
- 1933 Became Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at Beechwood School (Beaver College), a position he held until his death
- 1934-64 Affiliated with what is now the Philadelphia College of Art and for several years was director of the present-day printmaking department  
President of the Philadelphia chapter of Artists Equity (of which he was a founding member)
- 1952-67 Painter member of the City of Philadelphia Arts Commission  
Honorary degree from Beaver College  
Honorary degree from Philadelphia College of Art
- 1929 on Lithographs (numbering about 475) were exhibited almost continuously in various annual and biennial print exhibitions. He won innumerable prizes in invitational and juried exhibitions.
- 1930 on Prints exhibited at the Weyhe, Downtown, and Macbeth Galleries, which were among the first to encourage printmakers working in media other than traditional line etching.
- 1955-62 Served on the Pennell Fund Purchase Committee of the Library of Congress  
Was a member of the National Academy of Design  
Member of the original board of directors of the Tamarind Lithography Workshop
- 1950 Guggenheim Fellowship allowed Spruance to spend a concentrated period of time improving his abilities as a master lithographic printer
- 1962-63 Guggenheim Fellowship allowed Spruance to further his research in the workshop of Desjobert in Paris, Curwen Press Limited in London, and U M Graphic in Copenhagen  
Elected an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects
- 1954-67 More than thirty one-man exhibitions of Spruance's drawings, paintings, and prints were held from coast to coast
- 1967 Died in Philadelphia

