

A Life in Print: Robert Blackburn and American Printmaking  
By Dr. Deborah Cullen

## **Introduction**

Robert Hamilton Blackburn was born in Summit, New Jersey, on December 12, 1920. He passed on April 21, 2003, in New York City. In between these two dates, he quietly but unerringly affected the course of American art with his own graphic work. What has most generally been stated about Blackburn is that his generosity was legendary, and that he effortlessly fostered diversity on every level at his graphics workshop, The Printmaking Workshop (PMW) since its inception in 1948. (Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell once remarked that Blackburn had invented the word 'multicultural.') He is often invoked as a black artist of the WPA, and lauded as a printer-instructor. Indeed, Blackburn brought printmaking to countless artists through PMW, and he taught at many universities throughout his life. It is also frequently acknowledged that he was the first master printer at the fabled Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) --- producing the initial seventy-nine editions for artists including Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Larry Rivers.

What has rarely been noted, however, is Blackburn's own astonishing graphic oeuvre. His passage through mid-twentieth century American printmaking is epic. His lyrical and technical brilliance nurtured an art form as it was dwindling, and made a fluid and painterly style of lithography available to a new generation of artists. His own works link the Harlem WPA with the 'graphics boom' of the 1960s. His fluency and technical mastery of complex, abstract, color lithography not only contributed to forging the well-known ULAE expression, but also was prior and crucial to it.

### ***Figure 1 Girl in Red***

Growing up in Harlem, Blackburn was influenced by the intellectual and artistic legacies of the Harlem Renaissance, American social realism, Mexican modernism, and European abstraction. During his adolescence and teenage years, he became actively involved with the complex web of art programs and creative groups in Harlem, setting the tone for his future career in the arts. From 1932 until 1936, Blackburn was a middle school student at Frederick Douglass Junior High School, where he recalled working with Ilya Bolotowsky, Zell Ingram, Norman Lewis, and John Sollace Glenn. He participated in an after school program with the poet Countee Cullen, whom he recounted as an influential presence. At the junior high school, Blackburn was art editor of the magazine, the Pilot, in 1936, and upon his graduation, he was recognized with the Frederick Douglass Guidance and Art Medals in 1936.

At thirteen, he enrolled in the Charles Alston's Harlem Arts Workshop classes, held at the 135th Street Library. There, he met instructor Ronald Joseph, ten years his senior, who would become lifelong influence and friend. In May 1934, Charles Alston --- one of Harlem's most influential teachers --- initiated what would become an historic artistic

gathering point, simply called '306.' Located in Alston's studio at 306 West 141 Street, Blackburn was one of the youngest artists who occasionally dropped in on Alston's salon. Additionally, Blackburn worked with painter Richard W. Lindsey, Rex Gorleigh and sculptor William Artis in the Arts and Crafts Department of the Harlem YMCA, from 1934 to 1935. He assisted Artis on a mural for the boy's recreation hall of the YMCA. Through the YMCA, Blackburn received the John Wanamaker Medal, and the prestigious Spingarn Award, the Robert Pious Award, the Poussant Award, and the G.J. Pinckney Award.

Around 1936, Blackburn became friendly with Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight. Together with Joseph, they attended art classes with Augusta Savage. Earlier, in 1932, Savage began teaching art from her studio on 143rd Street. By 1936, she had renovated a garage on 136th Street, over which she lived, and christened it the Uptown Art Laboratory, where she taught art to children and the African American community. At this Laboratory, for the first time, Blackburn heard a lecture about abstract art, given by Vlastislav Vytlacil. In the mid- to late 1930s, Blackburn also became a member of the Harlem Artists Guild.

In the fall of 1936, Blackburn started at DeWitt-Clinton High School, where he became actively involved with the school publications, *The Magpie*, as well as the *Clintonians*. Particularly through the fabled journal, *The Magpie*, from 1936 through 1939, Blackburn began publishing his drawings and writings, alongside his talented classmates, including Richard Avedon, James Baldwin, and Sidney 'Paddy' Chayefsky. He also published his prints, which he learned how to make, famously, in 1938 at the Harlem Community Art Center. From 1937 to 1939, Blackburn attended the Harlem Community Art Center (often simply referred to as 'The Harlem Arts Center,' or HCAC), located at 290 Lexington Avenue at 125th Street.

The HCAC began in November 1937 and ran through March 1939. It was the WPA's largest New York community center for instruction in the arts, offering easel painting, sculpture, mural programs, a children's program, and a printmaking facility. Gwendolyn Bennet assisted Augusta Savage, the first director. (Bennet eventually replaced Savage when she stepped down after receiving the major sculpture commission of Harp, for the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair held in Flushing Meadows Park, Queens.) Many of Harlem's artistic talents visited, attended or taught at the HCAC, including Charles Alston, Henry 'Mike' Bannarn, Romare Bearden, Selma Burke, Ernest Crichlow, Aaron Douglas, Elton Fax, Sargent Johnson, William Henry Johnson, Langston Hughes, Ronald Joseph, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Claude McKay, James Lesene Wells, and Richard Wright.

In 1938, Blackburn learned lithography with Riva Helfond --- who reported that she herself was only one step ahead of her class in learning the process. He created approximately twelve black and white lithograph editions (in addition to at least one intaglio print), finely drafted and well-printed cityscapes, rural scenes, and interiors. In addition to publishing these in *The Magpie*, he sent them to art competitions and juried exhibitions. He was assisted by The Harmon Foundation, a philanthropic and educational

organization that promoted black artists primarily by organizing segregated exhibitions, creating publications with their works and biographies, and recommending their work as often as possible.

Thus, the artistic milieu in which Blackburn matured was a complex environment. Multiple influences and a network of forces pressured the black arts community in Harlem between the years of 1920 and 1940. The Harlem Renaissance's intellectual legacy stirred major and longstanding debates about the proper content and style for African American artists. Certain ideologies and political tendencies prevalent in the WPA, put forth by the American regionalists and social realists, as well as the Mexican modernists and muralists, were of serious artistic as well as political consequence. African art had a particular resonance for the Harlem community during this period, and artists struggled to incorporate appropriate references to it. In the surviving reproductions of his many drawings for his schools' publications, as well as in the scant extant black and white, WPA-era lithographs, this constellation of concepts and concerns is evident.

### ***Figure 2 Refugees***

Blackburn graduated DeWitt-Clinton in 1940, and from 1940 to 1943, he attended the Art Student's League on work scholarships. There, Blackburn studied with Vytlačil, whom he had met earlier in Harlem, as well as Will Barnet, a modernist painter with a commitment to color printmaking, who helped him hone his skills. Barnet was a mentor and, eventually, an enduring friend. Blackburn encountered varied modernist currents at the Art Students League, including the 'Indian Space Painters,' and began relinquishing his early, socially realistic influences as he seized more and more upon European and American modernist ideals.

After graduating from the League, Blackburn scrambled for five years doing various types of primarily arts-related freelance work for printing houses, public service organizations, and The Harmon Foundation. At the Harmon Foundation, he produced graphic maps and charts, and worked on elements for their educational film series. Blackburn moved frequently, struggling to support himself. In 1940, he stayed in an interesting building at 33 West 125th Street, with neighbors William Attaway, Romare Bearden, Ronald Joseph, Jacob Lawrence, and Claude McKay. For eight dollars per month, he got an unheated loft; later that year, Blackburn moved downtown.

### ***Figure 3 Untitled (watercolor study)***

He continued making his art. By late 1947, he procured one lithographic press, and initiated PMW --- which was christened, 'The Creative Graphic Workshop' at its inception. He officially opened the print studio in 1948, in his living space in Chelsea, with the idea of holding open classes approximately three nights per week, printing editions for other artists, and allowing students and friends to experiment on the press. Although he still took periodic day jobs, Blackburn was correct in estimating the need for access to lithographic print facilities. Artist Tom Laidman recalled the early print shop in detail:

". . .in 1950, the Shop was at 111 West 17th Street in a four story red brick building. There was no elevator, and everything in the place went upstairs on our backs, including presses, stones, lumber for building, and coal for the stove in the middle of the Shop. We froze in the winter, roasted in the summer, and the heat didn't make printing any easier; we went through all kinds of maneuvers to keep the images in the stones from filling in. The atmosphere was intimate and friendly. There was an open arrangement, whereby students and artist had unlimited access. There were three or four litho presses, and we'd all fight for press time. Blackburn was a dynamo of energy. He never walked, he trotted. He'd bound up the four flights and hit the landing on the run. He lifted and grained stones, rolled them up and printed them all day and into the night --- and then he'd work on his own prints. Sometimes I'd watch him work. I don't remember ever seeing any preliminary sketches. He'd go right to the stone, draw an image, etch it, roll it up, and print it. Then he'd draw on another stone, print that over his first image, and then evaluate the result. He always had five or six blank stones around while he was working. He used them like paintbrushes. He was a tremendous artist." (Tom Laidman, correspondence with Richard Nelson, 1995.)

Blackburn's workshop had the precedent of the HCAC, among others. Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17 workshop for experimental intaglio had moved from Paris during the war and re-positioned itself in New York by 1940. By 1950, when Hayter returned to Paris, Blackburn's studio wooed the wayward engravers by installing an intaglio press. This period was extremely fertile for Blackburn as an artist. In 1950 and 1951, when he had no outside job obligations and was not needed at the print studio, Blackburn took invigorating evening drawing classes with Wallace Harrison. From 1950 to 1952, he went sketching with Ronald Joseph in parks and waterfronts in the Bronx or Westchester; many of these sketches survive. They worked, side-by-side, on extremely similar images, employing a pared-down, Asian ink drawing style, attempting to capture the strong lines and fluid shapes of nature. Working with Joseph was another impetus to his own creative production; he found Joseph's knowledgeable conversation about ancient, Asian, and modern art, as well as Joseph's prodigious talent, inspirational.

***Figure 4 Untitled (ink wash)***

At PMW, the early artist-participants were a lively roster of talent, including Will Barnet, Ernest Crichlow, Antonio Frasconi, Sue Fuller, Jan Gelb, Milton Glaser, Ronald Joseph, Chaim Koppelman, Thomas Laidman, Seong Moy, Harold Paris, Michael Ponce de Leon, Larry Potter, Claire Romano, Margo Robinson, Clare Romano, Benita Sanders, Karl Schrag, Arnold Singer, Charles White, William A. Smith, Lumen Winter, Romas Viesulas, and John Von Wicht.

There, between 1951 and 1952, Blackburn and Barnet produced a suite of multi-stone, complex color lithographs. Together, they printed Barnet's images, using up to seventeen colors across many different stones, in a technically groundbreaking collaboration that was documented in the April 1952 ArtNEWS. In 1953, Blackburn traveled to Europe, under the auspices of a John Hay Whitney Traveling Fellowship. While his intention was

to work at Atelier Desjobert in Paris, he found the strict separation between artist and printer at the shop disturbing. He worked with seminal cubist painter, Andre L'Hote, for approximately six months, but then took off to see Europe. He even took a jaunt through Italy on motorbike. By the time Blackburn returned in 1954, he was strongly affected by European cubo-abstractation. He returned to New York to find that his shop had continued in his absence, run by his supporters. Blackburn's commitment to abstraction, gesture and color was buttressed by the inescapable force of Abstract Expressionism, and, later, color field painting, which led the American arts scene at this time.

***Figure 5 Interior***

***Figure 6 The White Pitcher***

Blackburn's most productive period was from the late 1950s until 1971. During this time, he created the core body of his mature editions and proofs, including many, varying abstracted still lifes, pure compositions of color, form, and mark, and a suite of experimental, black and white, sumi-ink like proofs done on crumbling limestones. His key works shift between more structured cubistic arrangements and color abstractions that are concerned with problems of composition and facture. His tenure as the first master printer of ULAE (1957-1963) overlaps with this compelling production --- complicated, varicolored abstractions. These prefigured or complimented the more familiar ULAE; however, Blackburn's own experimental color lithography was crucial and prior to this "print boom." After twenty years, his single-minded commitment to lithography, and his talents and predilections in the medium, shaped the printmaking espoused by these better-known artists. When his existing graphic oeuvre is assessed, we can see why he quickly developed a reputation for complex, multi-stone color lithographic experimentation and technical excellence. In contrast to many African American artists of his generation, Blackburn chose to sidestep the attendant, weighty issues brought to the fore by figurative work in his persistent exploration of abstraction. He placed his viewers before a window and a plane simultaneously, conjuring three-dimensions but always playfully insisting on the conventions of picturing, and referring to the sheet, the stone, the block, and the paper's edge.

***Figure 7 Color Symphony***

***Figure 8 Faux Pas***

***Figure 9 Blue Window***

Concerned with the idea of the printmaking process itself --- perhaps due to his longstanding intimacy with it --- Blackburn treated his stones with tremendous fluidity, reworking images from all sides, re-orienting, and, at times, signing on both top and bottom. His work was attuned to then-current notions, including critic Harold Rosenberg's idea that the surface was an arena, an evidence of the artist's struggle. Certainly, Blackburn's thinking was horizontal, across the surface of the stone as he moved around it as it lay on the press bed. More than an arena, even, his images call to mind what art historian Leo Steinberg coined the 'flatbed picture plane.' Steinberg noted that during the 1950s, artists shifted the relationship between the viewer and the work of art from an illusionistic, window-like reference (i.e., vertical parallel), to the reality of the

horizontal. Rotating downward, they re-directed the spectator towards the scattered work surfaces of the artist's studio.

Like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, Blackburn also challenged the idea of lithography as a high craft process in his own work and in the democracy of his studio. His widely disparate proofs often never arrived at an edition at all, evacuating any notion of the faithful reproduction of rigidly identical seriality. His playfulness and continual variation luxuriate in process, not finish. His prints primarily exist in multiple state color proofs, themes and their variations. Frequent color changes are accompanied by variations on the printing order and orientation, alternately blocking and revealing different passages within the work. Furthermore, motifs are constantly recycled and can be traced from stone to stone, block to block, decade to decade.

*Figure 10 Heavy Forms/Pink*

*Figure 11 Heavy Forms*

Through his tenure at ULAE, Blackburn kept PMW running, and, eventually, returned to his full-time directorship of it. In 1971, Blackburn created a Board of Trustees and incorporated PMW as a not-for-profit organization. Funding was raised from various sources to defray the shop's operations, and sponsor artists' projects. Although the workload of PMW continually increased, Blackburn was able to maintain a core staff. He created his own work when possible; during the 1970s and early 1980s, Romare Bearden inspired him to monotypes and Krishna Reddy instigated his work in viscosity intaglio. Post-ULAE, Blackburn began working in small- and large-scale woodcuts, which, after twenty-five years of lithography, became his primary mode of expression during the 1970s and 1980s. In his woodblock prints, too, his command of color, his sense of improvisation, and his control of compelling abstract balances are evident.

*Figure 12 Three Ovals*

*Figure 13 Woodscape*

*Figure 14 Woodblock for the woodcut, Three Ovals*

Blackburn's role as founder of PMW is notable, and inextricable from his life and art. PMW is the oldest continuously operating non-profit, artist-run printmaking studio in the country. Its mission is clearly indebted to institutions such as the WPA, the YMCA, and the many artistic and educational organizations in which he participated during his formative years. PMW can be seen as a link between WPA ideals and the proliferation of contemporary, funded, non-profit workspaces. Blackburn's studio served as an important forum, a way station where national and international artists were introduced to printmaking, to other printmaker-artists, and their diverse approaches. During the 1970s, 1980s, and through the 1990s, PMW continued to have a catalytic effect on printmaking, making workshop resources available to a diverse constituency and encouraging experimentation and participation. Blackburn, the dynamic artist and founder of this important institution, served as equal parts teacher, master printer, technical advisor, fundraiser, diplomat, instigator, and friend to thousands of artists. Among the many who have worked with Blackburn at PMW are: Emma Amos, Camille Billops, Kathy

Caraccio, Leonora Carrington, Elizabeth Catlett, Roy DeCarava, Mel Edwards, Mohammed Khalil, Richard Powell, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Juan Sánchez, Michele Stuart, Ursula Von Rydingsvard, Kay WalkingStick, Faith Wilding, and Hale Woodruff.

Many of those who participated would travel onwards, sometimes seeding other schools and workshops, such as The Lower East Side printshop (New York City), The Asilah Workshop (Morocco) and even the first Namibian printshop for black artists in post-apartheid South Africa. The PMW Print Collection, formed over the many years by donations from artists who worked with Blackburn and PMW, is not only a record of the history of these artists and processes, but also a document of intangible exchanges, ideas, and moments in time. In 1997, a project to assess and place the core PMW print collection began, and over two thousand, five hundred works have been deposited with the Library of Congress, Washington D.C., ensuring that Blackburn's legacy is accessible to artists, scholars and historians. Additionally, special, smaller selections have been placed with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and El Museo Del Barrio (both New York). PMW began a process of metamorphosis, becoming a program of The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts to assure that, as Blackburn wished, PMW would exist for future generations. Just as all this reflection, understanding, and planning was coming to fruition, Robert Blackburn passed away. After so many years of his hand-to-mouth, chaotic but charmed existence, he left, assured that his legacy would be both preserved and continued in the path he envisioned.

Despite his year-and-a-half European hiatus, and his fairly full-time six-year stint at ULAE, Blackburn virtually spent the rest of his life heading up PMW. Certainly, his own work suffered as a result of this commitment. Once, he commented wistfully on this split between his art and his workshop:

" . . . I feel as though I was a fractured individual whereas Jake Lawrence . . . was more complete. He stayed where he was. By that I mean, he did what he knew . . . he stayed in his little room and he made these things which are monumental things, the Migration series and all that. By circumscribing his activity, he was able to create a monument. I think that sometimes is the thing. I was torn between building something which I thought had value and doing my own work. So those are the kind of things if you look back on you say, well, gee, I would have done it differently, but you couldn't because you were who you were . . . ." (Robert Blackburn, audio-taped interview by Jennifer Bergman, February 16, 1994.)

## **Conclusion**

The common conflation of Blackburn's artistic contributions with the discussion of The Printmaking Workshop neatly sidesteps serious consideration of his own artwork. It allows for the simple chronology of the workspace history and the successive waves of printmakers, which are, indisputably, an easily understood 'who's who' --- particularly in terms of African American artists from the 1950s through the 1990s. However, it avoids Blackburn's work, which is harder to categorize and more difficult to contextualize. Additionally, the ever-present problems encountered in analyzing understudied artists,

including establishing clear biographical and chronological accounts, locating works and precisely dating them, contributes to this lack of contextualization. While he is exhibited internationally, and represented in numerous collections, his disregard for the documentation of his work, extreme personal modesty about it, in favor of those surrounding him at PMW, has contributed to the restricted access to Blackburn's work to date.

Nonetheless, in carefully examining Blackburn's milieu, and his various points of contact through the history of twentieth century American printmaking, and looking carefully at his extant prints with a clear eye, we are able to finally understand his complex, rich, and surprising set of interests, evidenced in his important body of prints created over sixty years. Through Blackburn's work, we examine the rocky transition from the Harlem Renaissance to Social Realism to Abstraction for the black printmaker. Blackburn is a critical figure who had contact with European and modernist printmaking communities. He disseminated technical information and championed the color lithograph as a fine art form to a diverse community of American artists at a time when the medium was not readily and democratically available. Blackburn's life has been richly entwined with many important American printmakers and streams of printmaking: the post-Harlem Renaissance artists, various WPA printmakers, Atelier 17 participants, teachers, students, and artists affiliated with the Art Students League, Cooper Union, New York University, and the New School (all of whom moved in circles around Abstract Expressionism), the ULAE 'explosion' group, and many other diverse members who contributed to the PMW community.

Indeed, Blackburn was trained in lithography through a Harlem program sponsored by the WPA. While it was not until fairly recently that any critical accounts of minority artists' participation in the celebrated WPA projects existed, and these efforts are to be lauded, such see this as Blackburn's only grouping severely short-changes him, by accounting for his work only to age eighteen. It is hardly an accurate way to designate a lifelong printmaker who continued to produce for at least sixty more years.

Therefore, the most compelling context in which to place Blackburn is as an important precursor to the so-called "graphics boom" of the 1960s. It is enlightening to examine what Blackburn brought to ULAE, influencing the printmaking practices of other, more well-known artists after twenty years of his own practice in the medium. Blackburn's contribution to forging the well-known ULAE aesthetic, which frequently stands for 'quintessential' American modernist printmaking, is evident through a close examination of his own prints of this time. It is a striking, but ultimately obvious, assessment of Blackburn's graphic contributions. While his African American heritage certainly created a particular shape and context to his achievements, Robert Blackburn should be seen, in the end, simply as a major American printmaker. No qualifications are required.

***Figure 15 Miss Unity***