

Homeport: Stow Wengenroth

by Martha Oaks

For audiences accustomed to viewing art in color, appreciating works done in black and white can sometimes be a challenge. Stow Wengenroth (1906-1978), one of New England's most accomplished printmakers of the twentieth century, knew this and embraced the challenge. During his long career Wengenroth created over 350 lithographs, black and white prints that display, in the words of one critic, "an amazing range of color... reaching from nacreous grays to deep, luscious blacks." Today, more than forty years after Wengenroth pulled his final print, the work of the man who friend and fellow artist Andrew Wyeth called "the greatest

black-and-white artist in America" continues to engage and inspire.

Stow Wengenroth was born in Brooklyn in 1906 and studied at the Grand Central Art School and, from 1923 to 1925, at the Art Students League; it was during his time at the League that Wengenroth first visited Cape Ann. In 1929 and again in 1930, Wengenroth spent the summer in Eastport, Maine, studying drawing at the Eastport Summer School of Art with George Ennis. Looking back, Wengenroth remembered that he did nothing those two summers but draw.

After his second summer at Eastport, Wengenroth tried to interest galleries in his drawings but to no avail. Later in life, Wengenroth admitted that it was at the urging

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of his mother that he shared his work with the Macbeth Gallery in New York City; the Gallery told the young artist if he made the drawings into lithographs, they would give him a show. Never having made a lithograph, the gallery sent Wengenroth to George C. Miller for instruction; he quickly mastered the process creating twenty-three lithographs using the drawings he had done in Maine. Macbeth's exhibition of Wengenroth's prints opened in November 1931 and critics were entranced, calling the show "an





All illustrated images are lithographs on paper, and from the Cape Ann Museum, gift of Robert L. and Elizabeth French, unless otherwise stated.

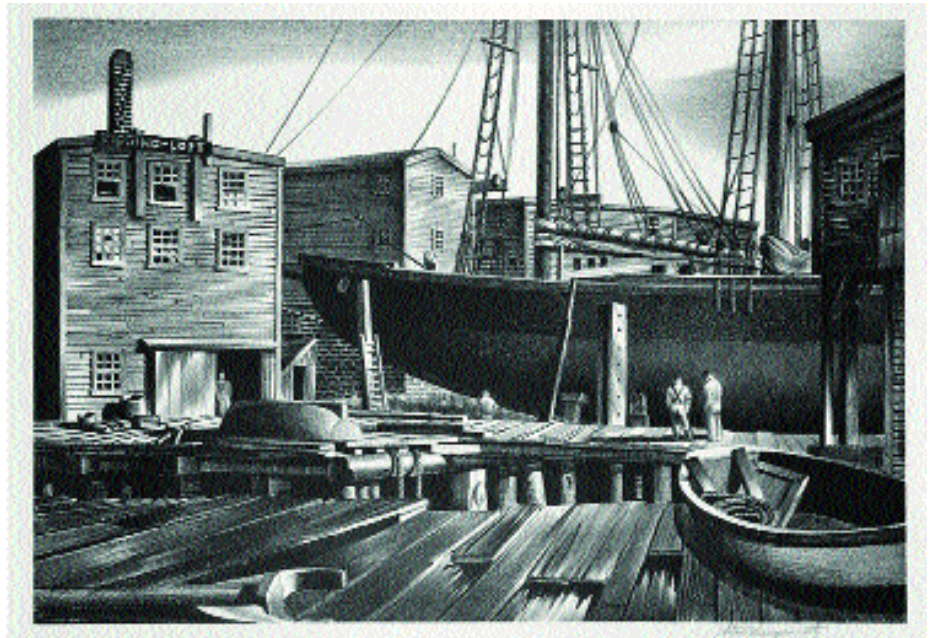
ABOVE: *Granite Pier, Lanesville, Massachusetts*, 1973, 9³/₁₆ x 15¹/₁₆.

RIGHT: *Shipyards, Gloucester, Massachusetts*, 1935, 9⁵/₁₆ x 13⁵/₁₆.

LEFT: *Sundown, Annisquam, Massachusetts*, 1973, 10¹¹/₁₆ x 15¹/₂.

event with many shining facets” and the young artist without a “peer in contemporary lithography.”

Following his solo exhibition in 1931, Wengenroth worked at perfecting his lithography skills and during the summer of 1934 he returned to Cape Ann, a spot he felt “had more to offer an artist than almost any place.” When Macbeth showed his work again in December 1934, views of Rockport and Gloucester hung alongside ones of Maine and critics declared that any notion that the artist’s earlier success had been “a flash in the pan” was without merit. “He has kept his footing, solving new problems, improving on the old ones, until today he stands as one of the first representatives in American lithography.” The 1934 Macbeth show came on the heels of an ex-



hibit of prints by Rockwell Kent and reviewers were quick to make comparisons between the two men’s work. Wengenroth’s prints are “...interpretations of the American scene invested with that quality of romanticism which relates him to the Bellows, Kent tradition,” one critic wrote.

First introduced to this country in the 1830s, lithography reached the height of its

popularity in America during the mid-nineteenth century. When Wengenroth discovered it a century later, it was no longer the medium of choice for the print world, but he was keenly aware of its artistic possibilities. In making a lithograph, Wengenroth began with a drawing made from nature; drawings were done in graphite and painted over in ink using a dry brush. The image



ABOVE: *River House, Annisquam, Massachusetts*, 1974, 9¹/₈ x 15.

LEFT: *Lanesville Harbor, Lanesville, Massachusetts*, 1976, 10⁷/₁₆ x 15⁷/₈, Cape Ann Museum.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Eastern Point, Gloucester, Massachusetts*, 1935, 9⁷/₁₆ x 13.

RIGHT: *Evening Train, Wiscasset, Maine*, 1948, 10 x 15¹/₄, Cape Ann Museum, The James Collection, gift of Janet and William Ellery James.



was next transferred to a limestone block using a grease pencil; the stone was bathed in an acid solution and prepared for inking. When ink was next rolled onto the block, it only stuck to the marks made by the grease pencil. Paper was then laid over the stone and run through a press. Wengenroth preferred to use a professional printer for the actual printing process and for many years prided himself on carrying his stones from his studio to the printer on foot.

Wengenroth's earliest lithographs done during the 1930s are characterized by dark, almost foreboding compositions and were printed in small editions ranging from twelve to fifty-four copies. In time, his compositions took on an airiness and lightness and his print runs increased. His imagery also became more faithful to his subject, as he moved away from the sweeping, stylized shapes of his earlier prints. By the late 1930s, his editions would some-

times jump to seventy-five, a sign of the artist's growing confidence and buyers' enthusiasm for his work.

Beginning in the early 1930s, drawings by Wengenroth began appearing as book illustrations. One of the earliest instances was in 1932 when he provided images for a book entitled *Silverpoint*, written by Edith Flack Ackley, to whom he would be married four years later.

As his career advanced, Wengenroth became an important voice advancing the art of lithography. In 1936, Wengenroth's book *Making a Lithograph* was published by Studio Publications as part of their "how to" series. In subsequent years, he went on to write numerous articles on lithography that appeared in *Print Collector's*



Quarterly and *London Studio*. His reputation and his voice expanded as his work received recognition from the Philadelphia Watercolor Club, the Philadelphia Print Club, and the Albany Print Club.

In addition to writing about lithography, Wengenroth was an active member of several groups devoted to the advancement of printing including the Society of American Etchers, Engravers, Lithographers and Woodcutters. In 1941, Wengenroth was elected to full membership in the National Academy of Design.

In 1974, shortly after the death of his wife, Wengenroth made Rockport his permanent home. That same year he married Harriet Matson, former curator of the Rockport Art Association. Over the decades Wengenroth had visited Cape Ann numerous times and exhibited his lithographs of local scenes widely. His decision to settle in Rockport would have been a surprise to no one. During this time, Wengenroth began working with watercolors, perhaps realizing that he had mastered the



art of working in black and white.

—The information in this article was drawn from many sources including the following: Ronald and Joan Stuckey's catalogue raisonné *The Lithographs of Stow Wengenroth* (Boston Pub-

lic Library/Barre Publishers, 1974); the Macbeth Gallery records, 1947-1948, bulk 1892-1953, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; and the archives of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, Massachusetts.