

Dox Thrash



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The remarkable African American artist Dox Thrash has been frequently included in dictionaries, text books, and group exhibitions, but has been little studied until now. This stunning catalog features prints, drawings, and watercolors through which Thrash

expressed a consciousness about the perception of blacks within the racist structures of both American society and Western art history. Working in a 'racial idiom' through these portraits, historical vignettes, and nudes, Thrash portrayed the American scene as he experienced it. Whether presenting a portrait of a strong, black individual, an unflinching image of racial violence, or a frank celebration of the black female body, Thrash was confronting cultural history through his art. His oeuvre can be seen as an interweaving of the human, the personal, the historical, and the political. Born in Griffin, Georgia in 1893, Dox Thrash compensated for his lack of formal education with a love of reading. After serving in the army during World War I, Thrash pursued his first formal art training in 1919 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After several years of traveling, during which he worked part-time jobs and drew portraits, he settled in Philadelphia where he remained until his death in 1965. At the height of the Depression, in 1936, Thrash joined the government-sponsored Graphic Arts Workshop of the Works Progress Administration in Philadelphia as a seasoned printmaker with a taste for experimentation. Philadelphia boasted the only Graphic Arts Division of the WPA devoted entirely to the development and production of fine art prints. While serving as head of the graphics division Thrash invented the carborundum printmaking process when he discovered that gritty carborundum crystals, normally employed to remove images from lithograph stones, could also be used to prepare copper plates for etching. The process was quickly adopted and adapted by other members of the WPA workshop, including a number of Thrash's younger African American colleagues, but the compelling imagery and rich chiaroscuro of Thrash's own carborundum prints have insured that it is his name that is most closely linked with this innovative method. Drawn from public and private collections, the book features a number of prints Thrash executed using the carborundum process. The selection also demonstrates his mastery of various other methods of printmaking in black and white and color, such as etching, aquatint, lithography, linoleum cut, as well as his accomplishments as a draughtsman and watercolorist. The works document the range of Thrash's compelling imagery, including scenes from his childhood in the rural south; hard times in the urban north in the 1930s; patriotic war work of the early 1940s; and poetic portraits of his community and its residents. The book focuses on the WPA period, as well as on the 1940s and 1950s, when Thrash's prints and drawings were shown in exhibitions in major cities across the United States, from Boston to San Francisco, as well as Mexico City. He was prominently featured in two landmark exhibitions in Chicago in the early 1940s: Art of the American Negro (1851-1940) during the American Negro Exposition in 1940, and We Too Look at America, the inaugural exhibition of Chicago's South Side Community Art Centre when it was formally opened by Eleanor Roosevelt in May, 1941. Subsequent solo exhibitions of Thrash's work were held in Philadelphia at the Pyramid Club, the Philadelphia Art Alliance, Lincoln University, and in Washington, D. C. at Howard University and at what is now known as the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Included in the book are four insightful essays: 'Thrash and the "Racial Idiom"' by Kymberly N. Pinder of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; an account of the activities of the WPA Graphic Arts Workshop in Philadelphia by Cindy Medley-Buckner of the Baltimore Museum of Art; an exploration of the central role played by the Pyramid Club in African American cultural life in Philadelphia in the 1940s and 1950s by David Brigham of the Worcester Art Museum; and a biography of the artist focusing on his career as a printmaker by John Ittman, Curator of Prints at the Philadelphia Museum of art and the organizer of the exhibition.

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