

# Louis Schanker The WPA Years



Non-objective, 1939

From Louis Schanker's example the great development of color woodcut in America chiefly stems.

About Prints, Stanley William Hayter, 1964



Pollock\_Krasner House and Study Center

[www.pkhouse.org](http://www.pkhouse.org)

[www. Louis Schanker.info](http://www.LouisSchanker.info)

Intentionally Blank

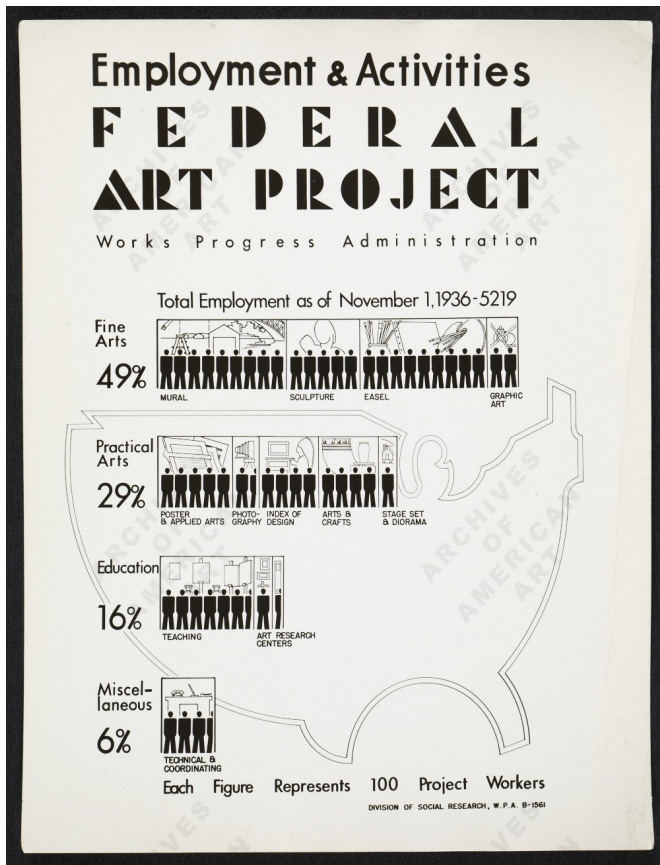
# Louis Schanker (1903-1981)



Three Men, Louis Schanker, Oil on canvas, 1937, 54 x 68 in.  
(Smithsonian American Art Museum)

*Louis Schanker worked during a period of time when there was great controversy over the validity of abstract art. From his earliest works in the 1920's Schanker expressed himself through watercolors. The same subjects then frequently appear in prints, oils and sculpture. Early representational works are a record of his New York roots. He took his paints with him as he crisscrossed the United States as a gandy-dancer with the circus and then a farm worker. In the early 1930's he set up his easel in France and Spain. Schanker captured the action of many sports such as the hockey and football..... Music was an early interest featured in many works including those which eventually were immortalized as WPA murals. [His works] trace the evolution from realistic to cubist abstraction and beyond realism, abstractions that had some recognizable elements and total abstraction. Louis Schanker is one of those blessed craftsmen who can lose himself in his materials as in a vice.*

[Harold Rosenberg](#), author, critic



Archives of American Art

## Works Progress Administration

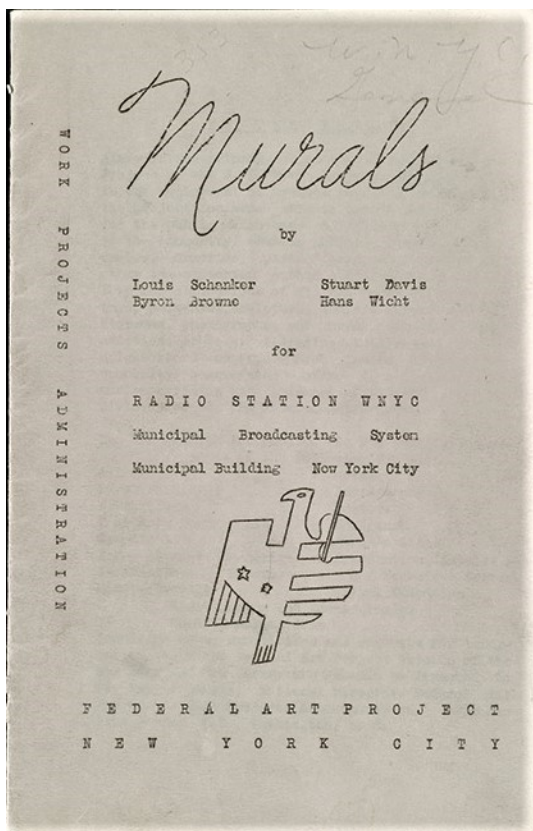
(1933-1943)

During the Depression era, President Roosevelt recognized the plight of artists. The WPA commissioned paintings and sculpture for the embellishment of newly constructed buildings, post offices and courthouses. In addition to providing work relief to suffering artists, these New Deal initiatives produced the first major body of public American art

*(WPA Artwork in Non-Federal Repositories, Dec. 1999)*

Louis Schanker's time with the WPA was divided between the Mural division and the Graphics Division. He was both an artist and supervisor. Between 1937 and 1942 he did many woodcuts some of which were directly supported by the WPA, while others were created during the time while he was doing murals.

## WNYC Radio Station



On the dedication of the artist's murals on August 6th, 1939 at the Municipal Broadcasting Station, Edward Alden Jewell in a New York Times article said:

"Though much of the four murals dedicated last week at WNYC is, in its present context, linked with music, Mr. Schanker's alone has been constructed manifestly on a basic musical motif, its abstract forms being symbolic of various instruments and notations. Attempted classification, in the realm of modern abstract art entails always an element of danger, so controversial the whole thing has grown to be. Taking a deep breath and plunging, this diver comes with the reckless opinion that Mr. Schanker's abstract idiom is of the emotional type and the three others are cerebral. Upon the one hand, too, we have an idiom that is quasi-representational and upon the other hand we have an idiom that departs entirely from representation at least from representation as commonly understood..."

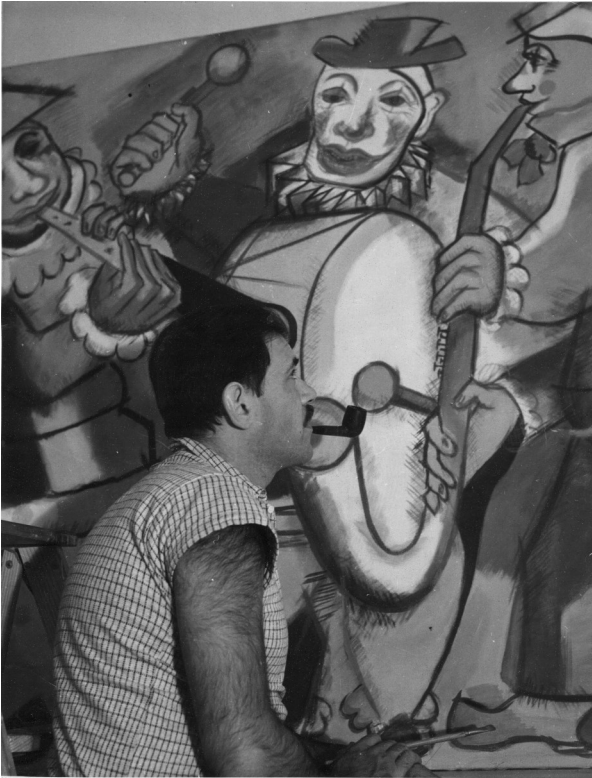


WNYC Mural Study, 1937, gouache on paper, 11.50 x 33.25 in.



**Louis Schanker Mural on the 25th floor of the historic Municipal Building in New York City.  
Above and on the left as it appeared in 1939 in the reception area for Music Station WNYC.  
On the right as the mural can be seen today behind a protective case.**

# Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital



Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital,  
study for dining room., 1937



While a supervisor, Louis Schanker did several murals for the WPA. A series of 11 murals was done for the TB wards' dining room and at the Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital in Rockaway Queens. In a 1970 interview Schanker said that he was pretty sure that the murals were removed when the Army used the building for returning servicemen in the late 40's and early 50's.

When the building was taken over by the Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC) in 1983 the images were listed as "missing."



FEDERAL ART PROJECT W.P.A.  
PHOTOGRAPHIC DIVISION  
110 KING STREET  
NEW YORK C.T.Y.

NEGATIVE NO: P-3101-4      DATE: 11/6/38      PHOTOGRAPHER: Horwath

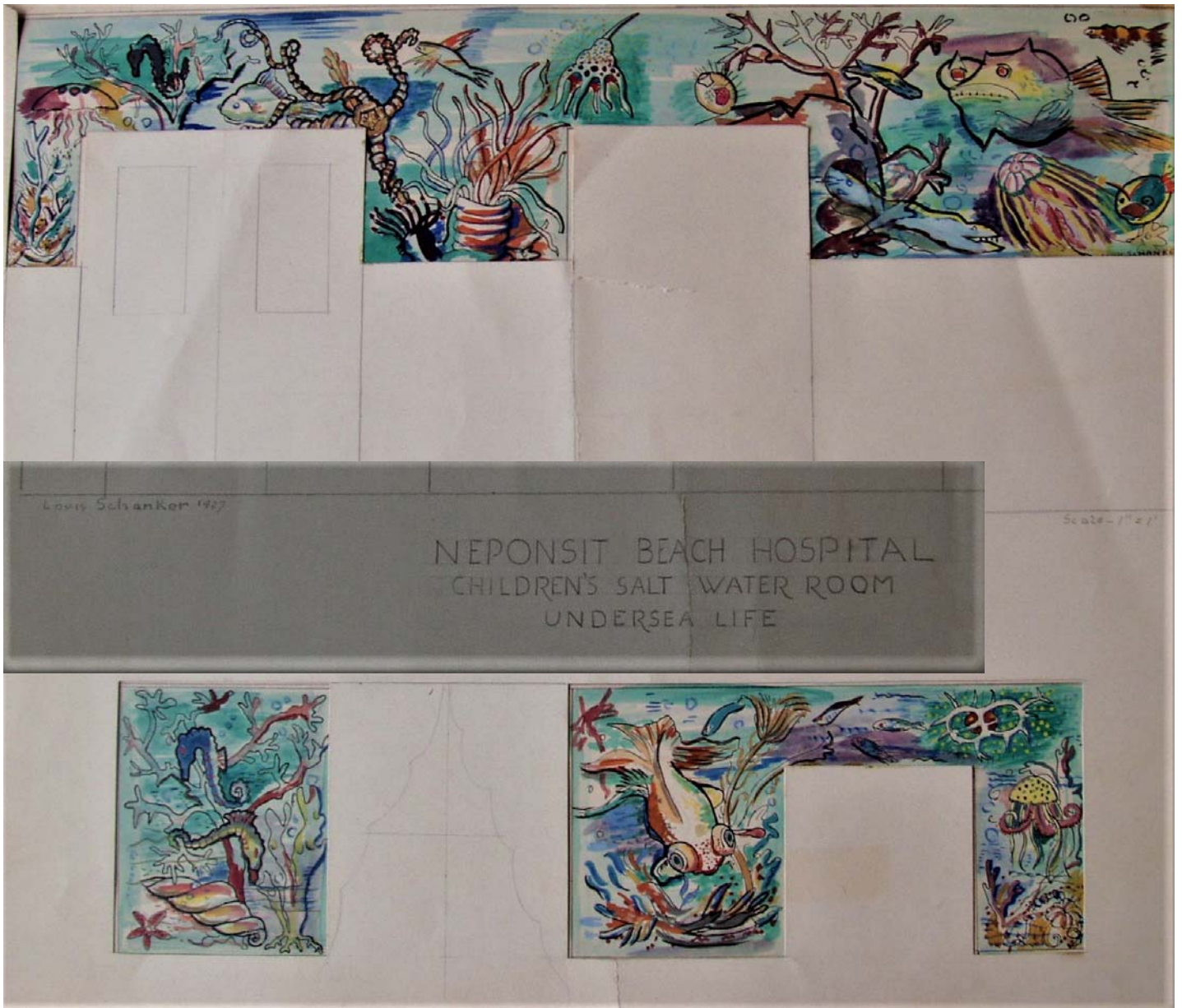
ARTIST: Louis Schanker

MEDIUM: Tempera

LOCATION: Repaint Beach Hospital  
Circus







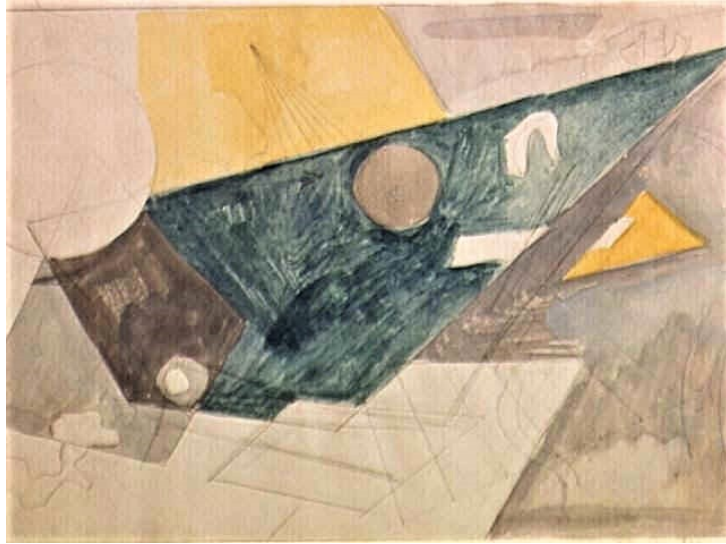
**Studies for the Neponsit Beach Hospital Children's *Salt Water Room***

**Schanker, Undersea Life, 1937**

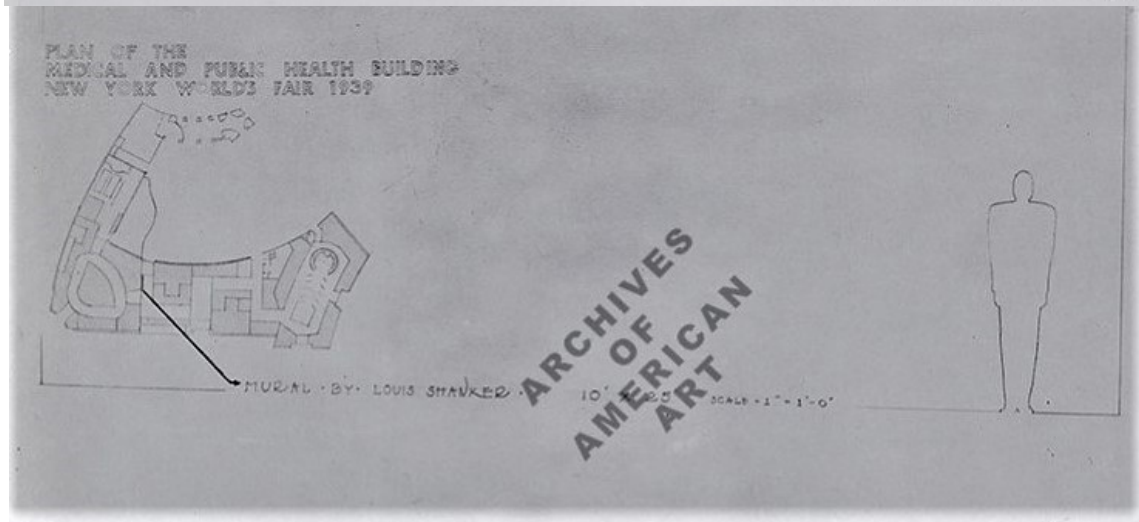
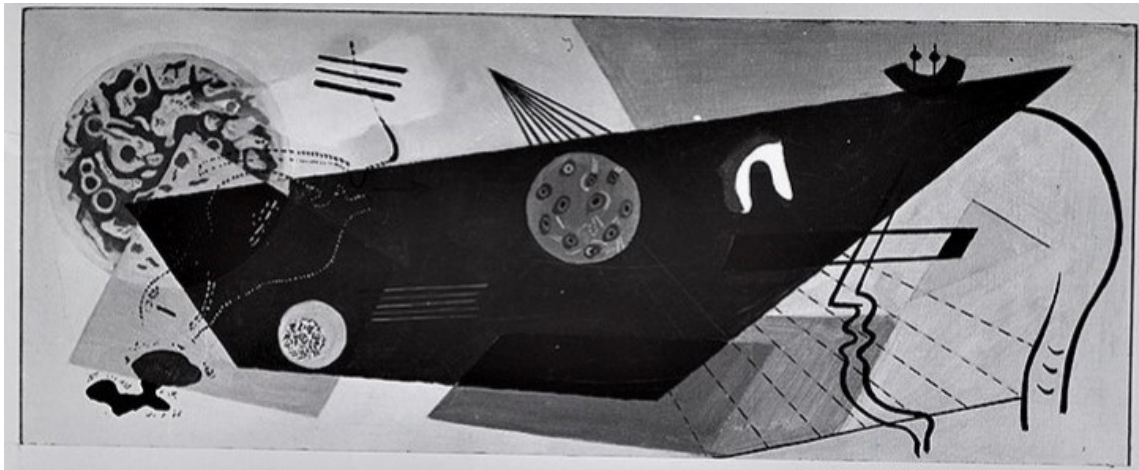
**Although Schanker's proposal for the *Dining Room* was approved resulting in 11 murals. It appears that the Salt Water room project was never completed.**

# 1939 World's Fair

The third project which Louis Schanker completed while in the Mural Division of the WPA was for the Hall of Medicine and Public Health Building at the New York world's Fair (1939-1940). Large sharply angled geometric shapes are the background foil for a variety of organic cell and ameba shapes, an oversized head, and directional symbols such as an arrow and dotted lines.



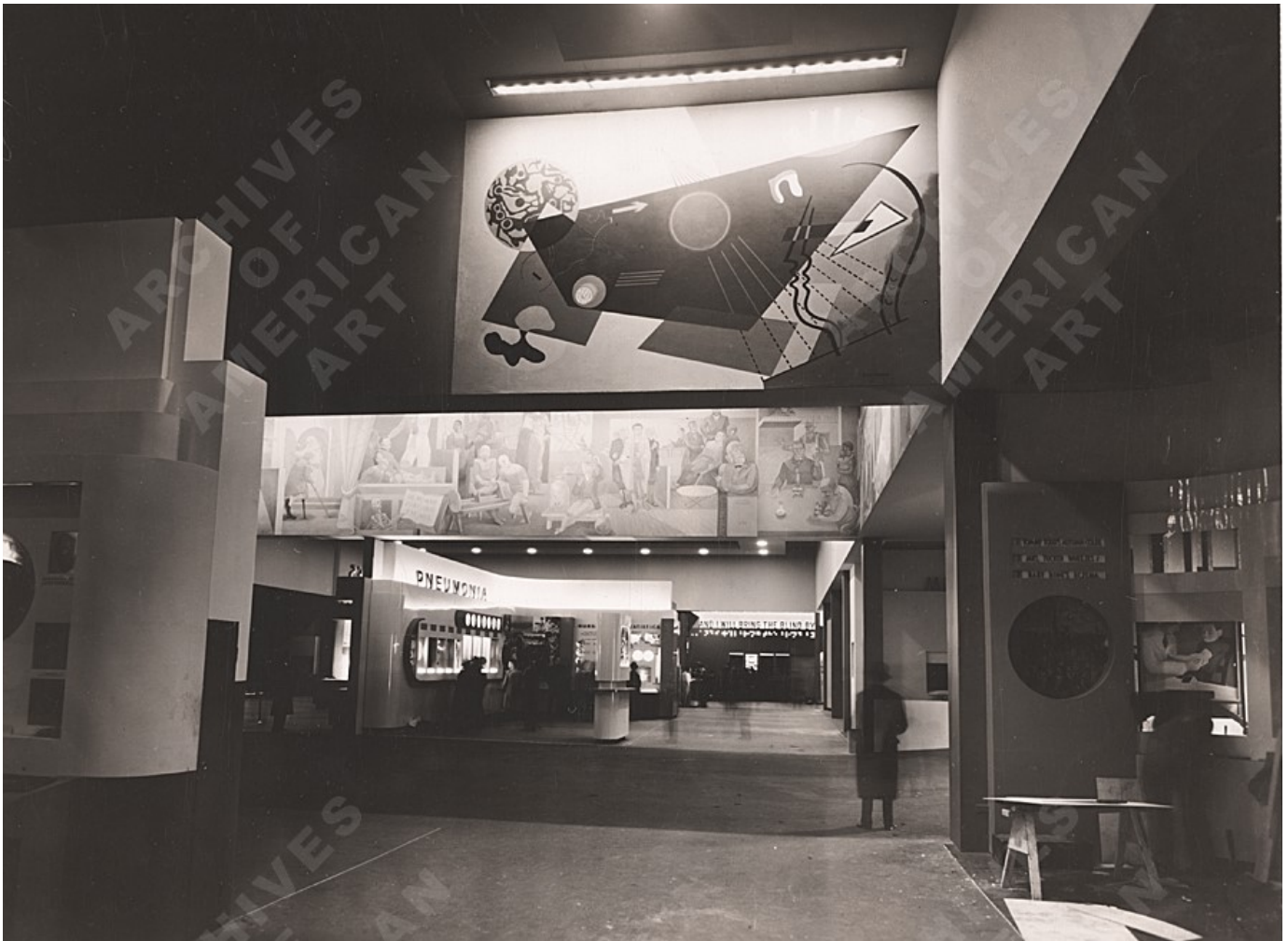
First Sketch for Worlds Fair Mural, 1939,  
gouache on paper, 12.5 x 8.5 in.





**Louis Schanker with his assistants.**

**Artist Joseph Hochfeld and another assistant are pictured with Schanker in front of the World's Fair mural.**



# american arts

art . music . dance . theatre . literature . radio . film



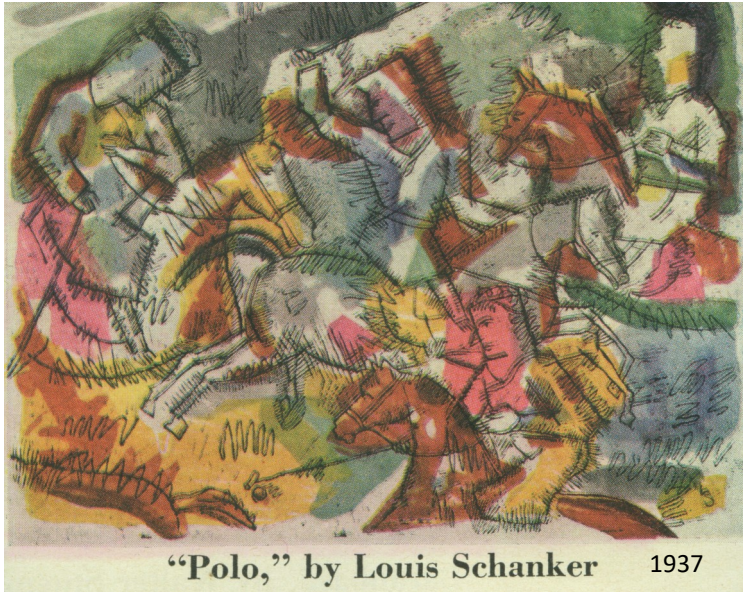
## monthly

JUNE 1937 • 25 cts.

**Louis Schanker's "Man at Piano," was chosen for the June 1937 cover of American Arts monthly. This was Issue one of Volume three. "With this issue a new, larger and finer American arts monthly makes its bow. Its program will continue to be the furtherance of all the American arts bringing to the American people the most advanced efforts of present day painters, poets, musicians, and all other creative and interpretative artists."**

**See: <http://www.louisschanker.info/print/>**

# VOGUE



“Polo,” by Louis Schanker 1937



**LOUIS SCHANKER** is a painter of movement and line, breathless, powerful, and extended. He sometimes likes vibrant, strong colour for his abstractions of flight, his paintings of polo ponies, of boxers, of dancers. Born in New York in 1903, he is now dark, square-faced, black-moustached; has worked the circuses, studied in Paris and Spain and Italy, travelled the United States. An authority on wood-cuts and linoleum blocks, such as “Polo” on the opposite page, he teaches the technique of this oldest printing medium at the New School for Social Research in New York. His work, exhibited at the Willard Gallery, hangs in many such major museums as the Metropolitan and the Brooklyn Museum.

Vogue magazine, circa 1945

APRIL 17-MAY 13 1939

GRAPHICS

IN

COLOR

BY

5 ARTISTS

OF THE  
FEDERAL ART PROJECT

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

RAYMOND AND RAYMOND GALLERIES  
40 EAST 49<sup>TH</sup> STREET. N.Y.C.

LOUIS SCHANKER

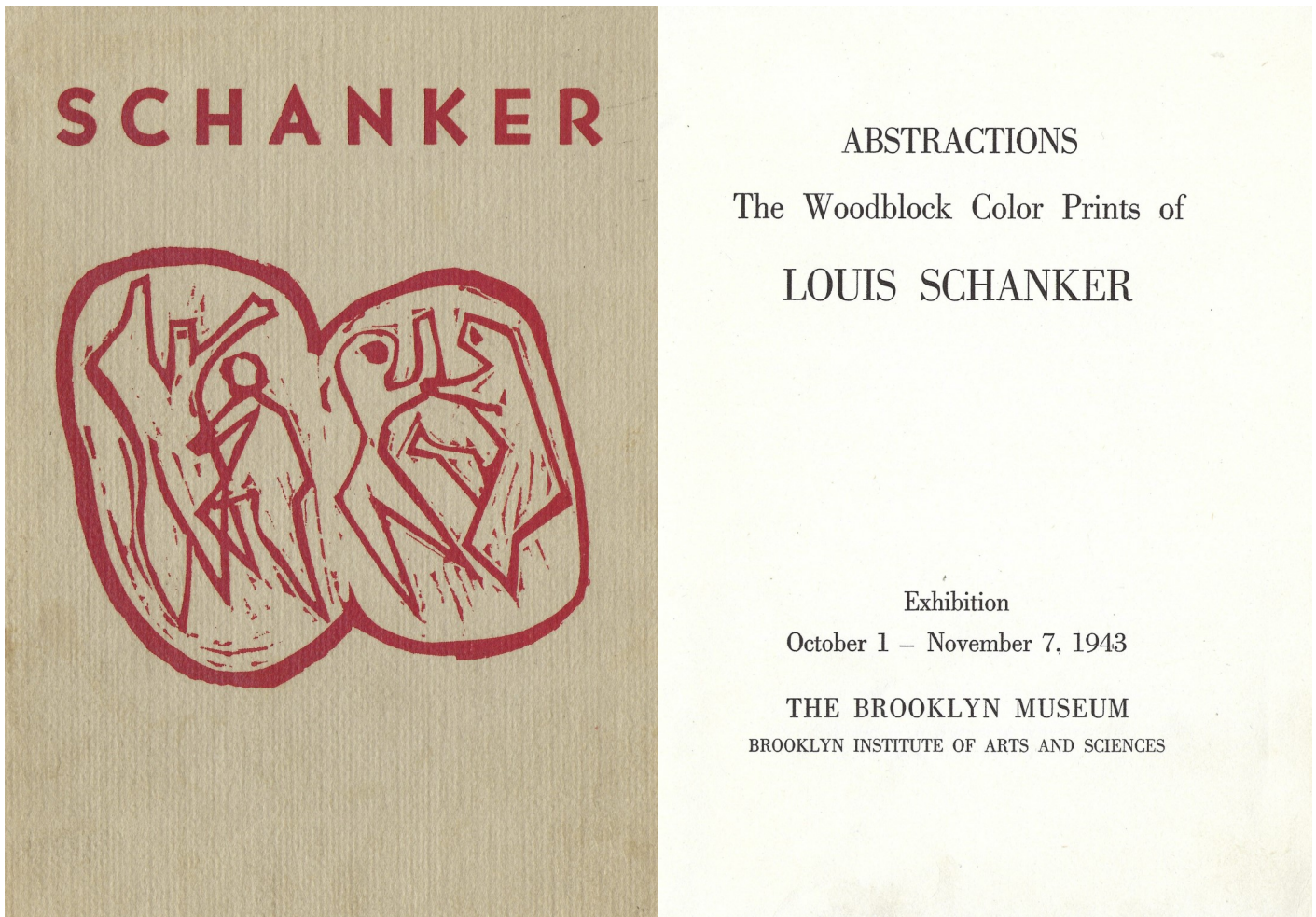
18. Abstraction
19. Non-objective
20. Men on Horseback
21. Acrobats
22. Composition
23. Cafe
24. Family
25. Girl with Lute
26. Duet
27. Conversation
28. Man at Piano
29. Polo Players
30. Musical Clowns
31. Trio
32. Composition
33. Dictator's Dream

Louis Schanker, one of the principal artists in the [WPA] woodcut workshop, initiated a movement that replaced the prevalent social realist imagery of the period with expressive abstraction.

A Spectrum of Innovation: Color in American Printmaking 1890-1960,  
David Acton, 1990

# Prints during the WPA years

This show included most of Schanker's prints during the WPA years. Several are presented on the following pages. They include both those produced as part of the WPA and independently.



In all of his work he seeks to express new relationships between organic and geometric forms and objects in motion. The thrust and counter thrust of movement, whether in a polo game or in a repeated theme of music, take on fresh graphic meaning and enjoy free range of expression. An admirably independent artist, he aspires to impart to the observer a sense of participation, and to interpret in abstract but highly personal terms the life about him.

Una Johnson, Curator  
Department of Prints and Drawings

The following woodcuts were in the 1943 Brooklyn Museum Show,  
"ABSTRACTIONS The Woodblock Color Prints of Louis Schanker."



Conversation, 1937, color woodcut, 6 x 4.5 in.  
(Houston Museum of Fine Arts)



Man on Horseback, 1939, linoleum cut, 3 x 3 in.



Aerial Act, 1940, color woodcut, 12 x 14 in.  
(Smithsonian American Art Museum)



Abstraction With Heart, 1938, color woodcut, 11 x 16 in.  
(Worcester Art Museum)

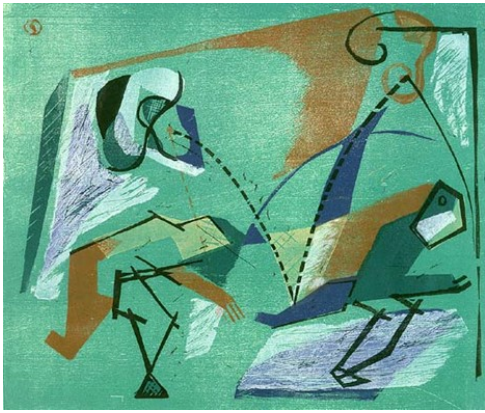


Musical Clowns, 1939, color woodcut, 11.5 x 15 in.  
(Portland Art Museum)



Indian Dance, 1941, color woodcut, 12 x 16 in.  
(Smithsonian American Art Museum)





Handball Players 1941 12 x 14 in.  
(Smithsonian American Art Museum)



Skaters, 1941, color woodcut, 8 x 14 in  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Football Players 1941 12 x 14 in.  
(Smithsonian American Art Museum)



Hockey Players, 1940, color woodcut, 14 x 12 in.  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)



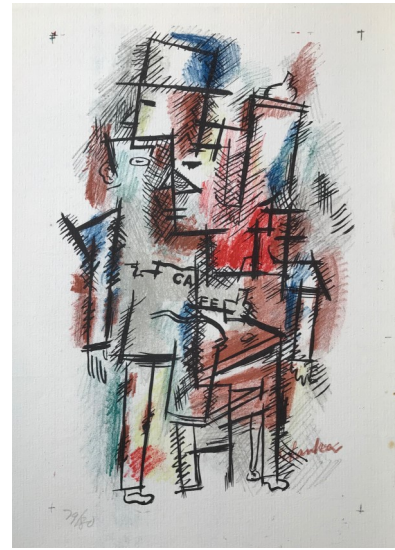
Men Running, 1940, Color woodcut, 8 x 14 in.  
(British Museum)



New York Times, December 1940



Café No. 2 , 1938, color woodblock, 9 x 5 in. in.



Café, 1938, lithograph, 10 x 6 in. \*  
(Davis Museum at Wellesley College)



Polo, 1940, woodcut, 9 x 7 in.  
(Yale University Art Gallery)



Three Men on Horseback, 1938, color woodcut,  
(Amon Carter Museum)



Composition With Figures, 1941, color woodcut, 8 x 14 in.  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)



New York Abstraction, 1937, lithograph,  
(Museum of Modern Art)\*

\* Not in Brooklyn Museum show



Trio, color woodcut, 1935, 7.5 x 9.5 in.  
(Yale University Art Gallery)



Girl with Lute, 1938, linoleum cut, 6 x 5 in.



Girl with Lute, 1938, color linoleum cut, 6 x 5 in.  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Family, color woodcut, 1937 3.5 x 3 in.



Abstraction in Grey, Pink and Black,  
color woodcut, 1942, 5.5 x 4.5 in.

\* Not in Brooklyn Museum show

# Protest!



The Ten Whitney Dissenters, Schanker, Poster, 1938 (Whitney Museum)

I was one of the group who picketed the Whitney Museum, the Whitney Dissenters, in 1936. I picketed the Modern Museum with the American Abstract Artists in the thirties, too. We [The Artists Union] used to picket and get chased by the cops. I was arrested and brought to court, -- this was in the late thirties, -- and we all gave names to the clerk, -- Pablo Picasso, Michelangelo, Cezanne. He put all the names in the court record.

It would be wonderful to see that record today. [Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Parsons interview, 1967]



The Ten Auction Poster, Schanker, 1937



Cops and Pickets, 1933, Oil, 29 x 36 in.

Many of Schanker's prints are iterations of larger oil paintings. Cops and Pickets is one example.

Schanker produced several "Protest works." He was a founder of the art group, "The Ten" which protested the choice of works exhibited at the Whitney museum.



Dictator's Dream, 1937, color woodcut, 10 x 14 in. (National Gallery of Art)



Cops and Pickets, 1939, woodcut, 9 x 12 in. (Yale University Art Gallery)



Louis Schanker (1903 - 1981) *Aerial Act*, 1940, color woodcut on paper, 12 3/16 x 14 1/16 inch

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Museum Purchase

# A New Deal for American Art in Federal Buildings

Work Projects  
Administration  
1935-1943  
Golden Anniversary

*Great governments throughout history have embraced the art of their time. The United States Government is no exception, beginning as far back as 1855, when the U.S. Congress commissioned Constantino Brumidi to paint frescoes for the Capitol Building. During the depths of the Great Depression, the Federal Government continued that tradition by employing thousands of artists to create public art which expressed the ideals of their time.*

U.S. General Services Administration

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Poster commemorating the 50th anniversary of the WPA  
Louis Schanker, *Aerial Act*, color woodcut, 1940



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## AMERICAN ARTISTS SCHOOL

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### **Mural Painting and Composition** (Fresco-Tempera-Oil)

*Instructor:* LOUIS SCHANKER

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday

6 to 10 p. m.

For advanced students. Applicants for registration in this class must submit work for approval of instructor.

*Tuition:* \$7.50 per month

**The current revival in woodcuts actually had its beginnings before World War II. One of the pioneers was Louis Schanker... One of the earliest U.S. woodcut artists to do abstractions. Schanker since has trained or influenced a generation of talented younger artists.**

**Comeback of an Art, Life Magazine, January 1955**

## CALENDAR OF LECTURES<sup>1</sup>

These courses with exceptions noted are open each week for single lectures. Unless otherwise stated the fee is \$1.50. Private and corresponding ranks in the Armed Forces admitted free to all courses. Non-commissioned officers may register at 25% reduction.

Louis Schanker

130 State St.

Brooklyn, N. Y. 2

### NEW SCHOOL BULLETIN

VOL. II, No. 32

APRIL 9, 1945

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 11

6:20 Williams

American Literature and  
Life

8:00 Schanker

Cutting and Printing from  
Woodblocks in color  
(\$2.40)

8:20 Cowell

Music Theory (Elem.)  
(\$1.10)

8:30 Fine

Educational and Institutional  
Publicity: how to use  
the syndicate to best ad-  
vantage (See Notes and  
News)

8:30 Hacker

Slavery, Industrial Capital-  
ism and the Civil War

Yakhontoff

Foreign Policy of USSR:  
Munich conference fails

Zucker

Styles through the Ages:  
French and Italian art  
of the 18th century

9:20 Cowell

Creative Music and Free  
Composition (\$1.10)

Schanker taught at the American Artists School, The New School (1943-1960,) and as an assistant professor at Bard College from 1949 till his retirement in 1964.

*The current revival in woodcuts actually had its beginnings before World War II. One of the pioneers was Louis Schanker... One of the earliest U.S. woodcut artists to do abstractions, Schanker since has trained or influenced a generation of talented younger artists.*

Comeback of an Art, Life Magazine, January 1955

*Louis Schanker stood at the center of the circle of avant-garde woodcut artists in New York in the middle of the twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-1930's, the artist exerted a profound influence on printmaking. Through his own technically innovative works and through his activities as a teacher.*

Worcester Art Museum, 1991



**NORTON MOCKRIDGE**

Louis Schanker, the abstract artist, has turned to sculpture, and it may be costing him friends. He carves things out of charred wood, wood which he gathers from all over and chars himself. Some of the things (on exhibit next week at the Granite Gallery) are carved from a pine post which Schanker wrenched from the porch of his Federal house in Sag Harbor. The sculpture has been acclaimed, but some people are afraid to let him into their houses because of the hungry look in his eyes when he spots a balustrade, a newel post or a mantel.

\* \* \*

Louis Schanker used the porch posts from his Sag Harbor, Long Island house that he owned from the 1940's to the 1970's, as raw material for this sculpture. This prompted the columnist, Norton Mockridge, to write the above NY Telegram article in 1964.



Sully Hammond Apr 1966

## Sculptor Asks Blind To 'Look' at His Work

Sculpture for the blind?

Louis Schanker, aware of the tactile appeal of his wood sculptures, has decided they ought to be touched as well as seen. He even likes to call them "feelies."

So today he's invited a group of children from the Lighthouse for the Blind to come over to the Dorsky Gallery, 888 Madison Av., and feel for themselves whether or not they like his abstract work.

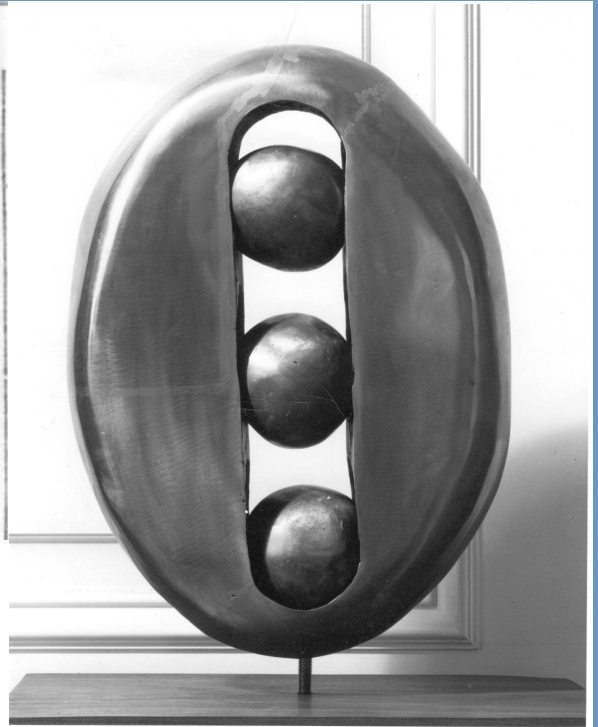
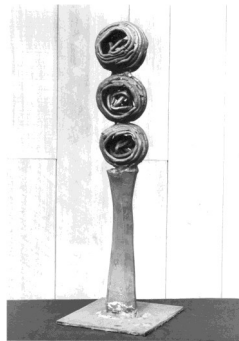
Schanker, a charmingly rough-hewn character himself, has based his current show on the theme of the circle or sphere, and many of the pieces have moveable parts, nut and kernel shapes that can be joggled intriguingly.

The surfaces range from rough and scratchy to deliciously smooth and polished and the woods used are black walnut, mahogany, pine, poplar, white oak and black birch.

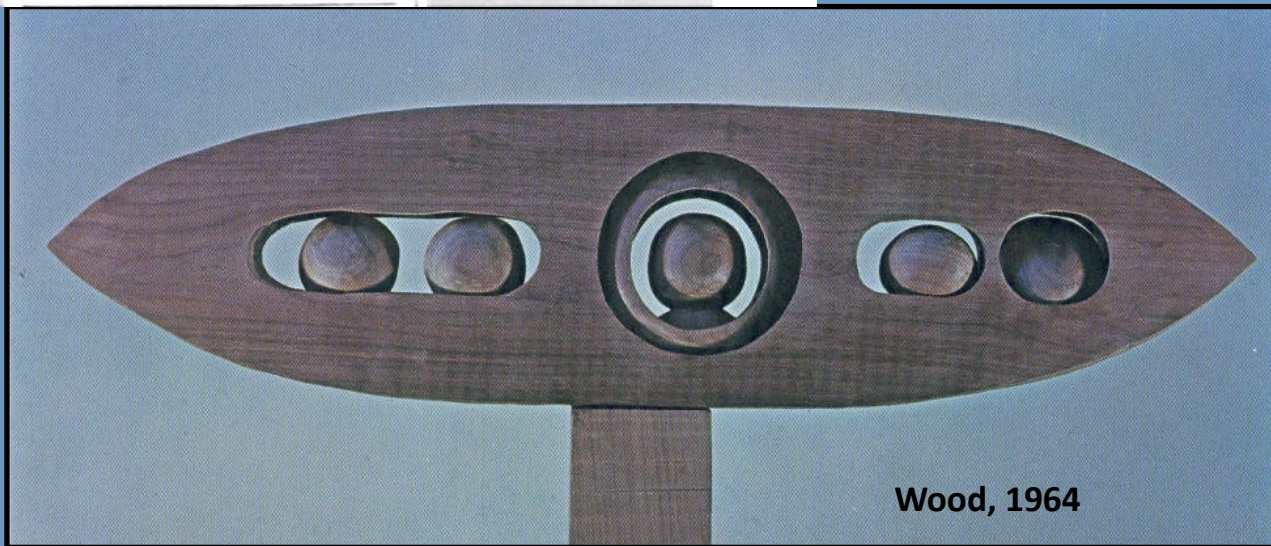
Schanker, a native New Yorker whose work is in the Metro-

politan, the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art and the Public Library, has taught at the New School and Bard College, where he is now professor emeritus.

He is married to Libby Holman, the famed torch singer of the 30's and 40's who now specializes in folk music. The current show at the Dorsky runs through April 30.



Bronze, 1965



Wood, 1964

These were part of a series which Schanker called his "Feelies." They were the 3 dimensional expression of his "Circle Image." He chiseled and polished one or more movable spheres that remain entrapped, exactly as he formed them in the body of the work. The spheres can be rotated, but they can't be removed from the piece. Always experimenting with different materials, the piece in the center was formed of window caulking which was then bronzed. In 1966 Schanker invited a group of children from the Lighthouse for the Blind to come and experience his sculptures at the Dorsky Gallery, NYC. (From Schanker's personal clippings.)



Louis Schanker: The WPA Years  
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center  
830 Springs-Fireplace Road  
East Hampton, NY 11937  
631-324-4929 [pkhouse.org](http://pkhouse.org)

**Louis Schanker: The WPA Years**

Graphics and mural sketches by one of the leading  
printmakers and muralists working on the New York  
City WPA Federal Art Project in the 1930s

3 May - 28 July 2018

Reception and gallery talk by  
catalog essayist Dr. Greta Berman  
Sunday 27 May from 5 - 7 p.m.

Louis Schanker (1903-1981), study for mural, WNYC Radio, ca. 1937  
Gouache on paper, 9 x 14 3/4 inches. Lent by the artist's estate

**Thank you to curator Helen Harrison and historian Greta Berman for making  
this WPA show a reality and bringing Louis Schanker's works back to the Hamptons.**

**Lou and Flo Siegel**



Scan for online version or go to [www.LouisSchanker.info/PKSchanker.pdf](http://www.LouisSchanker.info/PKSchanker.pdf)

# Louis Schanker

The WPA Years



Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

3 May – 28 July 2018

## 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:

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

- 1 *Cops and Pickets*, 1936  
Ink on paper, 10 1/8 x 13 1/8 inches
- 2 *Cops and Pickets*, 1936  
Woodblock print, 10 x 14 1/4 inches
- 3 *Cop and Picket*, 1936  
Woodblock print, 11 1/4 x 8 3/4 inches
- 4 *Musicians*, 1937  
Oil on linen mounted on wood, 12 x 9 3/4 inches
- 5 Two studies for *Duet*, 1937  
Gouache and crayon on paper, each 6 x 5 inches
- 6 Sketch and print, *Duet*, 1937  
Left: pencil on paper, 8 x 11 inches  
Right: color woodblock print, 6 x 4 3/4 inches
- 7 Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937  
Gouache on paper, 9 x 14 3/4 inches
- 8 Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937. *Illustrated below*  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 8 x 29 1/2 inches
- 9 Study for lobby mural, WNYC Radio, New York, ca. 1937.  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 17 3/4 x 6 inches
- 10 Study for dining room mural, north wall, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 17 x 24 inches
- 11 Study for dining room mural, south wall, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 9 1/8 x 24 1/4 inches
- 12 Study for dining room mural, west wall, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 4 1/2 x 6 inches (image)
- 13 Drawing for dining room mural, Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 9 x 12 inches
- 14 Drawing for *Polo*, 1937  
Ink and watercolor on paper, 13 1/2 x 18 3/4 inches
- 15 *Polo*, 1937  
Color linoleum block print, 17 3/4 x 20 1/2 inches
- 16 *Jai-alai*, 1939. *Illustrated on the back cover*  
Color woodblock print, 10 x 14 inches
- 17 *Hockey Players*, 1940  
Color woodblock print, 14 x 11 7/8 inches
- 18 *Polo Players*, 1940  
Color woodblock print, 11 3/4 x 14 inches
- 19 *Polo Players and Football*, 1940-41  
Process group:
  - a. Three-panel ink drawing, 10 1/2 x 22 5/8 inches
  - b. *Polo Players* tracing, 9 x 8 inches
  - c. *Polo Players* wood block, 7 7/8 x 7 1/4 inches
  - d. *Polo Players*, woodblock print, 7 7/8 x 7 1/4 inches
- 20 *Football* and abstract design, 1941
  - a. Wood block, 7 7/8 inches
  - b. Monochrome proof, 10 x 8 1/2 inches (sheet)
  - c. Multicolor proof, 12 x 8 3/4 inches (sheet)
- 21 Carved porch post from the Schanker house in Sag Harbor, early 1960s  
Pine, 87 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 5 1/2





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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the Estate of Louis Schanker  
[www.louisschanker.info](http://www.louisschanker.info)



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## ‘An Intimate View’ of a Rhythmic Painter

Louis Schanker was a music lover and used rhythm as a compositional element  
By Jennifer Landes | July 26, 2018 - 12:30pm



Numerous studies for Louis Schanker’s murals are on view through this weekend at the Pollock-Krasner House, including, above, the study for a WNYC lobby mural executed around 1937. The color woodblock print “Jai-alai,” below, is from a sports series he worked on during the late 1930s

Louis Schanker isn’t one of the first to come to mind when thinking of the grand artistic names of the mid-20th century on the South Fork, but perhaps he should be.



The painter and graphic artist's indelible participation in the cultural community here with his wife, Libby Holman, will be featured in a talk on Saturday by Lou Siegel, the artist's nephew, at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in Springs. The former home of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock and current art center is the site of an exhibition of Schanker's work from 1935 to 1943, when he was a supervisor of murals and graphic art for the Works Progress Administration. The agency, among other things, employed artists during the Great Depression so they could support themselves while doing some good for the public.

Those were the days before he found a Sag Harbor house on Madison Street in 1949, and married Holman in 1960. She was a colorful figure whose first husband died under suspicious circumstances, leaving her with quite a bit of Reynolds family tobacco money. The couple then bought a modernist house on Further Lane in East Hampton designed by Robert Rosenberg, which was subsequently destroyed, according to Helen Harrison, the director of the Pollock-Krasner House.

"I'm not sure when the Schankers bought it," she said. "But they had it by 1962, when the famous photograph by Hans Namuth was taken. It was their annual July 4th house party, and everyone trooped down to the beach for the photo."

Holman was a blues singer with very dark coloring, leading some people to surmise she was African-American. Witnessing oppression from both her own Jewish

background and the ethnicity she was assumed to have, she became an ardent civil rights advocate. After befriending the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, she encouraged them to go to India to learn Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful resistance tactics. Coretta King also visited the couple in East Hampton, according to Ms. Harrison. As a performer, Holman "was a pioneer in introducing African-American music to a white audience," she said.

Louis Schanker, who died in 1981, was also a music lover and used rhythm as a compositional element in his drawings, paintings, and print work. He shared this love with artists such as Stuart Davis, who was a fellow contributor to WNYC studio murals and used jazz rhythms and references in his work. Krasner, who contributed a proposal for the radio station that was never executed, became lifelong friends with Schanker, who in turn befriended her husband, another jazz enthusiast who referenced music in his work.

Included in the Pollock-Krasner House show are a few studies for Schanker's WNYC mural, which Greta Berman, a W.P.A. scholar, sees as "a forerunner of Abstract Expressionism, in a number of ways," she wrote in her exhibition essay. "The vague gestural figuration drawn over the colorful abstract background looks ahead to action painting. . . . And the textural surface adds to the feeling of movement." During this time, Schanker, who was a naturalist at heart, never abandoned figuration completely, but "he can be considered in many ways an avant-garde artist," Ms. Berman wrote.

The fact that the WNYC murals would be abstract — and all of the four contributions turned out to be, to an extent — was considered radical at the time. Burgoyne Diller, an abstract artist and director of the mural program, chose the murals because their modernity suited the modern surroundings, which boasted early examples of soundproof rooms and air-conditioning.

Schanker was also one of 10 artists who dissented in reaction to the Whitney Museum's preference for realist artists such as George Bellows and Edward Hopper in its exhibitions. As "The Ten," a group including Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, they staged their own abstract show in 1938.

Among the other mural studies on view in Springs are several drawings for the Neponsit Beach Children's Hospital's dining room, where Schanker decorated the walls in cheerful renderings of clowns and animals.

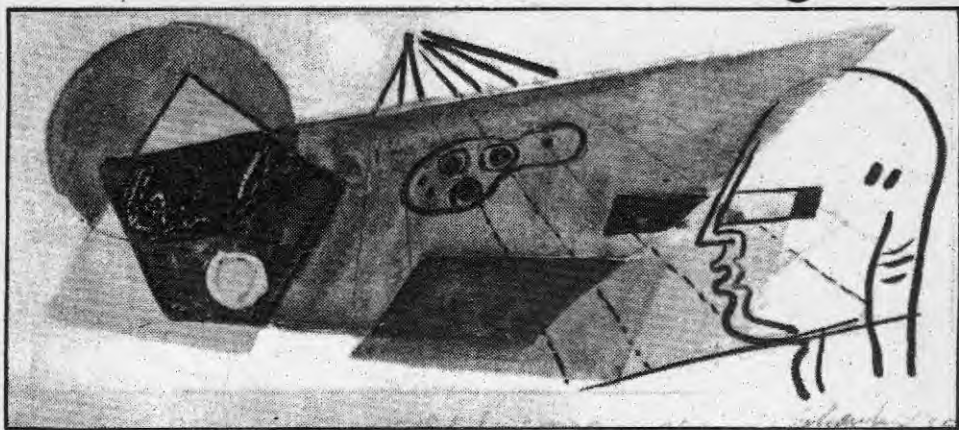
Some of the prints he worked on as a supervisor in the graphics division of the W.P.A. are here as well. There is a series of sports subjects rendered in woodblock and linoleum color prints that involved many different blocks, sometimes one for each color used. The exhibition includes examples of some of the steps in the process. Executed later than the murals, the prints continue to employ the movement he developed in those works.

There is a lot to see in such a concise show and it illuminates a period not often in evidence here. These are the last few days to see it before it closes on Saturday. The closing day gallery talk featuring Mr. Siegel is at 5 p.m. Titled "Lou and Libby: An Intimate View," it will be an eyewitness account of the couple's creative and social lives, including their involvement in the South Fork arts community.



The artist in front of his mural.

# Louis Schanker Bids Goodbye



Watercolor sketch for mural at N.Y. World's Fair at M. Diamond 1014 Madison - to June 4

Louis Schanker passed away the other day at the age of 78, an artist who has made contributions to American art over many years. He was a man of tremendous talent and ex-

perience in art, but one who always sought out new fields for his experiments. He was noted as an early printmaker. Printmakers must be experimenters, and that suited his nature best. He also did murals early, receiving important commissions.

Schanker was so skilled in painting that he could change styles and not lose stride. While others would need two years to produce their satisfactory work in a new style, he could do so at once. This could have been a mixed blessing, for Schanker was always searching, changing direction. In latter years, he moved into sculpture, still finding new outlets for his many-sided genius. He was forever youthful and open to new ideas—and we'll miss you, Louis.

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