

Highlights from the Sandzén-Greenough Family Print Collection



Auguste-Louis Lepère (1849-1918)
Wife and Son (reading The Print)
Etching, 2nd state, edition 2/6

Artist Birger Sandzén (1871-1954) enjoyed collecting all manner of original fine art prints – from French etchings by Auguste-Louis Lepère (1849-1918), early German woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), contemporary American etchings by John Taylor Arms (1887-1953), through Regionalist lithographs by Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) and Grant Wood (1892-1942). In 1930, Boston print aficionado Charles Pelham Greenough, 3rd (1908-1983) visited Lindsborg for the Eastertide Messiah Oratorio and met the Sandzén family, including the daughter Margaret Sandzén (1909-1993), whom he married in 1942. Greenough's print collection included “old masters” and European engravings from Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) to Robert Nanteuil (1623-1678), and he looked forward to viewing Sandzén's own prints during that first introduction. Once the wedded Greenoughs were established in their Lindsborg home, the two families united in their print collecting and Greenough focused on organizing a print catalogue raisonné for all of his father-in-law's editions of lithographs, blockprints, and drypoints in *The Graphic Works of Birger Sandzén*, published in 1952. Sandzén's print collection was eventually inherited by the Greenoughs, who opened the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery in 1957 to host new exhibitions and to share the family paintings, prints, and sculpture with a wider audience.

Sanzén was first introduced to fine prints when he was ten years old and taking art lessons at his boarding school in Skara, Sweden, when his teacher gave him a set of lithographs to copy. In 1891 the young artist moved to Stockholm for serious painting study and was fortunate to fall in with Sweden's premier artist, Anders Zorn (1860-1920), a leader of the radical Swedish National Romantics who had broken with the traditions of the Royal Academy of Art in 1885 to form the Artists League [*Konstnärsförbundet*]. Along with learning color theories and brushwork, Sandzén was exposed to his mentor's etching practice and print collecting. Zorn's influence seems to have been quite profound. In an 1894 letter home to his father, Sandzén describes an exhilarating visit to his mentor's apartment in Paris. After finding out how all his old pupils were faring, and telling of his travels to America and his latest paintings, Zorn enthusiastically showed “all of his etchings, new and old and all old studies, and more.”¹

Notably, in 1887 Zorn collaborated with the National Museum to establish the *Föreningen för Grafisk Kunst* [Association for the Graphic Arts], promoting contemporary printmaking and collecting through editions of fine prints commissioned annually. Today, the Association continues advocating for printmaking through supporting publications, awarding printmaking scholarships, and issuing portfolios of new prints for collectors just as they have for more than a century. The example of Sweden's successful print society helped pave the way for others to organize around the world.

¹ Birger Sandzén to Johan Peter Sandzén, Järpås, Sweden, 21 Mar 1894, trans. Emory Lindquist; Sandzén Archives, BSMG.

While the very first prints Sandzén collected are not known today, Zorn's etching *Circles of Water* (1907) may well have been among them, as it is inscribed to Sandzén in Swedish in the lower margin. Once he was established as a professor at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, Sandzén began collecting for himself as well as for a future art gallery on campus. He initiated the Smoky Hill Art Club at Bethany College in 1913 to encourage the appreciation of original art and from the \$1 per year dues to purchase work from local exhibitions. Many of the prints in the Bethany and Sandzén collections were acquired from the annual *Midwest Art Exhibition* (est. 1899) held at the college and from nearby McPherson High School (est. 1911), each attracting regular national attention for the quality of participating artists and prompting grade school art collecting. In 1916 Sandzén began creating his own prints, trying lithography in February and adding blockprinting to his skills by that fall. The artist encouraged all his students to try printmaking, and many of those students' works joined Sandzén personal art collection along with adding to the school's holdings.

While writing to a former student in 1936, Birger Sandzén reflected "I have more requests for lectures and exhibitions than I can take care of. Next Monday I show part of my print collection and give a lecture on Anders Zorn before the Print Club of Kansas City in the Nelson Gallery. I have lectured on Mexican Art, Swedish Art, Chinese painting, 'My Hobbies' (by request), Carl Milles, Vincent van Gogh, lithography, engraving, and a few other subjects this fall."² Sandzén went on to claim, "My principal hobby is my print collection,"³ although many other activities could have been cited, such as choral singing, fencing, or guitar playing, along with mountain hiking and rock collecting.

Sandzén was actively involved in most of the print societies around the country, including the Chicago Society of Etchers (1910), the Print Makers of California (1914), and the Brooklyn Society of Etchers (1915) which went through name changes to become what is now SAGA (Society of American Graphic Artists), before organizing the Prairie Print Makers in his home studio in 1930.

By 1919 he was corresponding with Bertha Jaques (1863-1941), cofounder of the Chicago Society of Etchers, and beginning to exhibit with the group. In a letter dated May 8, 1919, Sandzén thanked Jaques for clippings sent, and assured her that "We are quite familiar with your fine etchings. Several of them have been exhibited here and a few sold here and in the neighborhood."⁴ Friendships bloomed over exchanged prints as seen in a 1927 letter from Jaques to Sandzén, exclaiming over "your generous as well as interesting package with its splendid prints- they are such as I want to linger over...Would you please let me send you my work?"⁵ Sandzén invited Jaques to show in the 1928 spring annual *Midwest Art Exhibition* at Bethany when he sent his drypoint plate for *Mesa Verde Cedars* to her for three trial proofs to be printed on her press. The next year he invited Jaques to give lectures on etching at Bethany in Lindsborg and at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, where he was also guest teaching. Today the Gallery permanent collection numbers more than 20 of Jaques' etchings and drypoints.

The long running print society whose 2024-25 SAGA members are currently showing here at the Gallery was founded as the Brooklyn Society of Etchers in 1915 but evolved into the more inclusive "Society of American Etchers" and adding annual members presentation prints and traveling exhibitions programs by 1923. John Taylor Arms was the society's president for 27 years, and invited Sandzén to join and participate in club's 13th annual exhibition in 1928, ushering in a long history of correspondence between the two printmakers. Sandzén sent in his drypoints *Mesa Verde Cedars*, *Singing Pines*, *The Arch*, and *Mountain Stream* to that 1928 show, and started collecting Arms prints for himself and the college. In a 1947 letter Arms invited Sandzén to re-engage with membership in the then-titled

² Birger Sandzén to Sue Jean Hill Covacevich, 13 Nov 1936; Sandzén Archives, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Lindsborg, KS (hereafter BSMG).

³ Birger Sandzén to Sue Jean Hill Covacevich, 8 Mar 1942; Sandzén Archives, BSMG.

⁴ Birger Sandzén to Bertha E. Jaques, 8 May 1919; copy in Sandzén Archives, BSMG.

⁵ Bertha Jaques to Birger Sandzén, 9 Sep 1927; Sandzén Archives, BSMG.

“Society of American Etchers, Gravers, Lithographers, and Woodcutters” for a \$5 active member fee. By 1951 President Arms wrote a club letter proposing the name of the organization be simplified to “Society of American Graphic Artists, Inc.” Pelham Greenough continued acquiring Arms’ work for the Sandzén Gallery, which now has more than 50 Arms etchings, drypoints, and copper plates in the permanent collection.

On the cusp of the Great Depression, eleven charter members met in Sandzén’s Lindsborg studio on December 28, 1930, to establish a print society that would attract a wide audience of both artists and collectors and provide affordable art for every home: Birger Sandzén, C. A. Seward (1884–1939), Charles M. Capps (1898–1981), Leo Courtney (1889–1940), Lloyd Foltz (1897–1990), Clarence Hotvedt (1900–1991), Edmund Kopietz (1900–1988), Herschel Logan (1901–1987), Carl J. Smalley (1885–1965), Arthur William Hall (1889–1981), and Norma Bassett Hall (1889–1957), who designed the society’s sunflower logo. Probably drawing on Sandzén’s memories of Zorn’s success with Sweden’s Association for the Graphic Arts, as well as first-hand knowledge of American models, the Prairie Print Makers set up a subscription program for a membership who would be offered a gift print each year at the price of \$5. Sandzén created the first gift print in January of 1931, the lithograph *A Kansas Creek*. The organization was based in Wichita for most of its history, administered first by Seward, art director for the Western Lithograph Company. The membership expanded rapidly with artists such as John Steuart Curry (1897–1946) and John Taylor Arms subscribing and others including Doel Reed (1894–1985), Stow Wengenroth (1906–1978), and Gene Kloss (1903–1996) who were also commissioned to make gift prints. The group survived and flourished during the 1930s and ‘40s, outliving Sandzén by a decade until disbanding in 1965.

Kansas City grain merchant and fine print aficionado Alfred Fowler (1889–1959) founded The Woodcut Society in 1932 and invited Sandzén to be a charter member. Members contributed to several annual exhibitions and agreed to donate impressions of their prints to what is now the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Twice a year the Woodcut Society offered presentation prints to members for purchase, which Sandzén collected and Greenough later tracked down the few missing. When Fowler began the Society of Print Connoisseurs in 1945, Sandzén joined as charter collecting member, adding prints such as Gene Kloss’ drypoint *Processional-Taos* (1948) to his personal collection.

American Regionalists Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry mainly published lithographs through the Associated American Artists (AAA) that had formed in July of 1934, at a meeting in Benton’s New York studio. The Benton lithograph included in this exhibition, *New England Farm*, is unusual as it was privately commissioned by the Kansas State University Friends of Art as the annual members print for 1951. In the late 1930s Benton, Wood, and Curry were invited to send work to the Bethany College *Midwest Art Exhibition*. Wood wrote to Sandzén in March of 1939, “It would be a pleasure to exchange lithographs with you, though I’m afraid I will get the best of the deal. Lithography is a new medium for me and I have a great deal yet to learn about it.”⁶ The artist admired Sandzén’s scenes of the Rocky Mountains, and suggested that Sandzén keep the two prints sent for that spring’s show—including the self-portrait *Honorary Degree* (1938) in this exhibition—to add to the artist-printmaker’s growing collection.

6 Grant Wood to Birger Sandzén, 30 Mar 1939; Sandzén Archives, BSMG.

Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery
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Gallery Hours: Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m.