

Arthur Thrall: *Tribute to a Master Artist*

A Cedarburg Art Museum exhibition, January 21 – April 3, 2016

Lawrence University Wriston Art Galleries September 16 – November 23, 2016

From Graffiti to Calligraphy

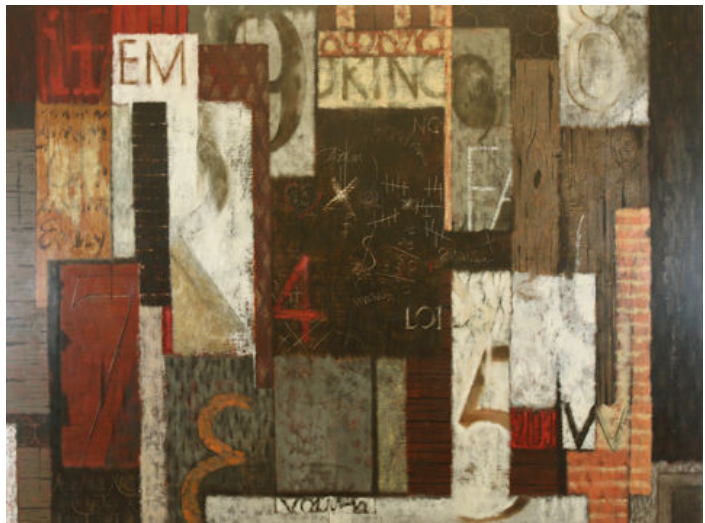


The life of Arthur Thrall, Wisconsin-born painter and internationally recognized printmaker, began in Milwaukee. Thrall was born in 1926 as the second of nine children of Irving and Helen Thrall, growing up on 35th Street near Lisbon Avenue. After graduating from Washington High School in Milwaukee, Arthur Thrall served in World War II from 1944-1946. With the G.I. bill, he earned his bachelor's and master's degree from Milwaukee State Teacher's College (UW-Milwaukee). He also pursued degree work at University of Illinois, Urbana. Thrall had many outstanding teachers and was particularly impressed with Robert von Neumann and Joseph Friebert. Thrall also studied with Alfred Sessler, who established UW-Madison's eminent printmaking department in the 1950s. Modernist trends had not yet permeated Milwaukee, but instead a Social Realist style with figurative subject matter that reflected the lingering effects of the Great Depression strongly influenced Thrall and others.

Arthur Thrall's earliest works in the 1950s were figurative. His movement toward creating paintings and prints using montages of façades with letter forms evolved as Milwaukee went through urban renewal. Gutted and partially torn-apart buildings being razed for new expressways all with graffiti, deteriorating surfaces, and textural qualities of exposed layers provided subject matter for him. A 1955 oil painting *1110 Illinois* is an example.¹

In 1960 Arthur was awarded a fellowship for a summer printmaking workshop at Ohio State University where he met his future wife Win Rogers, a graduate student in printmaking with Sidney Chafetz. When they were at a bar, Win first noticed Arthur's fascination with graffiti on a tabletop. He made a rubbing of it.² (Oh, that the artist - printmaker should find graffiti inscribed in a table! It is not unlike the intaglio process itself.)

Thrall also had a strong interest in fine handwriting and calligraphy which was further developed when the artist



Arthur Thrall, *1110 Illinois*, oil painting, 1955, 40-5/16" x 52 ¼".
Collection of the Museum of Wisconsin Art, Gift of Roy and Margaret Butter.

received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant in Graphics in the early 1960s. Thrall travelled to the Morgan Library in New York City and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC to study ancient manuscripts from all over the world. He found many inspirations in those texts; not for the message but for the aesthetic of lines. This fascination continued throughout his life.³

Paleograph, a two-color intaglio, shows Thrall's interest in layers of handwriting, foreign script and elegant, curving lines. While this work is strong on the calligraphy influences, Thrall employs other curving, linear elements that serve as playful doodles, signaling a growing interest in elegant lines.

Another strong influence for Arthur's growing interest in calligraphy was his teaching colleague, Carl F. Riter (1915-1992) who hired Arthur in 1956 to teach at Milwaukee-Downer College.⁴ Riter and Thrall were also colleagues at Lawrence University a number of years after 1964.⁵ Riter had a consuming interest in the art and architecture of the Middle East. Many summers he travelled to Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey, bringing home artifacts, rugs, and Islamic calligraphy.⁶ One piece in this exhibition that reflects that interest is *Undercurrents*, a gouache painting that undulates with lyrical simulations of Arabic characters and writing. Another Thrall work influenced by Islamic calligraphy is *Multi-Screen*, a painting with bold, yet fanciful strokes.

Thrall's niche for artistic work in calligraphy is duly noted in a number of texts such as Donald Anderson's *The Art of Written Forms: The Theory and Practice of Calligraphy* (1969), James Watrous' *A Century of American Printmaking 1880-1980*, (1984), and Ronald Ruble's *The Print Renaissance in America: A Revolution* (2015) where Thrall's work is featured on the cover. In 2002 the late *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* art critic James Auer referred to Arthur Thrall as one of Wisconsin's artists who "defy the dictates of fashion" and "whose high-styled uses of calligraphy rival those of the great age of the Ottomans."⁷



Arthur Thrall, *Paleograph*, intaglio, 1966, 33 x 23-3/4". Collection of the Wriston Art Galleries, Lawrence University, Appleton, WI.



Arthur Thrall, *Multi-Screen*, gouache, acrylic & ink, 1994, 30 1/4 x 22 1/2".

The Path to Musical Notation

Being at a small liberal arts institution like Lawrence University, Arthur reveled in contacts with colleagues in music, history, literature and science. One such cross campus dialogue came in the late 1960s when faculty organist, the late Miriam Clapp Duncan commissioned Arthur to create a print for one of her honors students for his performance of *Die Kunst der Fuge* by Johann Sebastian Bach.⁸ The *Homage to Bach* edition started him upon a creative path that lasted for the rest of his artistic career. Thrall was intrigued that Bach created his own monogram as a beautiful, calligraphic design and incorporated it into his artwork.⁹ Later in 1985, Thrall honored the 300th anniversary of Bach's birth with his *Tercentenary* intaglio edition. Both of these important prints are in this exhibition.



Arthur Thrall in his Appleton studio with trial proofs in the *Homage to Bach* series, c. 1968. Photo from Win Thrall.

After his Bach series, Thrall and his family spent two years in London 1973-1975, for a sabbatical and then teaching at Lawrence's London campus. He also had many contacts with artists at London's Slade School of Art, Morley College, and The Charlotte Street Print Workshop. While in London Thrall was able to meet with an independent musical engraver for Boosey and Hawkes, the world's largest classical music publisher. He and Jack Thompson hit it off well, and Thompson gave Arthur musical punch tools in exchange for a musical print.¹⁰ That encounter served the artist well for years to come. Examples of those German-made musical punches, now relics in a digital publishing age, are on display in this exhibition.



Arthur Thrall's musical engraving punches. Photograph by Mark Heffron.



One of Arthur's later works made by engraving, etching, and musical punch stamping is *Confluence*. It is also the featured print that Thrall is working on in the 2013 video by Mark Heffron called "Orchestrated Lines" that is also available for viewing in this exhibition.

Arthur is engraving on the *Confluence* plate in his Milwaukee Nut Factory studio on Fratney Street. Photo provided by Mark Heffron from his 2013 video "Orchestrated Lines."

The Lyrical Line

As early as the 1960s, Arthur Thrall revealed elements of curving, looping, playful lines as embellishments in his prints (e.g., *Paleograph*, illustrated earlier). In the 2000 to 2015 period, line as an elegant motif takes a more predominant role in many of Arthur's intaglio prints, as well as his gouache and acrylic paintings. Musical themes in prints and a painting like *Etude* took the musical staff to another dimension with playful lyrical lines giving fanciful life to an imaginary musical composition.

One source for the elegant use of line in Thrall's work has its origins in calligraphy. Even in Islamic/Arabic calligraphy and the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, there is a playful sense of line that still respects the rules and space allocations for the composition of the manuscript. In addition, Win Thrall suggests that the artist had an innate sense of linear play emanating from deep inside him. Not knowing where the line would lead him, Arthur would often set up a problem on a paper or plate, and then set out to find a solution, she explains.¹²

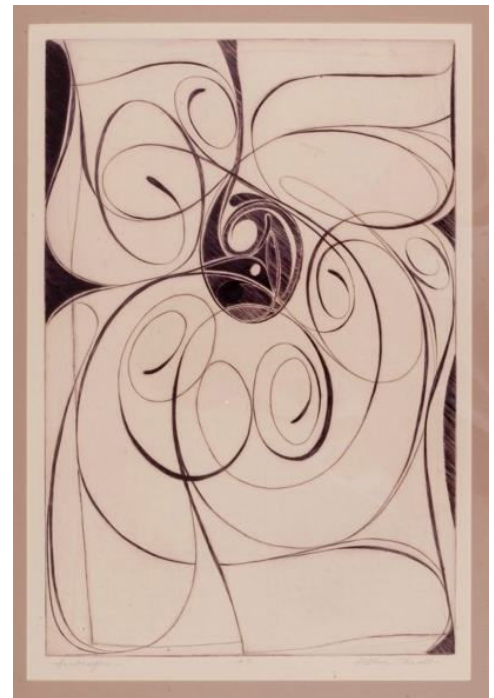


Arthur Thrall, *Etude*, 2007, acrylic painting, 25 x 30". Collection of Win Thrall.

Arabesque is a 2008 engraving by Thrall that focuses entirely on line as subject matter. The line is curvaceous and always flowing and proportional. It is thick and thin, delicate and bold, leading the eye to all parts of the composition. An engraving is no easy feat, as the artist used strong and fine tools to push, scrape, and incise lines with his metal engraving tools on a copper plate. This masterful engraving was hand-tooled by the artist at age 82!

Arthur Thrall, *Arabesque*, engraving, 2008, 24 ½ x 18 ½".

Another unique venture of the artist in his later years was the hand-coloring of some of his intaglio prints. Thrall utilized prints from a 1977 sepia-printed series called



Hexagonal, and when he hand-painted areas on the paper, he created new colors and patterns that were not in the original print. The new work, created in the 2000s, becomes an entirely different, one-of-a-kind work of art. Both the early *Hexagonal* and one of its later, more colorful renditions are in this exhibition. *Animato I*, also in this tribute exhibition, is a 2008 hand-colored intaglio. There were several different color renditions of this work that make use of the curvilinear spaces defined by graceful thick and thin lines, embellished with delicate musical symbols, then hand painted in Thrall's unique color combinations.



Arthur Thrall, *Animato I* (detail), hand-colored intaglio, 2008, 18 ½ x 18 ½”.

This exhibition also features many of Arthur Thrall's last works in the 2013-2015 period before his death in March 2015. Larger gouache paintings were some of his favored works at this time. *Passages*, *Aleatory Notations*, and the *Pentimento* series (I, II, & III) reveal Arthur's masterful use of line for its own sake. They also incorporate unique color combinations and textural patterns that emerged from Arthur Thrall's inner being.

- Mary R. Chemotti, 2016.



Arthur Thrall, *Aleatory Notations*, gouache, 2014, 29x36”.

Notes

1. Information in first two paragraphs was related by Win Thrall in a meeting March 24, 2015. The 1940 U.S. Census data on Ancestry.com confirms family residence on 35th Street in Milwaukee.
2. Ibid, W. Thrall.
3. Ibid, W. Thrall.
4. Information on Arthur's start at Downer College provided by Win Thrall in a meeting on March 24, 2015.
5. According to Lawrence University records, Carl Riter was Professor of Art at Lawrence 1964-1977, and Arthur Thrall was the Farrar-Marrs Professor and Chair of Fine Arts at Lawrence, 1964-1990.
6. "Lawrence Sabbaticals Result in Extensive Research," *Milwaukee Journal*, November 10, 1965, Part 3, 6.
7. James Auer, "Artist explores niche in series of 'New Paintings'," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 22, 2002, Cue section, 2.
8. Ibid, W. Thrall.
9. Information about the *Homage to Bach* series provided by Win Thrall on January 14, 2016.
10. Information related by Win Thrall on March 24, 2015.
11. The photograph of musical punches is from Mark Heffron's 2013 video "Orchestrated Lines", also on display in the exhibition.
12. Email message from Win Thrall on January 17, 2016.