

Jacques Boonen and the Interbellum Printmaking in Context

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On this side of the Atlantic, the graphic output of Belgian and Flemish expressionist artists active during the interwar period of the first half of the 20th century is perceived as something of an anomaly. Academic literature in English and French is scarce and public exhibitions of their work are a rare occurrence. Yet, amongst a select group of avid connoisseurs and collectors in the United States, the graphic oeuvre of Frans Masereel (1889-1972), Antoon Herckenrath (1907-1977), Joris Minne (1897-1988), Jan-Frans Cantré (1886-1931), Jozef Cantré (1890-1957) and Henri Van Straten (1892-1944) to name a few, is understood as a central counterpart to their American, Mexican and European contemporaries working during the period between 1918 and 1939, the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second World War.

Belgium witnesses an exciting revival of printmaking during the interbellum years, a period in which the flourishing production of prints is both integral to and inseparable from the larger cultural exchange between the Low Countries and related artistic developments elsewhere. The graphic work of Belgian expressionists in the post-World War I period develops as a reaction to the larger social and political shifts, an activity echoed in the prints of American WPA/FAP (Work Progress Administration/Federal Arts Project) artists, Mexican muralists and many German and Central European expressionists. One thread that connects both sides of the Atlantic is the graphic production in communal print studios by a wide range of artists, many who are not exclusively printmakers and who view printmaking as a socially relevant extension of their practice in painting and sculpture. Printmaking takes on an unprecedented significance during the interbellum as proliferating graphic vernacular corresponds to the profound social transformation unfolding in Europe and North America. Simultaneously, a wider interest amongst the general populace in an eclectic array of socially charged styles and higher quality artist-made multiples create and sustain the rising new market for prints and graphic portfolios that communicate and satisfy a political ideology proposing that art could indeed bring about social change.

In this context, a discussion about the work of Antwerp printmaker Jacques (Jac) Boonen (1911-1968) and specifically a series of uncommonly large-scale expressionist etchings he produced in the early 1930s, deserves special consideration. A contemporary of the above mentioned major Belgian inter-war expressionists, Boonen began his career as an art student in the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which impacted the Low Countries and much of Europe. A protégé of one of the foremost Flemish graphic artists and educators of the time, and, by today's perspective a considerably better-known figure of the interwar Belgian printmaking, Jules De Bruycker, Jac Boonen is, by all conventional standards, an unorthodox artist. Best known for his large, imaginary, dystopian etchings produced in his

early 20s while a student at the Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp (1930-35), Jac Boonen rejects De Bruycker's academicism and swiftly moves away from his influence. This particular body of graphic works bears witness to the complexities of the 1930s as radical changes are shaping cultural and political terrain across the European continent. At the center of Boonen's expressionistic etchings are images of rapidly changing cities, in which hectic urban life and ominous industrial progress collide. The works evoke the energy of Italian futurists and a mysticism that seems to jump right from the Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Boonen's ruthlessly correct, elegantly dynamic, and unusually powerful line etchings are a tour-de-force of 1930s printmaking unmatched in European context and at par with widely known works of his North American contemporaries, namely the burlesque etchings of the American regionalist and WPA-FAP artist Reginald Marsh (1898-1954) and the lithographs of Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco (1883 - 1949). In fact, Boonen's monumental etchings *Kermis* (1933), *Markt* (1934) and *Karnaval* (1935) bring to mind one of the most recognizable graphic works of the era, José Clemente Orozco's lithograph *Masses* from 1935. In Boonen's large etchings, we encounter a frenetic modernist twist to the carousing of his predecessors from Brabant, Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Through these works, Boonen rejects the bourgeois culture derivative self-involvement with romantic longings for French cubism, fauvism and Neue Sachlichkeit of the Weimar Republic.

Jac Boonen may be one of the most radical voices of the interbellum era, an artistic paragon of Belgian and thus European printmaking. Recognizing the immense potential of Boonen's work in the context of other contemporaries from Belgium and Europe of the interwar period, and perceiving how accessible and reasonable his astonishing prints were when I first began collecting them in the late 1990s, I have developed a keen interest in his oeuvre, which has been shared with my students and colleagues in the United States for two decades. In doing so, I may have become an unanticipated champion of this great Belgian artist and many of his contemporaries. Conversely, I am perplexed why Boonen is not better known amongst the collectors of European interbellum graphics, scholars and educators. Scholarly literature on the artist is mostly reduced to a footnote in some key texts on the field of Belgian printmaking, while being completely unrecognized in major publications on the interbellum European graphics. Boonen's graphic work deserves a closer analysis. This exhibition organized by Ewald Peters and Dennis Van Mol of Walden Art Stories proposes to shift a perception and to contribute to an important new discourse on this unique figure in Belgian and European graphics of the interbellum era.

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