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Sidney Hurwitz: Five Decades

Hurwitz, Sidney
Boston University

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Boston University
Sidney Hurwitz | FIVE DECADES

Boston University College of Fine Arts
School of Visual Arts

Boston University Art Gallery
at the Stone Gallery

February 13–March 29, 2009
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“Sidney Hurwitz’s Meditations on the Industrial Age” 
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Cover image: 
Bethlehem III, 1997 
Watercolor, Aquatint 
18 7/8” x 16 ½”

The School of Visual Arts (SVA) at the College of Fine Arts (CFA) and the Boston University Art Gallery (BUAG) are pleased to present a retrospective exhibition of work by SVA Professor Emeritus Sidney Hurwitz, who taught at the School of Visual Arts from 1965 (when it was known as the Division of Art in the School of Fine and Applied Arts) to 1999, serving as Director from 1969 to 1975. He was also Director of the Boston University Art Gallery from 1968 to 1969—which was then part of the School of Visual Arts—and curated several important exhibitions. Given Hurwitz’s valuable contributions to both institutions, it seems more than fitting that the School of Visual Arts and Boston University Art Gallery have come together to celebrate the work and career of one of SVA’s prominent faculty emeriti.

The aptly titled Sidney Hurwitz: Five Decades features a selection of prints spanning fifty years of the artist’s production, from his early woodcuts and figure studies of the late 1950s to the intricately rendered etchings of industrial architecture started in the early 1970s, a subject for which he has become well known and continues to pursue today. Sidney Hurwitz: Five Decades is a result of a fruitful, year-long collaboration and we are indebted to the artist with whom many hours were spent in the studio poring over a lifetime of work and discussing the details of the exhibition.

We acknowledge that an exhibition of such scope would not be possible without the help and contributions of many other individuals. We would like to first thank the Artists’ Resource Trust, a fund of the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, without whose support this exhibition and catalogue would not be possible.

At Boston University we would like to sincerely thank David Campbell, Provost, and Hannelore Glaser, Associate Provost of Finance and Administration, for their support of the exhibition. We would also like to thank Walt C. Messmer, Dean ad interim, College of Fine Arts, and Lynne Allen, Director, School of Visual Arts, for their ongoing encouragement and enthusiasm of exhibitions programming.

We extend tremendous appreciation and gratitude to Patricia Hills, Professor of American Art, Department of Art History at Boston University, for generously contributing the essay for this publication.

The artist would like to acknowledge Elisa Fines for her administrative support, Ellen Young for her assistance with color-ation of print edition, and Marshall for his time and attention in documenting the work for reproduction. Thanks are also due to the Boston University Society of Retired Faculty and Staff for a grant award to the artist for the catalogue and exhibition.

Special thanks to Vicki Wright, former Director of The Museum of Art, University of New Hampshire (UNH), for her commitment and efforts to bring the exhibition to UNH in the fall of 2009.

Finally, we would like to thank Jamie Griffith at Stanhope Framers and at Boston University’s Creative Services, Diana Parziale for her thoughtful catalogue design and Jan Hauben for her always patient oversight of the publication’s production.

Lynee Cooney  Marc Mitchell
Exhibitions Director, School of Visual Arts  Director ad interim, Boston University Art Gallery

Acknowledgments
Sidney Hurwitz’s Meditations on the Industrial Age

by Patricia Hills

Since the early 1970s, Sidney Hurwitz has focused on the industrial and urban landscape as the subject for his complexly organized and austerely beautiful intaglio prints. He has seen, studied, photographed, and thought about the elements of this landscape of factories, bridges, docks, and train stations. Away from the sites and back in his studio, he selects the sketches and photographs that best recall the light and shadow and intricate geometry of bricks and cement, steel and stone, girders and joists, hoppers and storage tanks, as well as pipes, ducts, vents, sheds, conveyer belts, chimneys, smokestacks, steel decks, railings, and ladder rungs. The results in his aquatint prints are what he has called, “the portrait, landscape, and still life of the industrial age.”¹ These representations of the actual sites, filtered through his experience and memories of them, become meditations on a heroic past of American industry. They are sites that have not yet lost their awesome presence.

Although drawn to printmaking soon after entering art school in the post-World War II years, Hurwitz would wait two decades before turning to the industrial landscape as the focus for his art. At the School of the Worcester Art Museum in 1950, he soon discovered that printmaking appealed to him because prints enabled him to make his drawings “more tangible,” and he “found the idea of making multiples quite appealing.”² Carl Fickhardt taught him etching techniques, and, during his second year at the school, Hurwitz enrolled at Brandeis University, where he studied English literature and art history and took studio courses with Mitchell Siporin and Peter Grippe. He then studied with David Aronson, Reed Kay, Jack Kramer, and Karl Fortess at Boston University, where he received his MFA in 1959. At the time, the art faculty at both Brandeis and BU held strong ties with figurative expressionism, a style and an outlook on art that influenced his choice of subject matter for many years.³ After teaching stints at the DeCordova Museum and Wellesley College, in 1965 he joined the faculty of the School of Fine and Applied Arts at Boston University, from which he retired in 1999.

A sabbatical leave from the University allowed Hurwitz to spend about eight months in London during the 1972–73 academic year.⁴ He sought out Islington Studios near his home in north London and introduced himself to Hugh Stoneman, a master printmaker who ran the Studios. He also frequented the Print Workshop run by Birgit Sköld on Charlotte Street in Soho, London, and enjoyed the camaraderie of the London printmakers he met, several of whom

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had been students of Stanley Hayter’s famous printmaking atelier in Paris. As Hurwitz honed his skills in intaglio printing, he became interested in the city itself and shifted his attention to city scenes as subjects for his prints. In 1986, he recalled:

I had begun working to translate the basic forms and compositions of the woodcuts into intaglio and managed to do a few plates along those lines. Although this was not my first stay in London, living there made me acutely aware of the character of the architecture and the particularity of the cityscape. I was struck by the appearance of the somewhat shabby but solid aspects of the industrial urban environment of Islington and Hackney. I spent many hours walking and taking the tube to various parts of the city, sketching and photographing, and soon began to translate these images onto plates. The first prints marking this change in approach were... 

In his first London etchings, such as Blackfriars Bridge [Figure 1], he elaborated on the abstract geometry of the structures of the bridges and buildings. However, the physical reality fascinated him more. The sense of a place achieved through the telling features of the working-class suburbs of Islington and Hackney within spreading Greater London appealed to him, and in subsequent prints he focused on the specificity of the architectural elements, such as Highbury Station with its unique station platform, tracks, staircases, and tunnels.

Cities that proudly display their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrial structures remind Hurwitz of his own youth in Worcester, Massachusetts. Worcester, still the second largest city in New England after Boston, boasts venerable cultural institutions such as the Worcester Art Museum, the American Antiquarian Society, and Mechanics Hall and universities such as Clark, Holy Cross, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute. During World War II it hummed as an industrial city, but began its decline shortly thereafter, especially after the Massachusetts Turnpike, built in the late 1950s, bypassed downtown from the flat his family rented in a triple-decker house on Barclay Street, he could see the deterioration of old factories.

An area then undergoing urban renewal. The site, except that photographic detail has been eliminated and surfaces display a purity of reflected light without distracting highlights. The prints, moreover, have a physical tactility—a slight burr on the blacks, a raised armature of lines, and, of course, the indentation of the plate mark, created when the damp paper and plate were run through the press. The physicality—the “thereness”—of Hurwitz’s aquatints cannot be approximated by photographic reproduces.

Hurwitz returned to London twice, in 1975 and 1976, in order to study the docksides of the Thames, the river that had made London a major industrial port in past centuries. His project was to produce a series of ten prints. Over a century before, the area of industrial London that perched on the banks of the Thames had fascinated another American, James McNeill Whistler. From the river’s banks near his studio in Chelsea, Whistler had viewed the docked ships and workers and had produced some of his most stunning pictures and several etchings. But whereas Whistler’s etchings look like delicate ink sketches (the result of an etching needle scratched into the wax-covered copper plate before the acid bath and printing) with meandering lines and cross-hatching to create darker tones, Hurwitz’s Thames prints, completed when he returned to Boston, are imposing and complex, 20-by-24-inch, intaglio compositions.

Hurwitz’s aquatint technique, for the Thames series and others, is to draw the contours and internal elements of the image’s design in detail on an opaque acid-resistant adhesive paper covering the plate. Thus, the arrangement of the lines and forms has priority in this process, and in many of the compositions he emphasizes the frontality of the forms, with the flat facades of the structures paralleling the picture plane. Hurwitz then carefully follows those guidelines to cut through the paper to score the plate, which is then placed in the acid bath. The acid bites through the cuts to etch the lines on the plate. He removes the paper and proceeds with the aquatint process, a technique used by Goya and other 18th-century printmakers. Hurwitz coats the whole plate with a layer of powdered resin. The plate is then heated and when the resin dust melts, it forms a pattern of dots on the plate around which the acid penetrates, creating a pitted surface. Through a series of stages in which areas of the plate are coated with acid-resistant stop-out varnish and repeatedly dipped into the acid bath, Hurwitz can achieve degrees of biting and stopping out. Hence, he achieves tonal variations in his aquatint print. At the end of the process the plate is inked and the surface wiped, with the result that ink pressed into the areas of heavy biting remains being wiped away. These areas would be a velvety black; lightly bitten areas (more easily wiped of their ink) would have lighter tones. After inking and wiping, the plate would be put through a press and the image transferred to a dampened sheet of paper under heavy pressure.

It is a meticulous process of working with and against the plate, but ultimately rewarding when the results produce a print such as Thames Series V—Hastings [Plate 04]—a display of tonal variations from matte blacks and delicate nuances of grays to pale whites. Without actually using color, Hurwitz nevertheless achieves almost comic-like effects as in the light and dark patterning of bricks that make up the buildings in Thames Series V—Doors. In Thames Series V—Storage the tonal range throws into relief the stairs and their shadows that wrap around the tower. A reproduction in a book or catalogue, such as this one, might trick the eye into believing that one is looking at a photograph of a site, except that photographic detail has been eliminated and surfaces display a purity of reflected light without distracting highlights. The prints, moreover, have a physical tactility—a slight burr on the blacks, a raised armature of lines, and, of course, the indentation of the plate mark, created when the damp paper and plate were run through the press. The physicality—the “thereness”—of Hurwitz’s aquatints cannot be approximated by photographic reproduces.

In the greater Boston area Hurwitz found many areas of the industrial landscape to serve as potential subjects for his art. During the 1970s he turned to the Fort Point Channel area of South Boston, an area then undergoing urban renewal. The Fort Point Channel Bridge [Plate 03] was one of three prints in which Hurwitz focused more...
and more closely on the design qualities of the bridge’s intricate structure and mechanics. In 1979 Hurwitz embarked on a series of seven aquatints based on a boat’s active oil and natural gas terminal facility in Everett, Massachusetts. Sand and gravel installations he discovered in Eastham (on Cape Cod) and in Weymouth, Massachusetts, provided the subjects for three more prints. About Weymouth he remarked, “The wonderful complexity of the storage tanks, conveyer belts, support columns, etc. suggest the architecture of fantastic castles or amusement park rides.”10 In 1985 he traveled to Sparrows Point in Maryland to experience the site—a museum, a sound-and-light show, and other amusement park features. The park’s website describes the transformation: “At the centre of the park there is a decommissioned metalworks, the old industrial facilities of which are today being put to a variety of different uses. The former factory buildings have been converted to accommodate cultural and corporate facilities; an old gas holder has become the biggest artificial dancing centre in Europe. Alpine climbing gardens have been created in the former storage bays, and an extinct blast furnace has been developed into a panoramic tower.”11

His large prints, Duisburg-Thyssen Ill and Duisburg-Thyssen V, Hurwitz suggests something of the heroic scale of the steel company that contributed to the manufacturing power of Germany in the postwar years and that dominated the landscape of the Ruhr Valley. However, steel manufacturing did not disappear from Duisburg: a new modernized steel manufacturing complex was subsequently built by Thyssen-Krupp Steel at the edge of town. Hurwitz continues to travel between the United States and Europe. He wrote to the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose industrial photographs he had long admired, asking for suggestions as to where he might find interesting industrial sites. At their suggestion, in 2002 he went to Duisburg, Germany, to look at the obsolete Thyssen-Krupp AG steel plant that had shut down its operations in 1985. Since then, Duisburg civic leaders in partnership with government groups had hired the landscape architects Peter and Anna-Lisa Lautz to convert the buildings and the site into an industrial theme park. The Duisburg-Nord Country Park first opened in 1994, and Hurwitz was amazed, and somewhat amused, by what he saw—a museum, a sound-and-light show, and other amusement park features. The park’s website describes the transformation:

“Among the prints from the first visit are Bethlehem III [Cover] with its large forms of smokestacks, ducts, and storage tanks with intricate patterns of tubing and pipes. Bethlehem XIII [Plate 14], the result of Hurwitz’s 1996 trip after the huge plant had closed, presents remnants of the industrial scene in the foreground and, through a tunnel, the buildings and green hillside of the city of Bethlehem in the distance. The tunnel suggests the time elapse between the remnants of the plant and the city where the townspeople no longer were subjected to the baffling pounding of the oxygen furnace every two minutes or so.”12

Figure 4

Green Line
1985
Watercolor, Aquatint
19 ½” x 24”

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In contrast to the imaginative retrofitting of the steel mills and furnaces to create the Duisburg-Nord Country Park, many of the old structures of European and American industry are left to corrode in the landscape, such as the giant cranes in Hurwitz’s Double Cranes situated in the old Antwerp harbor—sentinels left behind when the harbor was modernized and pushed further out toward the sea. Too expensive to dismantle, these giant cranes remind us of a time past, when industry kept Europe and the United States producing and increasing their gross national profits.

Hurwitz’s prints, then, sound a meditative note. He has created his art through a span of fifty years, from the time when the economy was expanding and Americans thought of their area as “the American century,” to the present, when heavy industry seems to have disappeared from our shores and moved to foreign countries. That is not wholly true, but rusting machinery, boarded-up old factories, and blighted urban landscapes—and the unemployment that accompanies that situation—make us wonder whether America’s industrial base will ever again achieve that era’s greatness for Americans. But whatever the future holds, Sidney Hurwitz’s art has captured and preserved the sublime beauty of those old factories, bridges, and elevated trains.

Notes

3. In conversation with author on October 7, 2008, Hurwitz recalled that during the time of his attendance, Herbert Barrett ran the school and Mary Murphy taught drawing.
5. This was not his first trip to Europe. During 1959–60, Hurwitz and his wife, sculptor Penelope Jencks, lived in Freiberg and Stuttgart, Germany, while he was on a Fulbright Fellowship.
7. Today the abrasives factory is owned by Compagnie Saint-Gobain.
8. Author’s conversation with Sidney Hurwitz, September 9, 2008, Boston.
11. Boston’s transit system of elevated, ground level, and below-ground tunnels is divided into four lines named after the colors red, green, orange, and blue, hence, its titles Orange Line and Green Line.
12. E-mail from Hurwitz to author, October 7, 2008.

Plates

Plate 1
Fort Point Channel Bridge I
1975
Etching, Aquatint
18 ¾” x 24 ¾”

Plate 2
Fort Point Channel Bridge II
1975
Etching, Aquatint
18 ¾” x 24 ¾”

Plate 3
Fort Point Channel Bridge III
1975
Etching, Aquatint
18 ¾” x 24 ¾”
Plate 4
Thames Series IX—Ventilators
1976
Etching, Aquatint
25" x 22 1/2"

Plate 5
Compressor I
1976
Etching, Aquatint
18 1/2" x 24 1/2"
Plate 6
Concrete Plant
1981
Etching, Aquatint
24 ½" x 18 ½"

Plate 7
Abandoned Factory
1982
Watercolor, Aquatint
18 ½" x 24 ½"
Plate 8
Orange Line
1984
Watercolor, Aquatint
18 5/8" x 24 1/2"

Plate 9
Cornice
1986
Watercolor, Aquatint
18 5/8" x 24 1/2"
Plate 10
Rowe Quarry
1987
Watercolor, Aquatint
18 3/4" x 24 3/4"

Plate 11
Sextet
1995
Watercolor, Aquatint
23 3/4" x 18 1/2"
Plate 12
USX—Gary I
1996
Watercolor, Aquatint
18 5/8” x 24 3/8”

Plate 13
Bethlehem VI
1998
Watercolor, Aquatint
18 3/8” x 24 3/8”
Plate 14
Bethlehem XIII
1998
Watercolor, Aquatint
16 ½'' x 20 ½''

Plate 15
Huletts VI
2000
Watercolor, Aquatint
16 ½'' x 20 ½''
Plate 16
Duisburg-Thyssen I
2002
Watercolor, Aquatint
16 7/8" x 20 ¾"

Plate 17
Bascule Bridge
2008
Etching, Aquatint
20 ¾" x 16 ¼"
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<td>1973</td>
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<td>Blackfriars Bridge, 1973</td>
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<td>Thames Series IV—Storage Tank, 1975</td>
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<td>New York Rooftopscapes I, 1983</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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</table>
Sidney Hurwitz
Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1932

Education
1960 Academy of Fine Arts, Stuttgart, Germany
1959 University of Freiburg, Germany
1957–1959 Boston University, MFA
1959, 1956 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
1952–1956 Brandeis University, BA, cum laude
1950–1952 School of the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA

Teaching Positions
2001, 1999 Visiting Professor, Amherst College
1965–1999 Boston University, College of Fine Arts
1965–1970 Director, School of Visual Arts, Boston University
1975 Visiting Professor, Brandeis University
1966–1977 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
1964–1965 Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA
1961–1962 DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA

Selected Solo Exhibitions
2007 Davidson Galleries, Seattle, WA
2007 Old Print Shop, New York, NY
2003 St. Botolph Club, Boston, MA
2002 Eli Marsh Gallery, Amherst College
1999 Adrondack Community College
1993 University of Utah
1991 William and Mary College, Williamsburg, VA
1990 Hixland Gallery, Miami, University, Oxford, OH
1990, 1988 Franz Bader Gallery, Washington, DC
1988 Morehead State University, Morehead, KY
1992, 1986 Mary Ryan Gallery, New York, NY
1986 Wiggin Gallery, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA
1984 Oxford Gallery, Oxford England
1981 Babson College, Wellesley, MA
1981, 1977 Martin Sners Gallery, New York, NY
1975 United States Embassy, Ankara, Turkey
1968, 1966 Tropos Gallery, Boston, MA
1960 United States Information Agency, Freiburg, Germany

Group Exhibitions (Partial List)
1977–2007 Boston Printmakers Biennials, Boston, MA
1999 University of New Hampshire Paul Art Center
1991 British Print Biennial, Bradford, England
1990 Print Club of Philadelphia
1988 Bradley University National Print Annual, Peoria, IL
1988 Audubon Artists Annual Exhibition, New York, NY
1988 Krakow Print Biennial, Krakow, Poland
1980 World Print International, San Francisco, CA
1980 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
1969 National Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
1961 1953 Library of Congress Print Annual
1956 United States State Department, American Drawings, Traveling Exhibition
1956 Museum of Modern Art, American Drawings, New York, NY

Awards
1999 National Academy of Design, Richard M. Racchia Memorial Prize
1986 Audubon Artists, New York, NY Silver Medal in Printmaking
1982 National Academy of Design, Leo Meissner Prize in Printmaking
1976 Massachusetts Artists Foundation Fellowship in Printmaking
1971 New England Intestational—Printmaking Prize
1969 National Institute of Arts and Letters Award
1966 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Fellowship
1959 Fulbright Fellowship for Study in Germany
1956 Austrian Government Grant for Study at The Vienna Academy

Selected Collections
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Cleveland Museum of Art
Library of Congress Print Collection
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England
Boston Public Library Print Collection
Kraske National Gallery, Poland
Worcester Art Museum
Virginia Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
Honolulu Museum of Art
DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA
Danforth Museum, Framingham, MA
Citibank, New York, NY
Federal Reserve Bank, Boston, MA
IBM, Danbury, CT
Readers Digest, Pleasantville, NY
Muscarelle Museum, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA
Japan International Bank, London, England
Bank of Boston, Boston, MA
Fidelity Investments, Boston, MA
United Technologies, Hartford, CT
President: Robert A. Brown
Provost: David K. Campbell

Boston University College of Fine Arts
School of Visual Arts
855 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02215

Dean ad interim: Walt C. Meissner
Director, School of Visual Arts: Lynne Allen
Exhibitions Director: Lynne Cooney

Boston University Art Gallery
at the Stone Gallery
855 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02215

Director ad interim: Marc Mitchell
Senior Security Assistant: Evelyn Cohen
Gallery Assistants: Christina An, Kaia Balcos, Tess Bilhartz, Michael Garguilo, Melanie Harvey, Timothy Kaddish, Samantha Kattan, Caitlin McVeigh, Mimi Palmore, Sarah Parrish, Terrence Smith, Ashley Varela, and Alison Yuhas

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