

My Grandfather Was a Famous Artist. He Also Made Greeting Cards.

By Jane Margolies

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TWO brawny construction workers perch on a plank dangerously suspended hundreds of feet off the ground in “Men of Steel,” a print that hangs in an exhibition at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery. The men are heroic figures intent on their task — bolting a horizontal beam to a column.

In a nearby display case, there is a greeting card illustrated with a snowy woodland scene called “Peaceful Valley,” depicting deer standing stock-still between gnarled trees.

Both etchings are by Samuel L. Margolies, who is best known for his New York cityscapes from the 1930s. And looking at them together — one a dynamic composition with pointed political undertones done by the artist at the peak of his powers, the other static, unconvincing and entirely tame — might be puzzling for some.

For me, it’s almost painful.

I’m the artist’s granddaughter. I didn’t know my grandfather well — he was estranged from the family and died in 1974, when I was 16 — but I’ve spent a good part of the last two years piecing together his life and, in the process, trying to understand how an artist whose work hung in the Whitney Museum of American Art alongside Edward Hopper’s could also have been capable of such, well, schlock.

This fascinating traveling show, “Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists, 1934-2000,” provides a clue.



“Men of Steel,” by Samuel L. Margolies. Associated American Artists, Syracuse University Art Collection

Associated American Artists, a private company established during the Depression, sought to promote artists and their work and at the same time convince everyday Americans that fine art had a place in their homes. In 1934 Associated’s founder, Reeves Lewenthal, held a meeting with artists including Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry — the company’s “heavy hitters,” in the words of Elizabeth Seaton, one of the exhibition’s curators. Mr. Lewenthal proposed that they produce etchings and lithographs that he would print in editions of 250 and sell to the public for five bucks apiece. “What! only \$5 for a SIGNED ORIGINAL by Thomas Benton, the Great American Artist,” one of the company’s ads blared. “Yes, Incredible, but True!”

Although Associated would branch into artist-designed home and fashion goods during its 66-year history — there are arresting stoneware platters and cotton fabrics in “Art for Every Home” — it started with prints, and they remained the foundation of the company.

At first, Associated sold them through department stores. It also opened galleries, including one on Fifth Avenue. But Mr. Lewenthal’s marketing breakthrough was mail order. Every year, Associated American Artists sent out catalogs that listed new works and profiled the artists. Gail Windisch, a retired Los Angeles lawyer whose research on the company was the basis for the show, said in a telephone interview, “The idea was that people would be more likely to buy prints if they felt invested in the people who made them.”

For the artists themselves — many of whom barely survived the 1930s, when their work was deemed a luxury by those who had difficulty putting food on the table — the company was salvation. Most received \$200 for each work — the equivalent of more than \$3,500 today. “It was manna from heaven,” Ms. Windisch said.

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It surely would have been for my grandfather. Born in 1897 on the Lower East Side to Jewish immigrants who had fled czarist Russia, Samuel Margolies studied at Cooper Union, the Art Students League and the National Academy, first painting and doing bronze sculptures before discovering etching.



Samuel L. Margolies in his New York studio in 1923. Courtesy of the Margolies family

He worked from the 25th and top floor of the World's Tower Building on West 40th Street in Manhattan. From his studio's quatrefoil windows, the artist looked out over Bryant Park and the New York Public Library, and, more important, the skyscrapers that workers were building all around him, supplying the subject matter for his art.

Despite a strong exhibition record, blue ribbons from art fairs and praise in the press, my grandfather struggled to make a living, even after joining the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, for which he produced prints that ended up everywhere from Evander Childs High School in the Bronx to the Library of Congress in Washington. He grew increasingly cranky. When the public paid scant attention to shows he helped organize for the Queensboro Society of Allied Arts & Crafts — he lived with his family for a time in Hollis, Queens — he published a tirade in its newsletter, which he produced, under the headline: "Is There Something Wrong With the People of Queens?" (He was ousted shortly thereafter.) My grandmother ultimately gave up on him, moving out with their two children (my father and aunt) and opening up the chasm between the artist and the rest of the family.

His relationship with Associated began in 1941, when, two years after the drypoint "Men of Steel" was exhibited at the New York World's Fair, he sold the company the copper plate. The same year, it bought his mezzotint "Reflections," a scene of boaters in Central Park with the buildings of Fifth Avenue in the background. During the next nine years Associated acquired 18 more plates, some he'd etched years before, some he made expressly for the company.

Here's the rub: Associated's goal certainly wasn't to foster mediocrity, but Mr. Lewenthal would only buy works he believed would appeal to the general public — the average housewife looking for something to hang on a wall. Though "Art for Every Home" and its catalog feature many of the company's most potent images — see Curry's fiery portrait of the abolitionist John Brown — a number of artists, my grandfather included, found they had better luck if they stuck to innocuous fare.

Which meant that not only did fine works like "Men of Steel" go out into the world in large numbers, but so did snowy rural landscapes that my grandfather created under seemingly interchangeable names: "Winter Symphony," "Winter Wonderland," "Winter Solitude" (none of the above in the exhibition, thankfully). These "snow scenes," as he dismissively referred to them, typically involved some combination of white-blanketed trees, distant farmhouses, meandering streams and, sometimes, deer (which he rendered with far less success than he had the New York skyscrapers). One called "White Fantasy" practically makes me cringe.



A box of Associated American Artists greeting cards with reproductions of, from left, "Peaceful Valley" by Samuel L. Margolies, "Winter Fun" by Louis Lozowick and "Home Port" by Gordon Grant. KSU, Beach Museum of Art

But customers gobbled them up. While it took two years for Associated American Artists to sell out its inventory of "Men of Steel" prints, the snow scenes sold out quickly — in some cases immediately. During the patriotic war years, when the company placed eagles on its catalog covers, artwork that played up the wholesomeness of the countryside appealed to many Americans, Ms. Windisch said. "The art said, 'This is the peace and beauty we are fighting for:'"

Then, too, my grandfather, who went to work at a General Motors plant outside New York City that built carrier-based bombers for the Navy, might simply have been too busy to attempt anything artistically ambitious. He implied as much in a note he dashed off to Associated in 1944: "Although I can't spend a minute away from my war job, I'll not sleep a wink until I've etched a new plate. I'll deliver it to headquarters within 10 days."

In time, Associated American Artists, under Mr. Lewenthal's successor, Sylvan Cole, embraced nonrepresentational art. And it was the first American publisher of David Hockney prints. The company folded in 2000.

A half-century before, my grandfather sold his last plates to Associated; one was the aquatint "Builders of Babylon." Like "Men of Steel," it's a New York scene of two construction workers high above the city — though this picture has a dreamy, vaporous quality, as if the stylized, almost mythic figures are evanescing into thin air. The 1950 company catalog called it his "newest" work, but he almost certainly created it in the 1930s.

"Men of Steel" and "Builders of Babylon" are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has well over 100 prints and drawings by Samuel Margolies, and many other museums and institutions. They are also coveted by private collectors.

I've tried to buy both works at auction but have had to drop out of the bidding as prices for prints that originally cost \$5 climbed to several thousands of dollars.

Meanwhile, the snow scenes flood eBay.

"Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists, 1934-2000" runs through July 9 at the Grey Art Gallery, 100 Washington Square East, Manhattan; greyartgallery.nyu.edu.

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