



*A Fantasy in Blue and Gold*, 1964, oil and acrylic on canvas, 27" x 36", The Stillman-Lack Foundation



*Coney Island (Three Horses)*, c. 1936, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", The Stillman-Lack Foundation

# Ary Stillman

## PLAY OF LIGHT

The Journey of an American Modernist

Ary Stillman (1891–1967) was a Russian-born American artist who, in spite of gaining significant recognition in his day, is largely absent from the historical annals of modern art. Yet the works he produced have continued to intrigue art historians as well as offering contemporary audiences new perspectives on the prevailing movements, influences and milieus of twentieth century art.

Following his own independent and wayward course, evolving from representational art to the post war, painterly style of abstraction inspired by cubism and surrealism, Stillman took cues from his surroundings – Paris in the 20's, New York in the 30's, 40's and 50's and Mexico in the 60's. While he absorbed the stylistic experiments and innovations of these decades, he distilled them through his singular vision to produce a remarkably distinct and mature body of work.

In tracing the evolution of Stillman's art, one finds evidence of his early academic training in Russia, the lingering spell of Impressionism in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century, and the mid-century impact of Abstract Expressionism in America. Further, one discovers yet another story as well – the story of a young Jewish boy in Russia seeking to realize his dream of becoming an artist against all prevailing odds. His legacy is not only the distinctive body of work that he created, but also the undaunted resolve that characterized his life as an artist.

In 1907, Ary Stillman immigrated from Czarist Russia to Sioux City, Iowa, where he spent his days working to support his family and his nights painting. All the while he hoped to continue his artistic training. In 1919 he succeeded in moving to New York, and then, two years later, to Paris to further his studies and nourish his ripening capacities. He soon earned a reputation on both sides of the Atlantic for his atmospheric landscapes. Traveling to North Africa and Palestine, Stillman also created watercolor portraits of individuals from various “exotic” cultures. Although Stillman was certainly exposed to abstract art as well as the beginnings of the surrealist movement in Paris, he didn't immediately embrace these new strategies, continuing instead to respond to the impressionists' experiments with light and atmosphere.

In 1933 Stillman returned to New York. There, he painted the familiar landmarks of the city, capturing the vibrant crowds and the cadence of urban life. He worked for the easel division of the WPA Federal Art Project and became a member of the American Artist's Congress. He also participated in numerous exhibitions, and his work was embraced both critically and publically.

In the 1940's the center of the modernist avant-garde moved from Paris to New York when Stillman's colleagues such as Jackson Pollock, Willem DeKooning and Adolph Gottlieb combined the spontaneous, unmediated gestures of Surrealism and the geometric innovations of Cubism into the potent cocktail known today as Abstract Expressionism, or the New York School. By 1946, in response to the horrors of World War II, Stillman, like many of those contemporaries, had completely abandoned representational art. Like them, he sought to create an art of “inner

necessity." As he explained, "For me, the world of surface realities is no longer paintable. For nothing is as it formerly seemed. It is not the surface of things – the look of things – that is real – it is that which is hidden beneath the surface."

Stillman particularly responded to the Abstract Expressionist pursuit of the universal language of archetypal forms and symbols, which Carl Jung and other "archetypal" theorists believed constitute a dynamic, numinous, core of being – an ancient trans-historical truth embedded in the psyche – the "soul" – of modern man. Because these "memories" exist deep within the subconscious, to encounter these buried images artists employed the techniques of psychic automatism, subverting conscious control through spontaneous gesture.

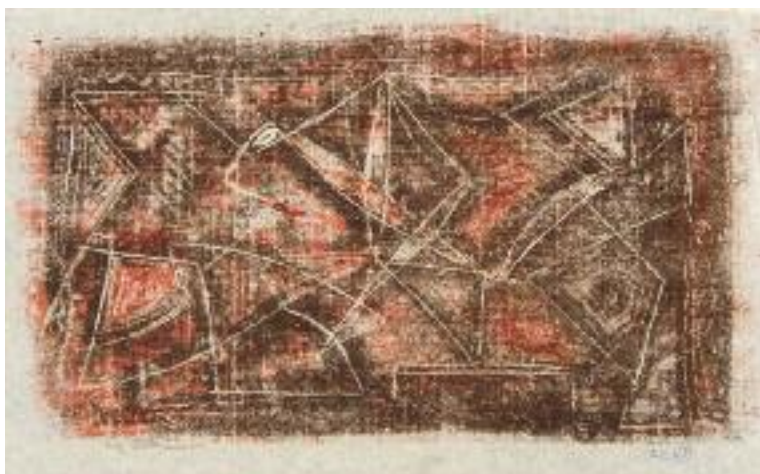
During the summer of 1948 in the artists' colony of Provincetown, Massachusetts, Stillman's experiments with such techniques led to a unique drawing process. Using an inkless pen or stylus-like tool, the artist impressed the paper with visible scribbles, which only emerged as white lines when he rubbed a flat stick of charcoal or pastel across the surface. These evocative, subtly modulated, works on paper are sophisticated, yet little known, examples of Abstract Expressionist art. He imbued his abstractions with a glowing atmospheric quality that derives from both Impressionism and biblical/mystical concepts of divine light. He subsequently adapted his technique to the graphic arts, experimenting in the early 1950's with color lithography and woodcut.

During the rise of the New York School, Stillman exhibited regularly at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery on Manhattan's 57th Street and with the Provincetown Art Association. Yet, Stillman severed these affiliations when he moved to Mexico, in 1957. In failing health, he spent the final ten years of his life between Cuernavaca and Houston, Texas, where he received medical treatment. In many ways Stillman's paintings and works on paper from this period constitute an inventory of life experiences that apply techniques of gestural abstraction, surrealism, and impressionism to imagery derived from myriad sources including pre-Columbian Mexican culture, classical mythology, literature, history, and his own personal memories and dreams.

The art of Ary Stillman gained critical acclaim in the mid-twentieth century, and 40 years after his death is experiencing a renaissance. A major retrospective was held this spring in Sioux City, Iowa, where Stillman immigrated 100 years ago. Last year, two New York organized exhibitions of Stillman's work were on display, including the prestigious Pollack-Krasner House. As of this writing, 45 major museums hold Stillmans in their permanent collections.

My sincere appreciation to Simon Zalkind, Curator of the Mizel Arts & Culture Center's Singer Gallery, for recognizing Stillman's importance and supporting his "rediscovery" through organizing and curating this exhibition. Along with the recently published book on Stillman, this exhibition addresses the different artistic strategies that Stillman used to authentically live and express his identities. He was a Russian-Jewish émigré in the Midwest, an expatriate in Paris between the wars, a liberal intellectual in Depression-era New York, and a post-Holocaust international humanist.

Barry Lack, Executive Director  
The Stillman-Lack Foundation



*Woodcut No. 13*, c. 1953, experimental proof 2/2, paper, 10  $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 16  $\frac{1}{2}$ ", The Stillman-Lack Foundation



*Janitzio*, 1940, oil on canvas, 19  $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 23  $\frac{3}{8}$ ", The Stillman-Lack Foundation



*Gold and Blue*, 1948, oil on canvas, 27" x 21", The Stillman-Lack Foundation

Opposite panel: *Self Portrait & Still Life*, 1942, oil on canvas, 32" x 27", Private Collection

Cover: *Design on an Old Wall*, 1958–1960, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 18", The Stillman-Lack Foundation

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**JANUARY 20–MARCH 10, 2009**

Opening Reception January 31, 6:30–9 p.m.

**Sponsors:**





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**Lecture by Donald Kuspit**

*“Making An Emotional Difference: The Art of Ary Stillman”*

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