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By John Palmer Leeper

THE MOST impressive single quality of Adja Yunkers is his absolute maturity as an artist. Each print is a complete, fecund statement. The impact of his woodcuts, which I first saw unpacked and spread about the Print Room of the Fogg Museum, was deep and satisfying—a recognition of the poised and powerful statement which places him in the tradition of modern expressionism: Gauguin, Nolde, Heckel.

Knowing Yunkers himself, following the constantly extending horizons of his art have in no way lessened appreciation of his fullness and potency. In part these qualities may have grown from the assimilation with thought and high wit of rich, heterogeneous experience. He was born in Riga, trained in Leningrad, Berlin, Paris and London, and later travelled through Central and South

America, reaching the West Indies as a stowaway, then stoker, on a Danish freighter. Yunkers eventually returned to Scandinavia to choose a workshop in Stockholm, focus of intellectual life in northern Europe, and his role there became an important one. He founded and published the Ars-Art portfolios, constantly calling attention to new, and to established Scandinavian creative artists. In addition to the fruitful work of editing and writing, these years were filled with steady production and new exploitation of the woodcut medium. Increasingly his prints were seen in European exhibitions, and one-man shows were held in Berlin, Hamburg, Copenhagen and Oslo. A few American collectors learned of his work, but no comprehensive collection of Yunkers' prints reached this side of the Atlantic.

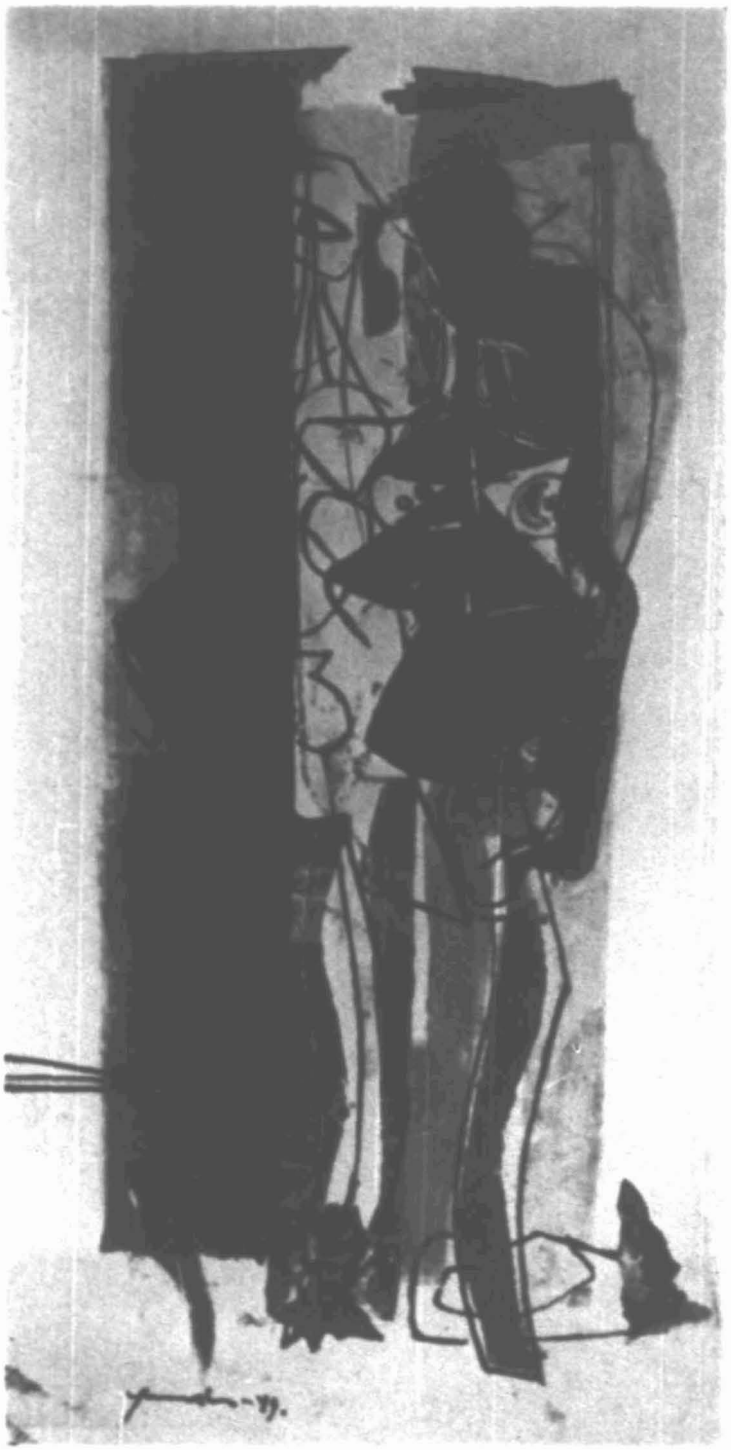
The sudden, Minervan appearance of a strong, mature artist in our midst dates from the arrival of his wife, Kerstin, in New York in 1946, bearing a portfolio of the large woodcuts that now are in the most distinguished print collections in this country.

In 1947 a fire destroyed his European studio, tools, and the blocks and prints produced during the preceding ten years. Nothing was salvaged beyond the handful of prints fortunately on a continental tour at the moment. Immediately thereafter Adja and Kerstin Yunkers moved to the United States, bringing with them only that nucleus of prints. America is thus generally unacquainted with Yunkers' formative work, and his extraordinary reputation rests entirely on the work of the last three years. Perhaps knowing only a segment of his work is partly responsible for the impression of astonishing unity and finality, but only in part can it be so explained.

Yunkers' American career began with a teaching position at the New School for Social Research in New York, while summers were spent teaching at the University of New Mexico. He formed a passion for New York as for the incandescent New Mexican countryside. Even the endless trips by bus between New York and New Mexico became enormous adventures, and he lived for

DEAD BIRD. Colored woodblock print 18¼" x 19¼". 1947.
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

SUBURB. Colored woodblock print 8½" x 23½". 1950.
Photograph Naomi Siegler.



THE INTRUDER. Colored monotype 8½" x 23¼". 1949. *Collection Miss Hortense Powdermaker, New York. Photograph Naomi Siegler.*

CRYING WOMAN. Colored woodblock print 18¼" x 25⅜". 1944. *Courtesy Boston Museum of Fine Arts.*

days on "Kleenex bread" sandwiches, met everyone, and found everyone rewarding.

At the end of two years Yunkers' woodcuts were to be found in the Print Rooms of the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Chicago Art Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art—in a word, in every key collection. Such eminent private purchasers as Lessing J. Rosenwald, Frank Crowinshield, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and innumerable others added his work to their cabinets. He was named a Guggenheim fellow for 1949-50.

AS GRAPHIC artists the expressionists, particularly the German expressionists, were marked by their penchant for woodcut, which they freed from its role of reproductive agent and used as a direct medium. The cut became free and powerful as it had not been since the fifteenth century. In addition they were constant experimenters, utilizing the graphic media vigorously and imaginatively.

Yunkers may be studied as a continuation of both these impulses. Like his predecessors he customarily works on the plank, using its surface grain to supply basic textures, and on this he builds, having developed a procedure of printing akin to that of the Ukiyo-e artists who employed blocks by the score, even printing certain of them blind for particular effects.

Over the texture and tone so established, Yunkers prints his key block, a powerful carving giving the basic elements of the design. One at a time the various blocks are printed, their number depending on the complexity of the print and the effects intended. This procedure has nothing of the mechanical in it, no confining limitation of accurate register, and is in itself a creative action, the print literally growing under his hand. The key block is the final as well as the first used, re-establishing and strengthening the design.

The paper employed naturally varies, depending upon the nature of the print, but there is a recurring use of dark papers of tissue weight, a fragility making large editions impossible. His inks bear resemblance to enamel, for their surfaces are glossy and opaque, as rich in texture as brush-worked areas.

The double factor of complexity in procedure, and of the creative act in the printing process, accounts for the singularly small editions of each print, and for the individuality of each.

Yunkers' recent experimentation in monotypes is of particular interest, and it is his firm hope to continue this exploration in New Mexico where a group of young print-makers may gather about him at Corrales to form a workshop for the graphic arts in the Southwest. To explain lucidly these discoveries is a difficult task, for the business of printing here becomes identical with the process of creation. Each print is a unique solution: the block is prepared for it in endless ways. The inking is a delicate process, made intricate by the use of stencils at various stages, by the superposition of materials, by direct carving, and by the magical application of touches of color.

Merely to state the fact that experimentation exists, and to allow the prints themselves to stand as convincing evidence of it, is sufficient. More important, one must understand what the role of this constant searching for new effects, and of the delight in elaborate textures plays with Adja Yunkers—how well it is assimilated into the totality of his art.

The spectacle of the artist infatuated with his virtuosity is not an unusual one, but Yunkers cannot interpret the question of how something is achieved as a serious compliment. Despite his impressive accomplishments as an innovator, and the remarkable technical achievement each of his prints evidences, such a question has little relevance. The mechanics of the sentence are so fused with the statement that the consciousness of an original and meticulous style is an afterpleasure. Here, I think, we have the most telling evidence for the maturity of Yunkers: that without

jeopardizing the clarity and emotional power of his prints, he is able to handle a method that might easily amount to performance alone.

FEW THINGS are more difficult for the responsible critic or connoisseur than to form, through analysis and understanding of his own emotional and aesthetic reaction to a work of art, a lucid and tangible estimate of the artist and his attitude. In talking with Mr. Yunkers I have been struck frequently with his belief that the full maturity of intelligence and experience is a state of neutrality. In other words, the fully developed man of breadth views with wit, interest, sympathy and intelligence whatever experience comes before him, but does not participate in anything outside his immediate destiny.

Adja Yunkers' prints seem to reflect this attitude in being perfectly balanced, disciplined, clear statements. But they lack the discordant note. Each print is finished, and so captures his goal of equilibrium, that to my mind, just as there is a flaw in the philosophy, there is an omission in the print. This is an elusive and controversial point, and one poses it with humility.

A more specific note, though a related one, is Adja Yunkers' keen pleasure in the joys of this world, and his wise acceptance of the bitterness that accompanies them. Unless one employs Hedonism in its purest sense, the word is perhaps too strong, but essentially that is the word. And it is an unfamiliar note in contemporary thought, this fecund wealth, for our passion is for the dead land. The relish of the physical and the natural is indicated in Yunkers' sumptuous textures, rich and sombre colors, his virile designs, and the delicate nuance of his finest prints.

It is a proud quality, and a hopeful one.