



ADOLF DEHN'S LITHOGRAPHS

International Views

Sarah P. Rubinstein

IN NOVEMBER, 1987, "*The Prints of Adolf Dehn*," an exhibition of 70 of the Minnesota-born artist's lithographs, opened at the James J. Hill House in St. Paul and will run through March 19, 1988. In conjunction with the exhibit, the MHS Press has just issued *The Prints of Adolf Dehn: A Catalogue Raisonné*, compiled by Joycelyn Pang Lumsdaine and Thomas O'Sullivan, with essays by Richard W. Cox and Clinton Adams. In the following MHS Collections article Sarah Rubinstein, who edited the catalogue raisonné, offers readers a further view of works by Dehn, "among the most influential American printmakers of the first half of the twentieth century."

Collecting the creations of Minnesota artists has long been part of the Minnesota Historical Society's program, but until recently primarily those works on

recognizable Minnesota subjects were considered for acquisition. In the early 1980s the society consciously broadened its policy and began collecting more works by state artists on non-Minnesota themes. The result has been dramatic. This article will focus on Adolf Dehn—a printmaker and watercolorist whose roots were in this state but whose subjects were drawn from throughout the world. Dehn and his artwork provided the specific instance to argue the general policy. The society's decision to collect his prints became pivotal in this turn of events.

Born in 1895 to German immigrant parents in Watterville, Minnesota, Adolf Dehn left home upon high school graduation to study art in Minneapolis and New York City.¹ In the 1920s he joined other artistic and literary illuminati in Europe, spending a couple of years each in succession in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. Lithography was his medium of choice to depict the nightclub patrons, the street scenes, and the landscape

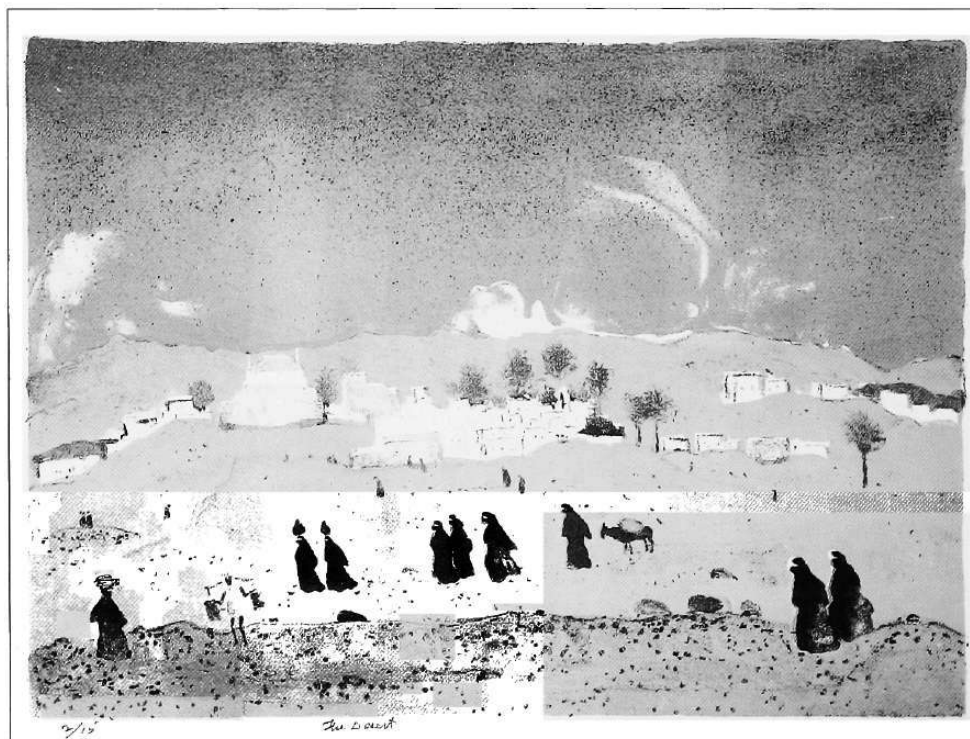
¹ On Dehn's life and work, see Richard W. Cox, "Adolf Dehn: The Minnesota Connection," *Minnesota History* 45 (Spring, 1977): 166-186, and "Adolf Dehn: Satirist of the Jazz Age," *Archives of American Art Journal* 18 (1978): 11-18; "Adolf Dehn," in Carl Zigrosser, *The Artist in America: Twenty-four Close-ups of Contemporary Printmakers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 14-23.

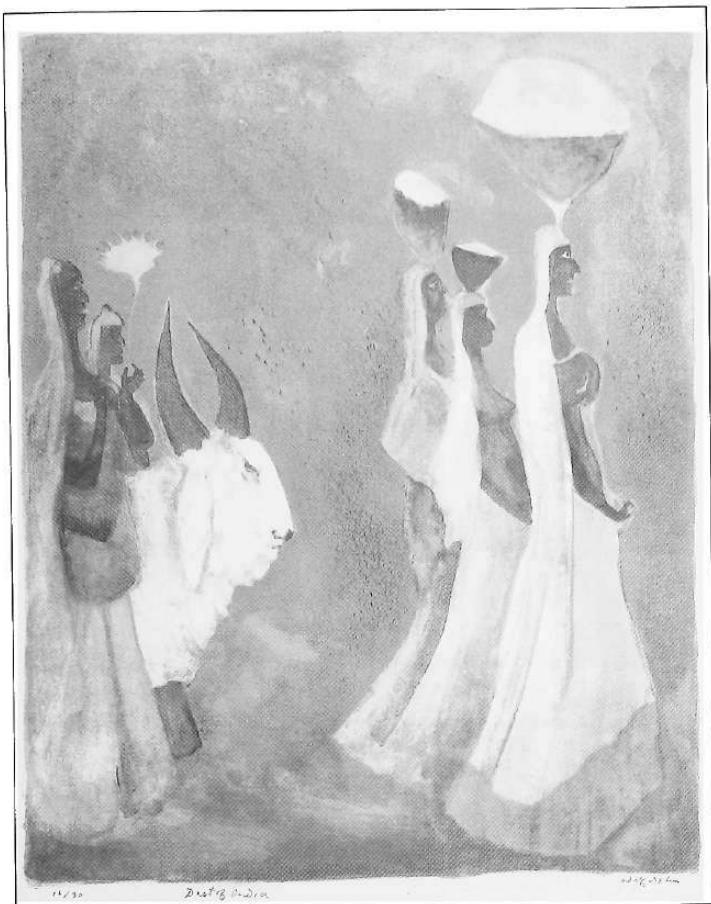
MHS COLLECTIONS



CARIBBEANS (1961)
*exemplifies Dehn's
 exuberant use of color
 shown in his earlier
 lithographs.*

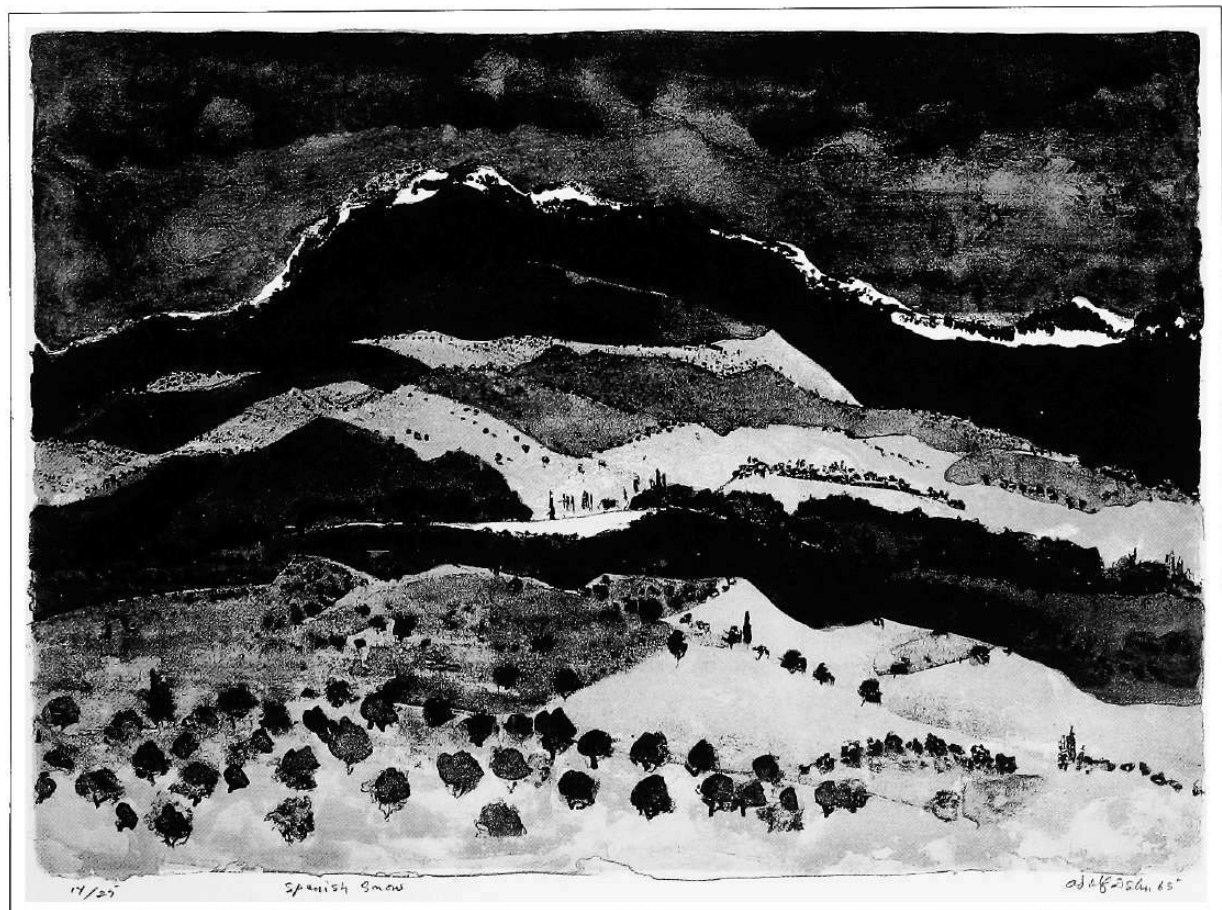
THROUGH its subtle
 coloring, *The Desert*
 (1967) conveys the hot,
 dusty feeling Dehn
 remembered from his
 trip to the Middle East.

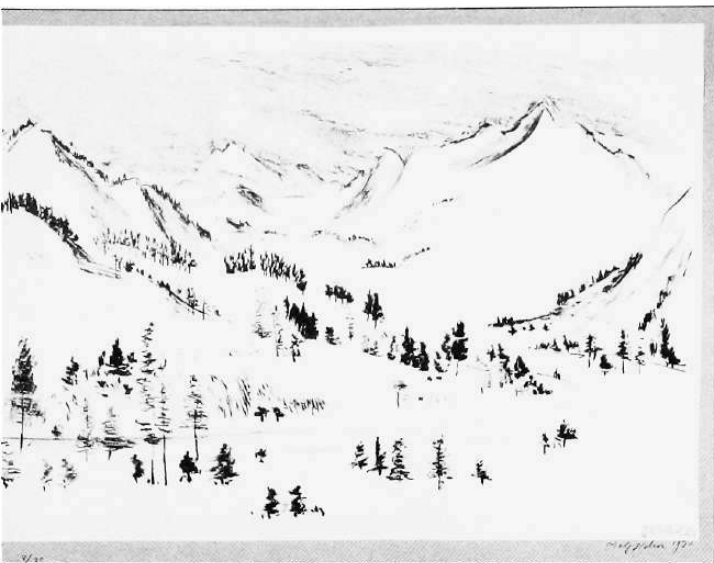




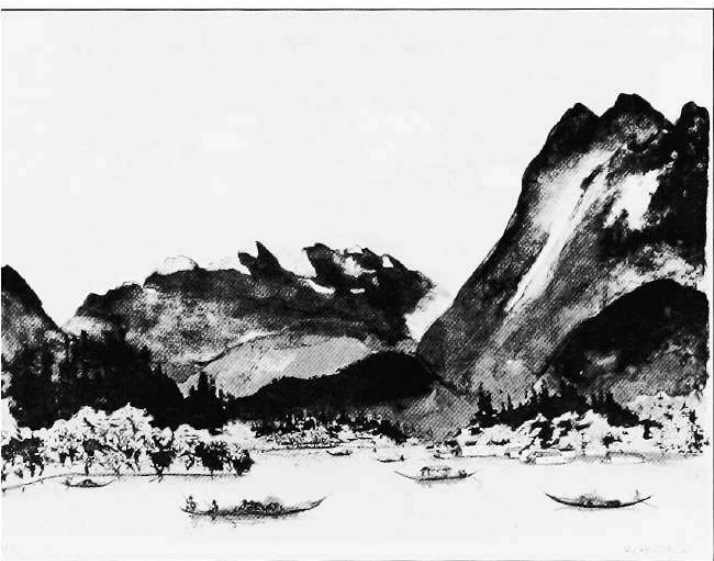
DUST OF INDIA (1963), one of a series Dehn printed in three colors, shows the gently moving forms of Indian women against the majestic bulk of a sacred bull.

SPANISH SNOW (1965), printed in four colors, plays on a favorite theme of the artist—mountains in all their rugged glory.





MOUNTAINS near Oberammergau (1930) and Lake Dal (1965) demonstrate different techniques—from light and delicate to dark and heavy—and depict one of Dehn's favorite subjects—mountains.



of postwar Europe. Dehn described the lithographic process: "A lithograph is drawn on smooth limestone with a black grease crayon—just as a picture is drawn on paper. After the drawing is finished, the design-covered stone is treated with chemicals. Then the stone is inked with a roller, a dampened paper is laid on the stone, both stone and paper are pulled through a press—and *voilà*, the finished print. It sounds easy, and it is—after one has done it for twenty years."² He experimented with his lithographic techniques, turning to rubbing, erasing, and cutting his drawings on stone to

achieve sharp black-and-white contrasts or subtle gradations of grays.

Dehn's reputation as a lithographer grew, based on several successful showings of his work. He returned to the United States on the eve of the Great Depression and, like so many other artists, had to struggle to make a living. He received some support from federal art projects, and he also garnered a small share of the mass market through the Adolf Dehn Print Club—"original signed lithographs for only a few dollars." These prints fit the American regionalist genre, as they were chiefly landscapes, some featuring Minnesota. Dehn joined even more lucrative and long-term ventures with the Associated American Artists and the American Artists Group. They commissioned runs of up to 250 prints and used hard-sell advertising through such outlets as department stores.

In what he felt was a major leap of faith, Dehn in the late 1930s began working with watercolors. He found that his innovative lithograph techniques made the transition to the loose medium of watercolor amazingly smooth. To his great surprise the watercolor paintings were well received by both art critics and the buying public.

After World War II Dehn resumed his travels, this time on a global scale. His sojourns in Spain, Italy, Ireland, Mexico, Venezuela, Haiti, India, and Afghanistan are all reflected in his lithographs. Again he concentrated on landscapes and people. The full range of his technical expertise can be examined in such works as the Haitian market scenes, the compositions of Indian women and sacred bulls, or the monumental Mayan women.

Encouraged by his success as a watercolor artist, he began using color in his lithographs. Some, such as the vibrant Caribbean scenes, use four-color combinations. Occasionally a lithograph was printed in different color combinations with separate stones being drawn in black and then inked for each color. In the society's collection of Dehn prints are progressive sets of color proofs; these are proofs done in a single color and then a final multicolor print. Thus the stages of the printing process for color lithography can be followed by studying these sets of color proofs.

By the time of his death in 1968, Dehn's work had been shown in one-artist shows and retrospective exhibits and was in the collections of the major American art museums. Much earlier in his career, however, Dehn had realized that he had not kept examples of each print edition, nor had he kept records of title,

² Adolf Dehn, "Oh Woman! Oh Frailty! Five Lithographs and a Personal Commentary," '48 *The Magazine of the Year* 2 (Feb., 1948): 134.



BENARES BEGGARS (1963) and *Bitt'chon* (1926) reveal Dehn's continuing sensitivity to people living in poverty, whether he found them in post-World War I Europe or the economically emerging countries of Asia.

medium, and number of prints in the edition. Systematically he went through his remaining copies, marking them "Rare," "Only copy," "Do not sell." He began buying back his own prints. In this effort to assemble a master set containing one of each lithograph he had made, he was ably assisted by his wife, painter Virginia Engleman Dehn. The thoroughness of the Dehns' undertaking was attested to by an art history graduate student, Joycelyn Pang Lumsdaine, who inventoried the master set for her thesis completed in 1974.

In the early 1980s when the Minnesota Historical Society acquisitions committee was considering a change in the collections policy, the debate turned to the feasibility of focusing on one or two Minnesota printmakers, such as Dehn and his good friend, Wanda Gág, and collecting one of each print they had produced. Because the society already owned many examples of Dehn's work, mostly watercolors, drawings, and prints on rural and north woods subjects, the decision to acquire his work seemed natural. Curator of art Thomas O'Sullivan added other examples showing Dehn's satire and social comment, and Virginia Dehn made a gift to the society of 17 Dehn prints and drawings in 1983. O'Sullivan next wrote to Virginia Dehn to inquire about the condition of the master set, the number of prints in it, and the possibility of publishing a catalogue raisonné. In the summer of 1984, he and the managing editor of the Minnesota Historical Society Press, John McGuigan, met at the Dehn house in New York City on a sticky, hot June afternoon to review



about a thousand prints. Many of the prints, especially from early and late in Dehn's career, were virtually unknown and rarely seen. By December Virginia reached a decision to donate the master set to the Minnesota Historical Society, and the society began planning to mount an exhibit and publish a catalogue raisonné based on the Lumsdaine thesis.

O'Sullivan's work had only begun. With a copy of Lumsdaine's thesis in hand, he made a return visit to New York to inventory the master set and select which one of multiple copies to take. Then the collection was crated and shipped to Minnesota on a loan basis to be cataloged. One year later in December, 1985, Virginia Dehn and the Minnesota Historical Society executed an official transfer of title of the master set.

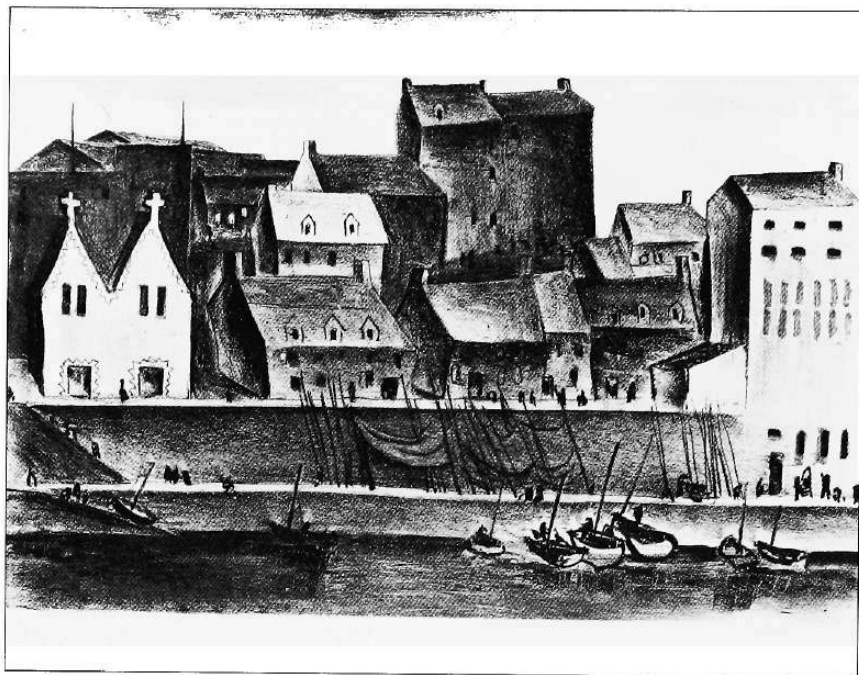
Preparation for the exhibit and book proceeded. Grant application forms went out to the National Endowment for the Arts. O'Sullivan, again with Lumsdaine as a reference, measured more than 600 prints in inches and centimeters, verified dates, number of prints in each edition and titles, and checked with other galleries and museums for their versions of Dehn prints to fill in any perceived gaps. The prints were photographed for archival reference and for the cata-

logue and then stored in acid-free folders, eventually to be matted for permanent storage.

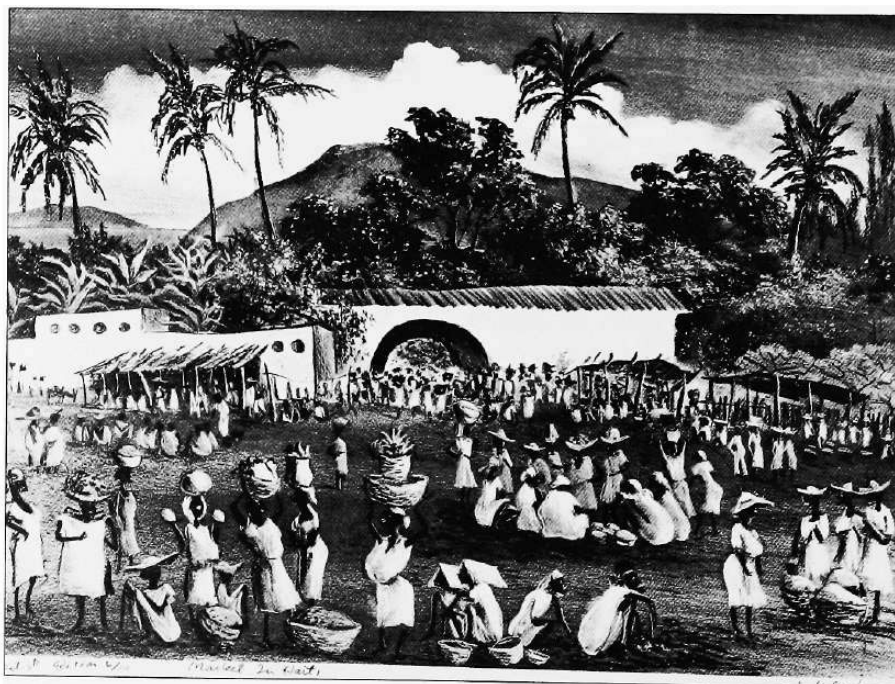
The catalogue raisonné, published in October, 1987, has already been cited as a reference in the literature of American printmaking. The photographs are being used by other museums in their efforts to identify their Dehn prints. The Minnesota Historical Society is recognized as *the* repository of Adolf Dehn prints.

Adolf Dehn has sometimes been pigeonholed as a

one-subject artist, painting or drawing only bucolic farm scenes. This collection allows the opportunity to see the breadth of his work—the social satire and commentary, the surrealism, the sensitive depiction of people, the use of color. The illustrations that accompany this article are representative of his international work. They point up the changing ideas and techniques of the artist over his lifetime as well as the new direction of the Minnesota Historical Society's collecting program.



THE QUAI at Douarnenez (1927) and Market in Haiti (1952) display Dehn's interest in places where people lived and worked. From Berlin streets to New York parks to Minnesota farms, he depicted houses and shops against a variety of horizons.





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