

The Most Significant Western Prints of the Past 100 Years?

by John Faubion

I recently asked curators at a random sampling of America's museums to identify the most significant Western print in their collections and explain why they chose it. The criteria: Their print selection had to be a work on paper from the past 100 years. Passions for the art of the American West run so deep that you'd have thought I'd asked a mother to pick her favorite child. Some simply could not, or would not, choose.

It is worth noting that the factors that contributed to the prints featured here being christened "significant" are not necessarily the same as those applied to their predecessors. Many earlier prints of the uncharted American West were regarded as important because they were visual documents of its flora, fauna, and native peoples. Some helped shape the worldview of America.

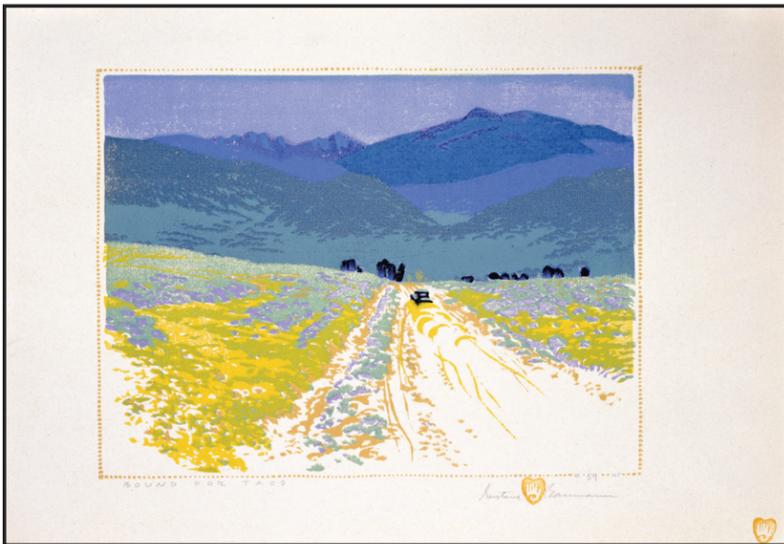


After Karl Bodmer (Swiss, 1809-1893),
Johann Hürlimann, engraver,
"Missouri Indian, Oto Indian,
Chief of the Puncas," aquatint, mezzotint, etching,
and roulette, hand-colored on paper,
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Ne.
Gift of Enron Art Foundation, NNG 520.2

Notable early examples were a series of prints produced by Swiss-born artist Karl Bodmer to record the exploration of the Upper Missouri River between 1832 and 1834.

Bodmer was accompanied by German naturalist Prince Maximilian. In a 2013 article about the expedition, Manuela Well-Off-Man, Ph.D., Assistant Curator at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, wrote: "Although they were not the first to explore the American West and record their observations, they were the first team combining a trained scientist and a skilled artist (one of the major oversights of the 1804-06 Lewis and Clark expedition), whose collaboration resulted in a publication of unique art of historical, scientific, and ethnological importance: *Travels in the Interior of North America* (Koblenz and Paris, 1839-43.)" Eighty-one hand colored aquatints illustrate this publication, refined by Bodmer, over a period of more than a decade, from watercolors and drawings he had made on the voyage. Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, is home to more than 350 of these watercolors and drawings.

Toby Jurovics, Joslyn's Chief Curator & Holland Curator of American Western Art, identified *Tableau 7* as a significant example of a print from this publication. Jurovics writes: "*Tableau 7* is a triple portrait, 'Missouri Indian. Oto Indian. Chief of the Puncas.' The three individuals were encountered at different times and locations, their likenesses combined in the studio by



Gustave Baumann, "Bound for Taos," 1936, woodcut on flax fiber paper, 13.5 x 17 inches

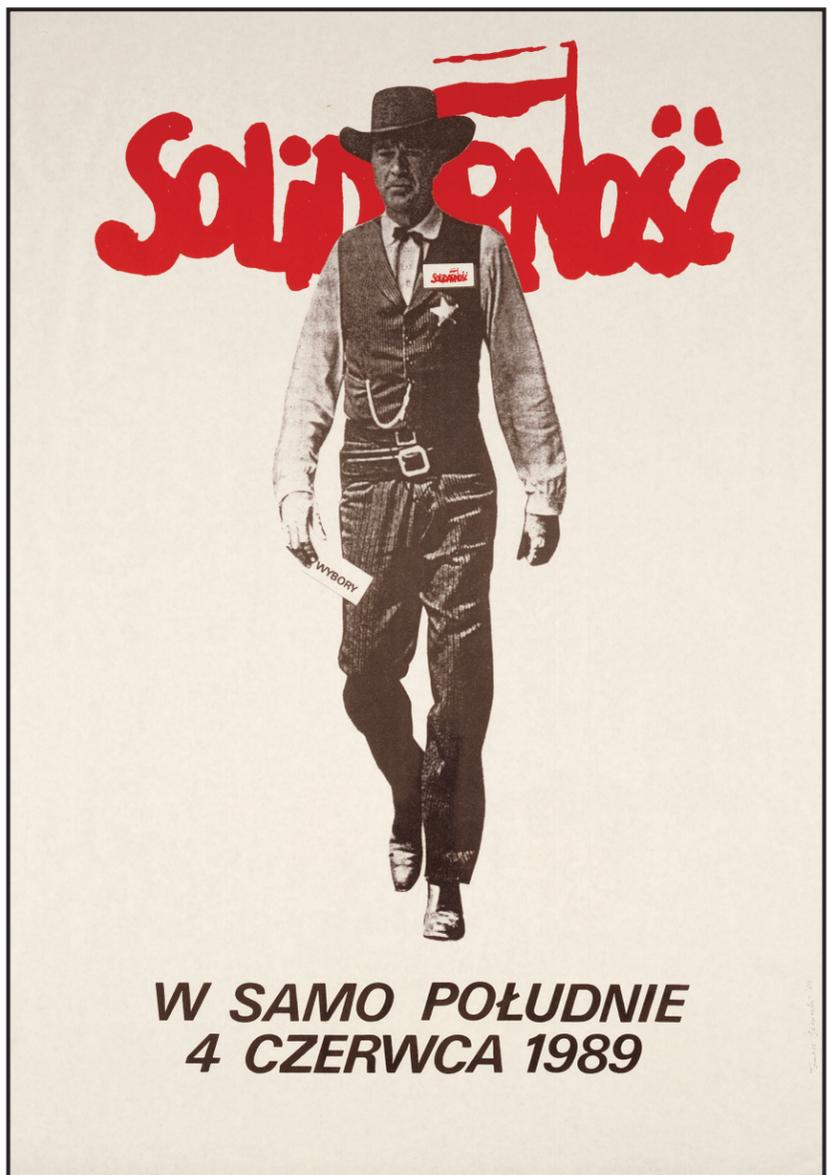
Bodmer in a drawing for the engraver to follow. While the image speaks to Maximilian's ethnographic interests, it is more compelling as an example of Bodmer's careful sensitivity to not only the likenesses but the personalities of his sitters."

According to Sarah E. Boehme, Ph.D., curator at Stark Museum of Art in Orange, Texas: "One of the most significant Western prints in the collections of the Stark Museum of Art is *Bound for Taos*, a woodcut by Gustave Baumann. Baumann is important in the field of western art because he chose printmaking as his primary medium. His work celebrates the practice of making multiples, yet creating them in a handmade process. He used one of the oldest printmaking methods, the woodcut, but he made works with a modern sensibility. In *Bound for Taos*, he portrayed a New Mexican landscape with barrenness and patches of foliage against boldly layered mountains in the distance. The small black automobile seems to cut a path toward the ultimate destination."

Few collecting institutions have the original artist-carved wood block(s) from which any prized print was pulled. Keep this in mind as Boehme continues: "The Stark Museum's print of *Bound for Taos* is especially interesting because it is part of a set that shows Baumann's preliminary work to create the final print. The Museum has a preliminary watercolor for *Bound for Taos*, seven wood blocks, and ten proofs that show *continued on page 23*

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Tomasz Sarnecki (b. 1966) "Solidarnosc," 1989.
It's High Noon, June 4, 1989
Autry National Center, 97.155.1

LAWRENCE TENNEY STEVENS (1896-1972)



Lawrence Tenney Stevens, "Rams," Linocut, c. 1935
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From a series of rare Western and wildlife linocut prints pulled from his own press by American sculptor Lawrence Tenney Stevens beginning in the spring of 1935. These are among discoveries in the Stevens archives that have compelled scholars to conclude that Stevens was "an undeniable progenitor of Cowboy High Style."



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