

ISABEL BISHOP
Etchings, Engravings and Aquatints.
A Catalogue Raisonné.

By Susan Teller. Third edition revised and supplemented by Alan Hyman.
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The first edition of this catalogue was published by Associated American Artists in 1981. The second edition of the catalogue contained information regarding recently discovered prints, variant states of previously known images, and work produced since 1981. This third edition is occasioned by the sudden demise of the Associated American Artists (AAA), early in 2000. It includes the printer's mark of Stephen Sholinsky so that collectors can distinguish the contemporaneous from the later printings. Sholinsky also supplied information on posthumous editions of the artist's graphic work, which were published in 1989 and therefore not included in the second edition of the catalogue. These editions included 4 etchings which also did not appear in prior editions of this catalogue.

In 1926, when she was twenty-four, Isabel Bishop opened a studio near Union Square in New York City. Union Square has always been a meeting ground, a hub of activity, and a home to many artists. The people, together with the fountains and pathways of the Square, form the core of Bishop's work.

Every print by Bishop is figurative. Her sharp eye captured a full range of gestures. Bishop comes closest to her aim of revealing an aspect of the sitter's personality through the recording of a precise gesture. This special interest in gestures is epitomized by her many works of men and women taking off, putting on, carrying or merely wearing coats.

Her subjects were usually not professional models. Many were "shop girls.", and some were vagrants. Most of Bishop's prints up to 1959 were etchings. In 1961 she made a major change to aquatint and compositions which became increasingly, though never totally abstract. The aquatints usually focus on groups of three or more anonymous figures. Unlike the etchings, the aquatints contain no interaction between figures, who appear isolated, walking alone in large, public places. Youthful and bold, they stride in classic contrapposto, and often seem to be similar versions of the same figures in only slightly different positions. Unlike the etchings which can be given at least approximate dates by the clothing styles, these prints are ageless. The figures move through time as well as space, an element exaggerated by the flattening bas-relief effect of the aquatint.

When Isabel Bishop moved her studio from Union Square to her home in 1984, she discovered a cache of forgotten plates. Her discovery, plus completion of several new plates made since the first edition of the catalogue in 1981, prompted the issuing of the second edition. The total number of catalogued images increased to 117, more than half again as many as in the earlier edition.

It seldom happens that we are afforded an opportunity to delve so closely into the forgotten plates of an artist of Bishop's stature, and they offer insights into her work patterns. Typically the artist turned to a new plate to revise a composition. She often drew on the plates from a live model and treated them like sketches. Additional plates were means of working out compositions that might or might not make their way into drawings and paintings. Her paintings are composed via gigantically enlarged photographs of her prints.

Isabel Bishop produced more than one hundred prints over nearly six decades. From the first etchings of the 1920s, to the carefully rendered studies of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, to the aquatints of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the human being remained her primary subject.