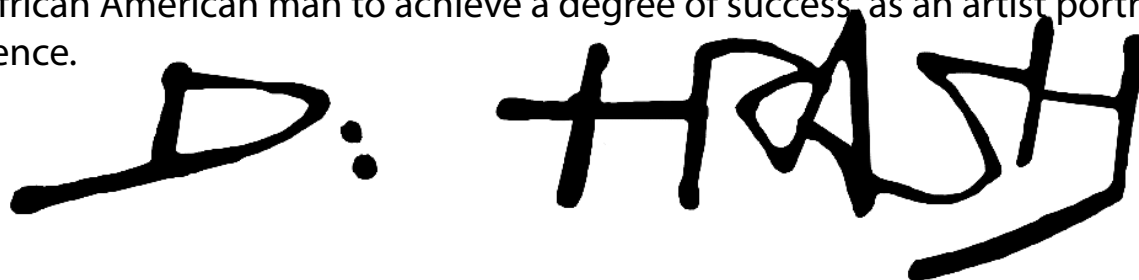


"I always wanted to be an artist." To achieve his goal, Dox Thrash (1893–1965) had to leave his home in Griffin, Georgia. Between bouts of minstrelsy and military service in World War I, Thrash studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. By 1929, he settled in Philadelphia, where he lived the remainder of his life and established himself as a recognized figure in both the city's black and arts communities. His origins and experiences infused his imagery, bringing to audiences across the color divide honest depictions of black life.

Thrash worked in a wide variety of media: painting, watercolor, drawing, and printmaking, but earned national repute in 1937 as the inventor of the carborundum mezzotint process. At the time, he was employed by the Philadelphia Fine Print Workshop, which was funded through the Depression-era federal Works Progress Administration (WPA). Thrash's invention was hailed as the most significant development in printmaking since development of lithography in the late eighteenth century. As New Deal programs came under political attack, the WPA found it expedient to promote Thrash's invention. At that time, his prints were included in several important national exhibitions as well as seminal presentations of black art, including the Contemporary Negro Art exhibition mounted by Alain Locke, the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance," at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

In the carborundum mezzotint process, the surface of a copper printing plate is scoured with carborundum (silicon carbide). An inked plate would hold the ink in its pitted surface and print as a rich black sheet. To create an image, the artist must then smooth the roughened surface with burnishers and scrapers. The process gives the artist the ability to create subtle variations of tone, and thus is responsive to the sensitive portrayal of African American figures.

Trained in the European artistic tradition, Thrash's prints reveal the influence of printmakers such as Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), Francisco Goya (1746–1828), and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)—artists to whose prints he had ready access at both the Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, at which Thrash first exhibited a work in 1937, was the alma mater of Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), the most famous black artist of the time. Although racism forced Tanner to settle in Paris, by Thrash's day, it was possible for an African American man to achieve a degree of success as an artist portraying the contemporary black experience.





*Abstract and Modern*

ca. 1945

Relief on folded paper

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Abstraction***

ca. 1945

Ink on paper

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





***Afternoon Chat***

ca. 1939–40

Color carborundum relief etching

Private collection



## ***Study for Afternoon Chat***

ca. 1939–40

Graphite on paper, incised for transfer

Private collection

Thrash ensured the accurate transfer of this preparatory study for *Afternoon Chat* by tracing the key elements of its composition onto a carborundum-abraded plate with a stylus hard enough to mark the metal below. The scoring can be readily observed in the drawing. The resulting design was then used as a guide for applying the acid resist, which in turn, after the plate was etched, inked, and printed, yielded the rich, rather painterly image evident here.





***Baptism***

ca. 1940

Watercolor with pen and ink on paper

Private collection

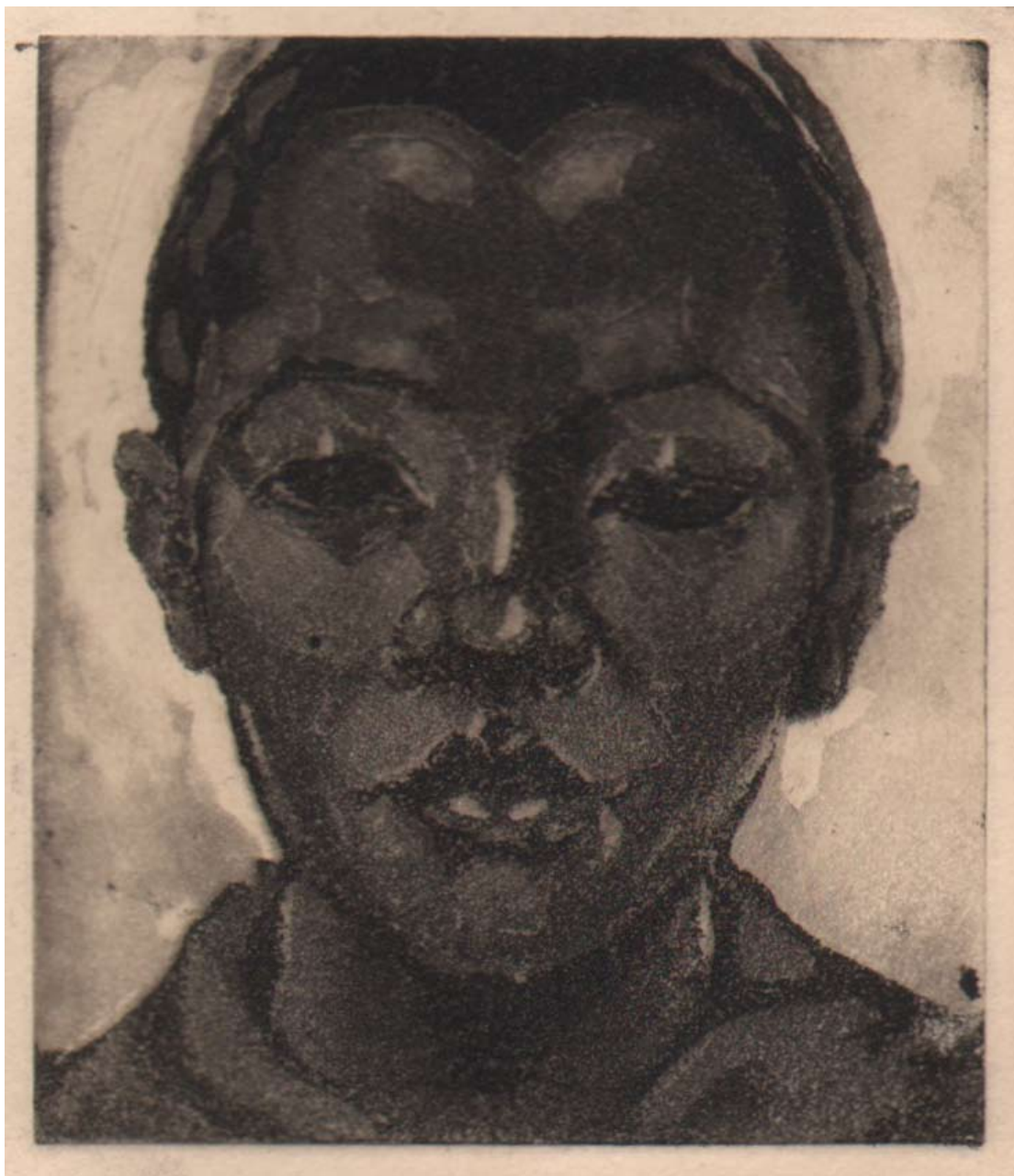


***Backstage***

ca. 1939–40

Carborundum mezzotint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Bronze Boy*** (First version)

ca. 1937–38

Aquatint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



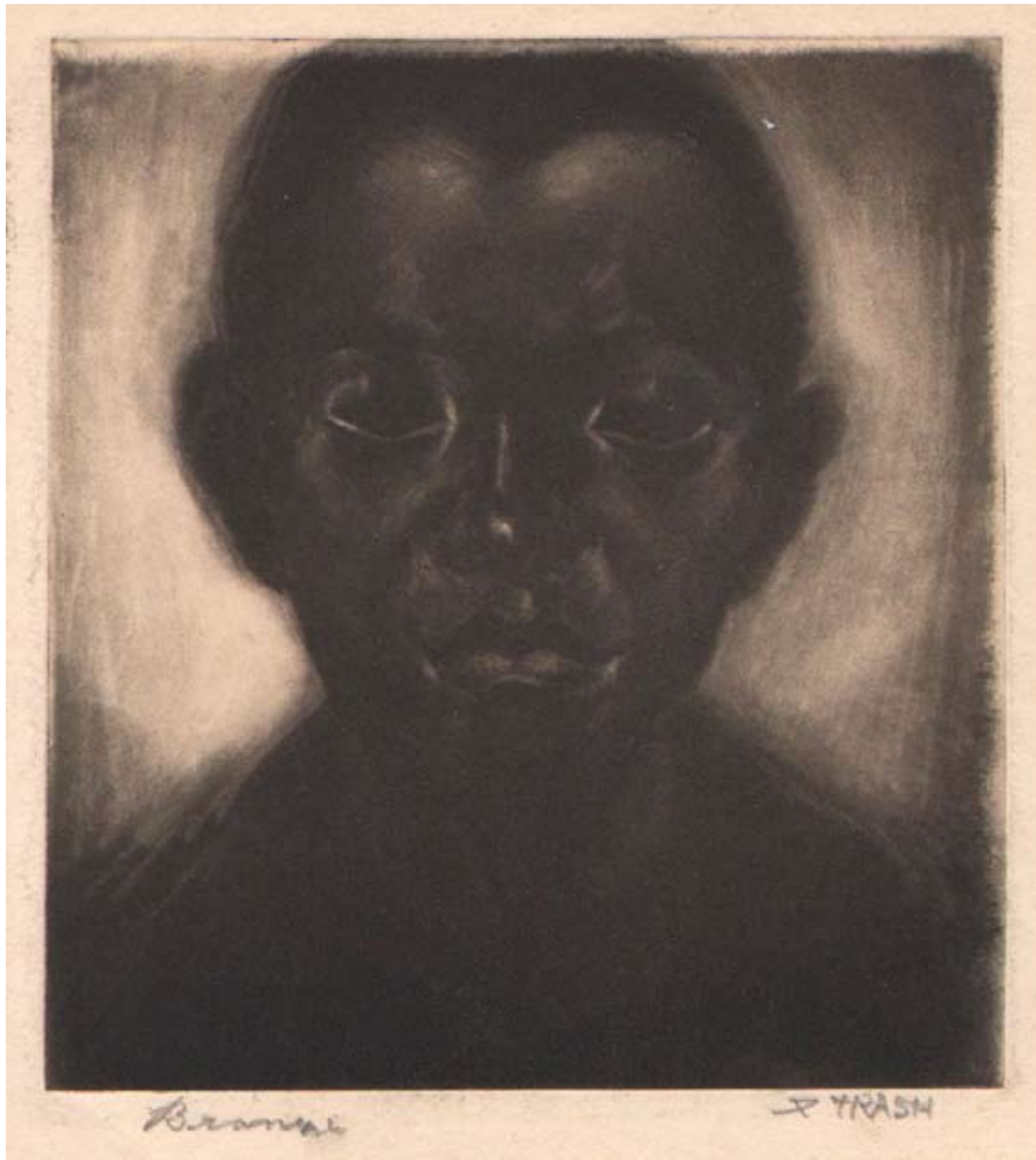


***Bronze Boy***

ca. 1937–38

Graphite on trace paper

Private collection, Philadelphia  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell

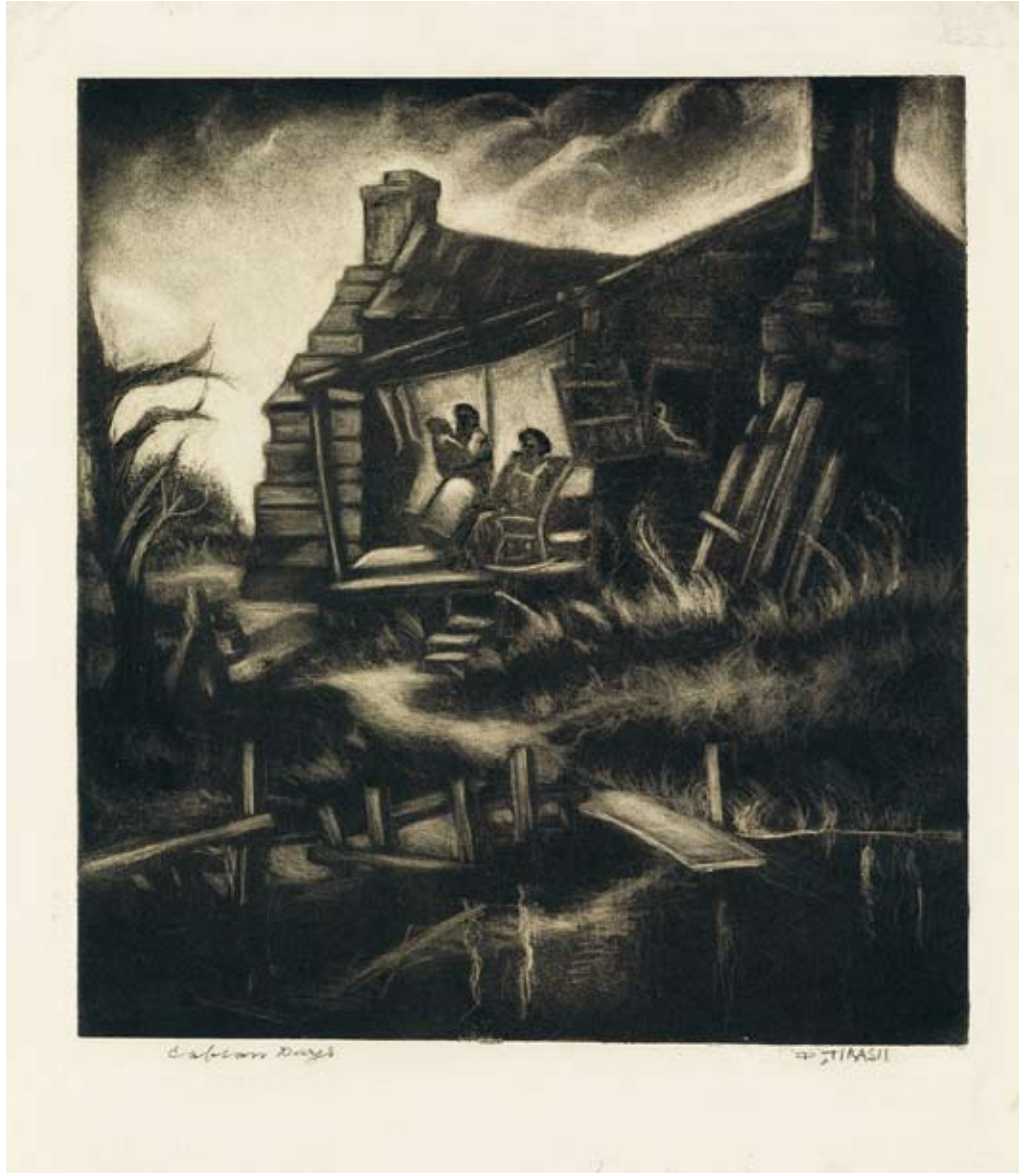


## ***Bronze Boy***

ca. 1937–38

Carborundum mezzotint,  
state proof before further burnishing

Private collection, New York, NY  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



## *Cabin Days*

ca. 1944–45

Carborundum mezzotint and etching

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



## ***Cabin with a Star in the Window***

c. 1944–45

Carborundum mezzotint,  
proof reworked in ink

Private collection



Early in 1941, artists working in Philadelphia's Fine Print Workshop were asked by the federal government to create imagery in support of the country's burgeoning war effort. Thrash, a World War I veteran, enthusiastically took up the charge (much to the chagrin of some of his younger colleagues, whose left-leaning sensibilities often placed them at odds with Thrash's views). In this mezzotint, the most poignant of the artist's wartime prints, a service flag hangs in the window of the modest home as an indication that a family member was on active military duty.

Considered in concert with Thrash's other rural landscapes, *Cabin with a Star* might additionally be read as the artist imagining a similar gesture decorating the family home in rural Georgia during his service in the Great War.

Despite his patriotic response to the call for support, not to mention his veteran status and his standing within the art community, when Thrash applied for a position as an insignia painter at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in the spring of 1942, he was turned away specifically because of the color of his skin.

## *Carborundum Mezzotint Illustration*

ca. 1940

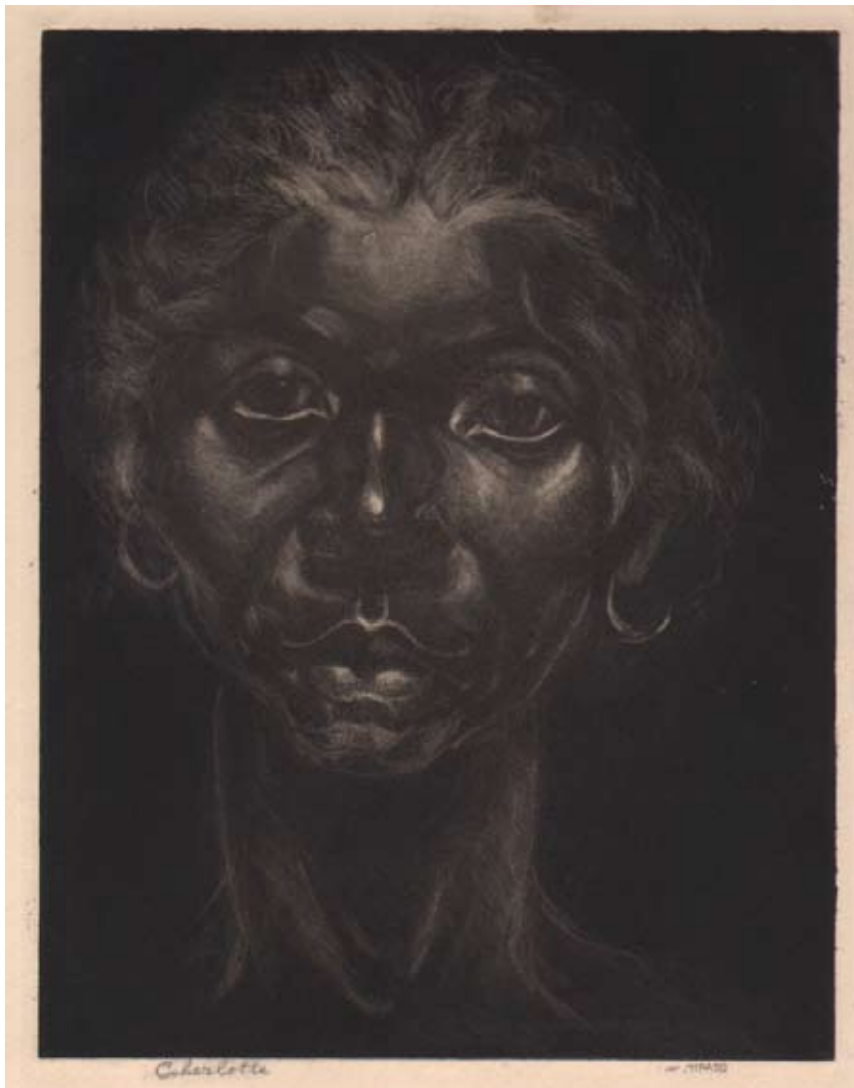
Graphite, gouache, with pen  
and ink on paper

On loan from Dolan/Maxwell



In December 1937, Thrash and two other artists working for the Federal Art Project in Philadelphia's recently opened Fine Print Workshop—Hugh Mesibov and Michael Gallagher—began to experiment with a new approach to intaglio printmaking. "I got some of the carborundum powder they used in grinding lithograph stones," Thrash explained, "and rubbed it into a copper plate with an old flatiron. I got a queer rough surface." He continued:

The carborundum plows up the plate, making little bits of metal stick up like hills. To draw on the plate, all you have to do is take a burnisher and smooth out the parts you want to register light on the paper; the hills you leave will register as black because they will catch most of the ink. You can make your hills and valleys of different depths all over the plate, and get all sorts of shades, blending into one another.



***Charlotte***

ca. 1938–39

Carborundum mezzotint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





## *Chromatic Tunes*

ca. 1938

Watercolor on paper

Everhart Museum of Natural History, Science & Art  
Courtesy of the Fine Arts Collection, U.S. General  
Services Administration, WPA, Federal Art Project,  
1935–43

The casual pose and informal dress of the musician depicted here belie the image's significance. The man plays a harmonica, specifically a diatonic harmonica invented in Germany in the early nineteenth century. As the title suggests, though, the performer is not employing the harmonica in the manner for which it was intended. Seeking a greater range of expression, he will adjust, or bend, some of the tones over the course of the performance. These bent tones, typically flattened and better known as blue notes, create a chromatic quality that is foreign to the diatonic scale. The resulting music is called the blues, a genre originated by African Americans musicians in the South toward the end of the nineteenth century. The blues laid the foundation for important subsequent genres, including jazz, country, folk, rock, and hip-hop.



## ***Churning Butter***

1944–48

Carborundum mezzotint  
with etching, first state of two

Private collection

Thrash likely pulled this first state of *Churning Butter* as a trial proof to get a sense of his progress with the composition. He then revisited the plate with a burnisher and scraper to mitigate the burr and abrasions (hills and valleys) in those areas where he felt the highlights needed to be fortified. This effort yielded the second and final state, an example of which hangs nearby.



## ***Churning Butter***

1944–48

Carborundum mezzotint  
with etching, second state of two

Private collection

While Thrash often combined etching with his carborundum mezzotints, usually in an effort to more sharply delineate form, its use here is purely incidental. The plate for *Churning Butter* was previously etched with another, unrelated image, which the artist failed to fully efface before initiating the mezzotint process. The preponderance of black in the first state helps obscure much of the earlier design; however, subsequent burnishing for the second state revealed more of the underlying etching.



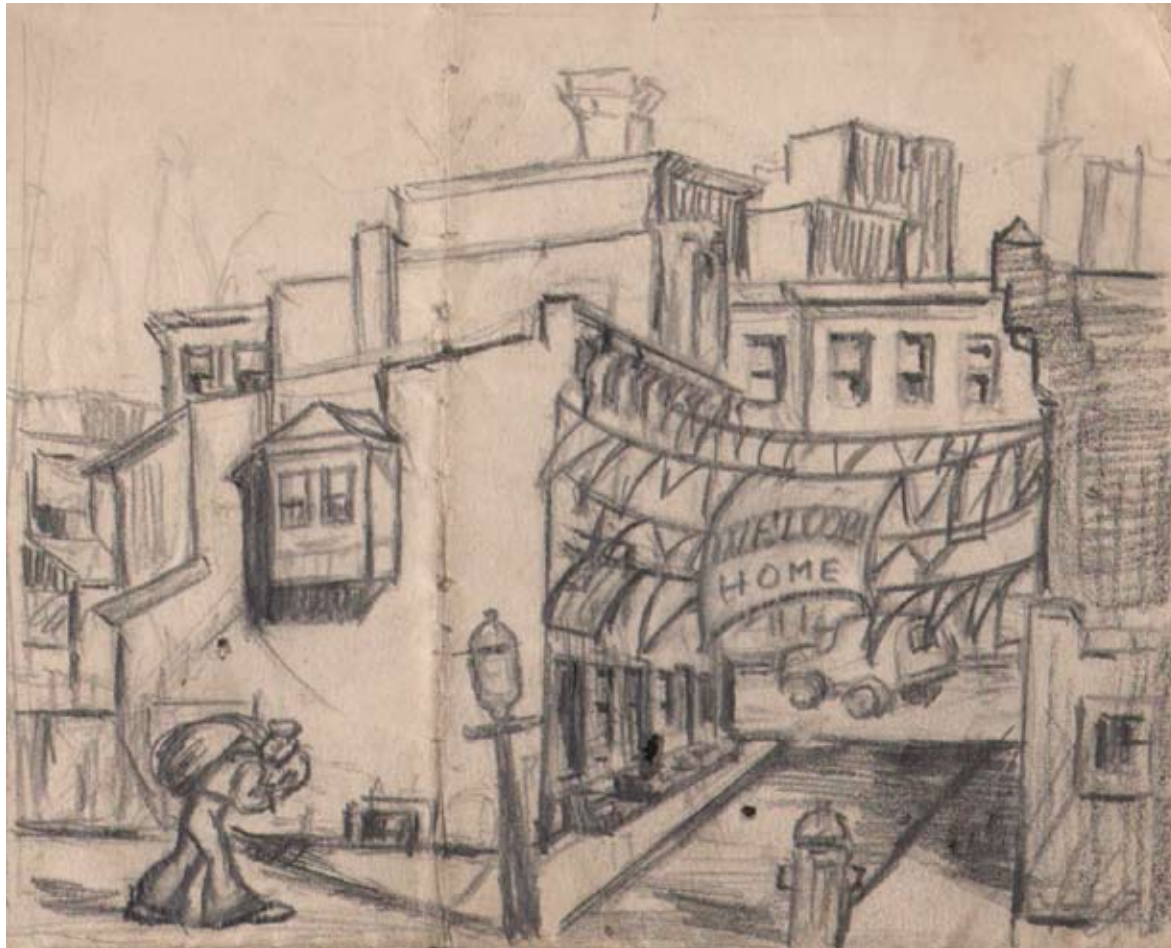


*City Plevins*

ca. 1939

Watercolor

Private collection



## ***Coming Home***

ca. 1945

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Evening Tide***

ca. 1942

Carborundum mezzotint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





## ***Fanaticism or Prayer Meeting***

early 1930's

Etching

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell

This print has been identified as one of three Thrash exhibited in December 1932 at a YWCA in a black neighborhood of Philadelphia. The exhibition was organized by the Tra Club of which Thrash was a member. The club was dedicated to promoting "Art, Painting, Crafts, Sculpture, Music & Drama" among African American community members.



*Figure on a Horse*

1940s–50s

Carborundum mezzotint

Private collection



## ***Glory Be!***

ca. 1941–42

Carborundum mezzotint

Private collection

With prints such as *Glory Be!*, Thrash demonstrates the unique attributes of the carborundum mezzotint. The medium's rich play of black and white is particularly effective in conveying the surrounding gloom through which radiance—soul-saving enlightenment—emanates from the heavens. The realization of the technique, as it unfolds from dark to light, is rooted in Old Master painting.





## ***Study for Glory Be!***

ca. 1941–42

Graphite on paper, incised for transfer

Private collection

The imagery for *Glory Be!* derives from the artist's watercolor titled *Baptism*, also in this exhibition. By narrowing the focus to just the group of worshippers from the watercolor, Thrash is able to create a more dramatic composition in which each of the supplicants' gestures can be articulated. The scoring marks evident on the drawing indicate its use in transferring the composition to the mezzotint plate.



## ***Grinder***

ca. 1940

Carborundum mezzotint

Private collection, New York, New York  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell

Alain Locke, a leading black intellectual, included *Grinder* in a 1941 exhibition entitled *American Negro Art, 19th and 20th Centuries* at the Downtown Gallery in New York. A total of three works by Thrash hung alongside those of Sam Brown and Horace Pipin, among others.



***Heave!***

ca. 1939–40

Etching

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





## *Hobo with a Satchel*

1940s

Etching

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell

Thrash may have recalled this scene from his youth. He left home at the age of fifteen. In a short autobiographical account, he wrote of the

open road, ho-boing, working part the time on odd jobs. Such as bell boy, dining car waiter, private car porter, massager in bath-houses, black face comedian in carnivals, small town circuses, and vaudevilles. With the idea of describing drawing, and painting the people of America. Especially the "Negro."

## *Landscape with Farm Buildings*

early 1930s

Aquatint

Private collection



Before the discovery of the carborundum mezzotint, aquatint was one of Thrash's preferred printmaking techniques. An intaglio process invented in seventeenth-century Europe, aquatint can produce tones of differing gradations by allowing selected areas of the plate to be bitten more deeply by the acid; the deeper the bite, the darker the tone in the resulting print.

Although Thrash often employed the technique in tandem with etching and carborundum mezzotint, *Landscape with Farm Buildings* was created solely with aquatint.



***Large Tree***

1940s–50s

Carborundum mezzotint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





***Men in Period Costume***

ca. 1945

Graphite on board

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





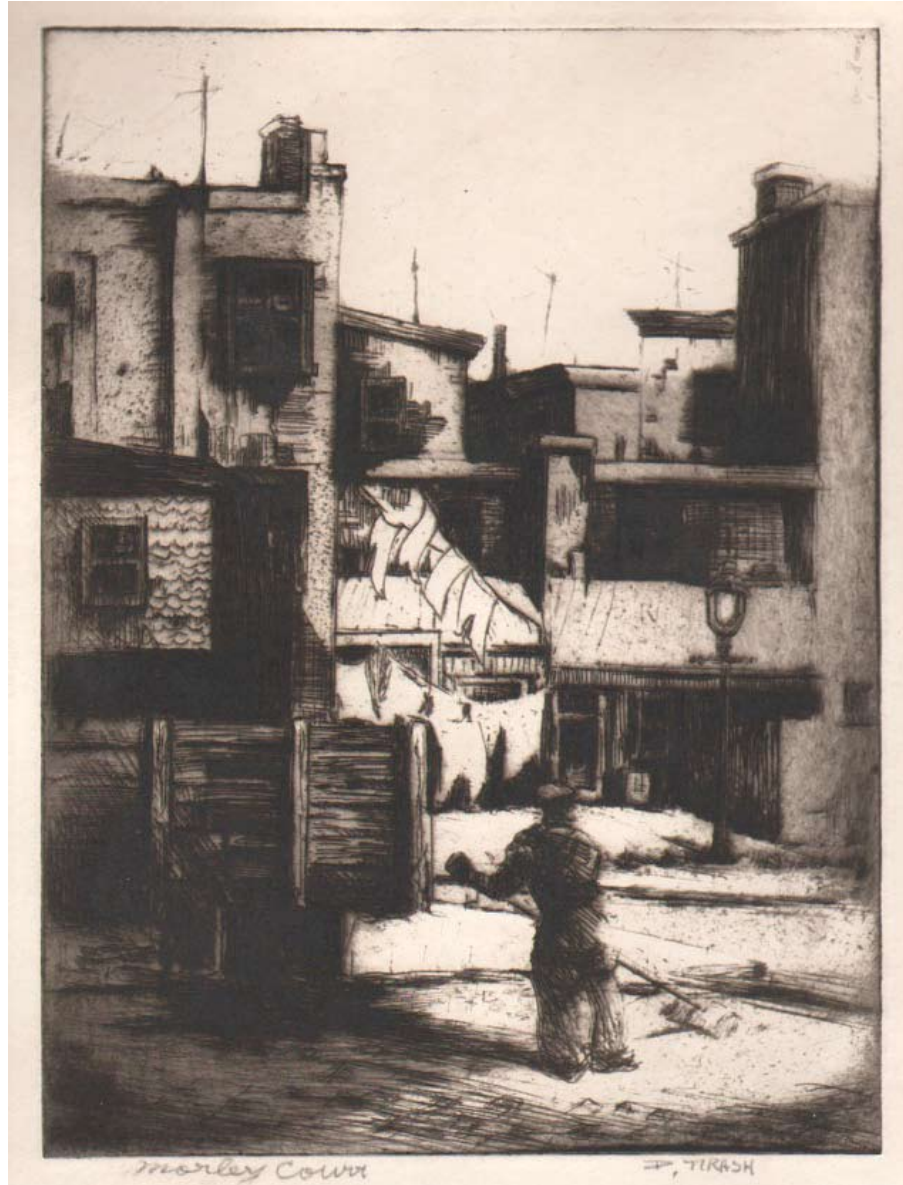
## ***Moon Dance***

ca. 1950

Ink, watercolor, and gouache

Private collection, Philadelphia  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



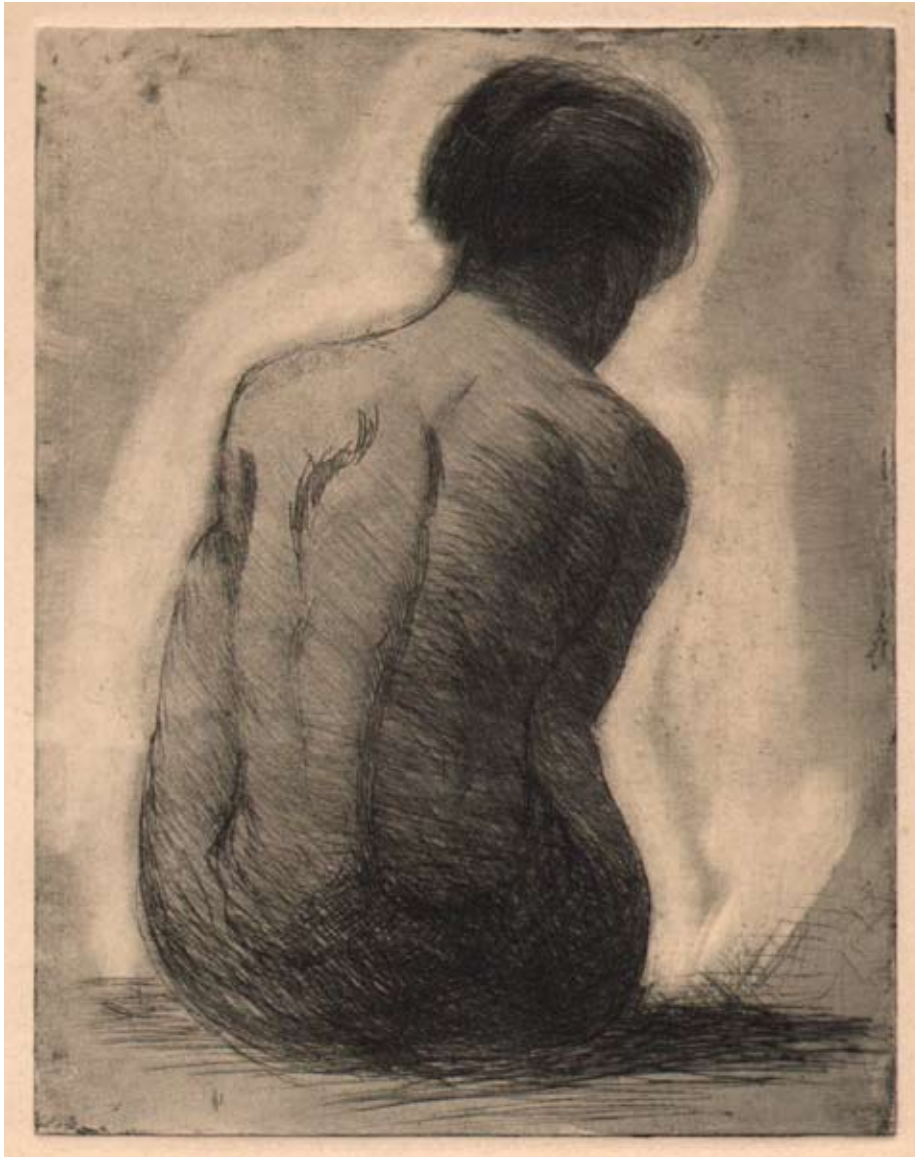


***Morley's Court***

ca. 1939

Etching

Private collection



***Nude Model, Seated*** (First version)

ca. 1946

Etching

Private collection, Philadelphia  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Nude Model, Seated***

ca. 1944–46

Carborundum mezzotint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





***Nude Model, Standing***

ca. 1939–41

Lithograph

Private collection



***Nude with Robe***

ca. 1950

Watercolor

On loan from J.D. Treadwell, New York  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell

## *Nursery Rhyme*

ca. 1939

Lithograph

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



This image is unique to Thrash's WPA work. It illustrates the nursery rhyme *There was an Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe*. The original commission was for a mural in the children's ward at Mercy Hospital in Philadelphia. It is not known whether the mural was ever executed.



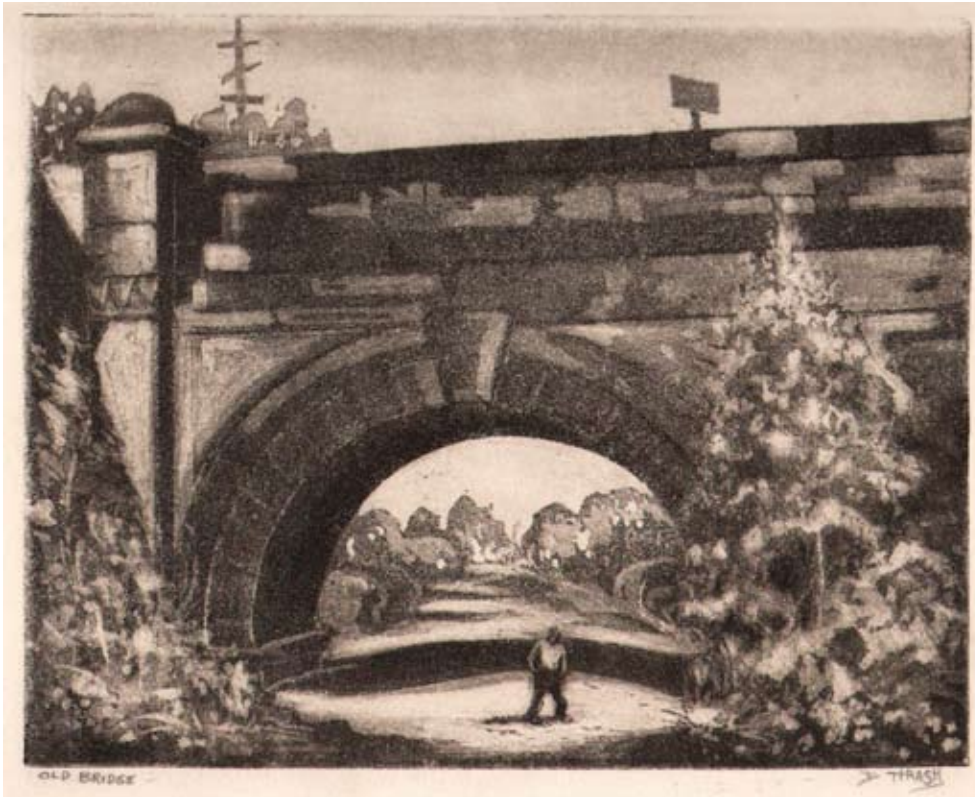
## *Old Bridge*

1940s

Aquatint

Private collection

Thrash was introduced to aquatint in the early 1930s while studying at the Graphic Sketch Club with Earl Horter, an acknowledged master of the medium. One important aspect he learned from Horter was the freedom to revisit aquatinted passages with a scraper or burnisher to minimize or even eradicate the effects of the bite. In *Old Bridge*, the result of burnishing can be seen in the brightened portions of the bridgework to the left, in the sunlit area surrounding the man in the center, and in much of the highlighting that decorates the foreground foliage.





***One Horse Farmer***

ca. 1944–48

Carborundum mezzotint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



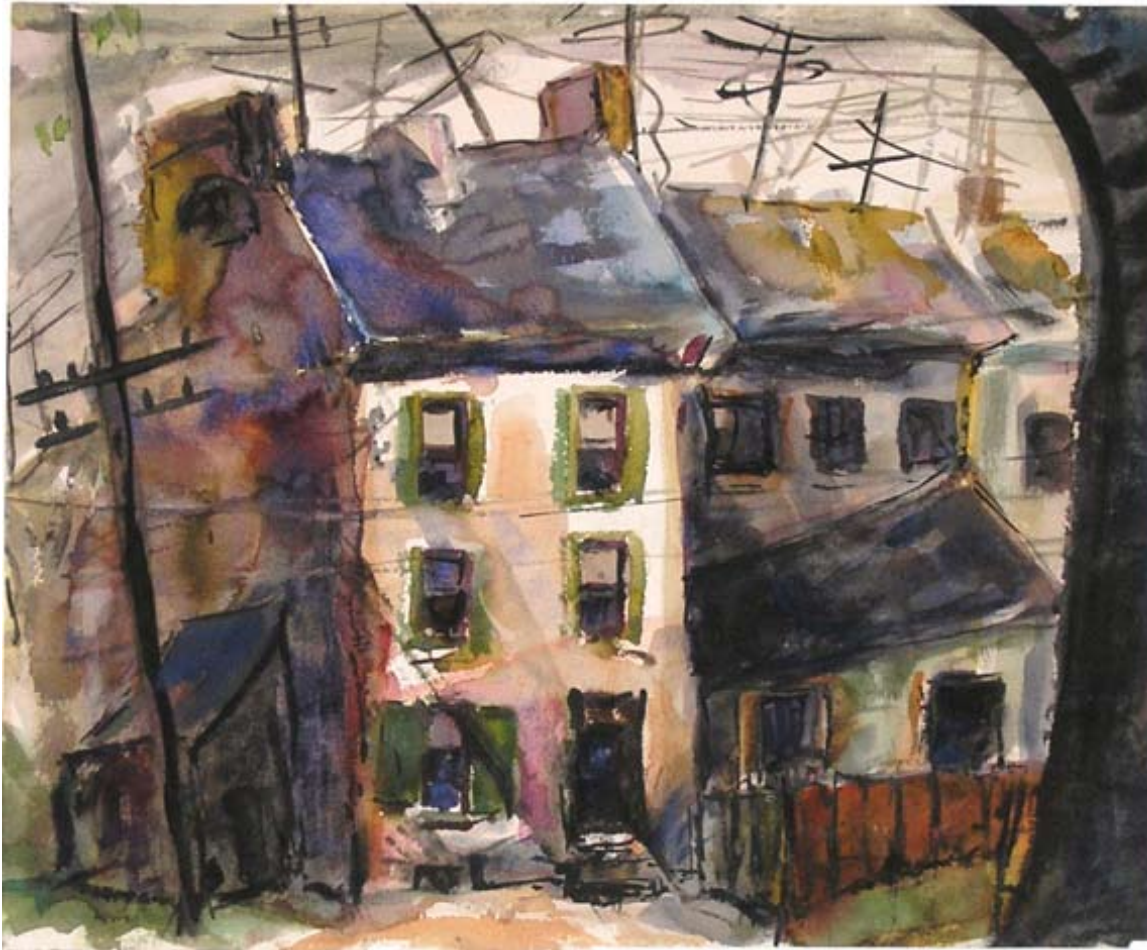
***Penn***

ca. 1940

Graphite

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





***Row Houses***

ca. 1950

Watercolor

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Sanctifying Their Souls***

ca. 1930

Watercolor

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



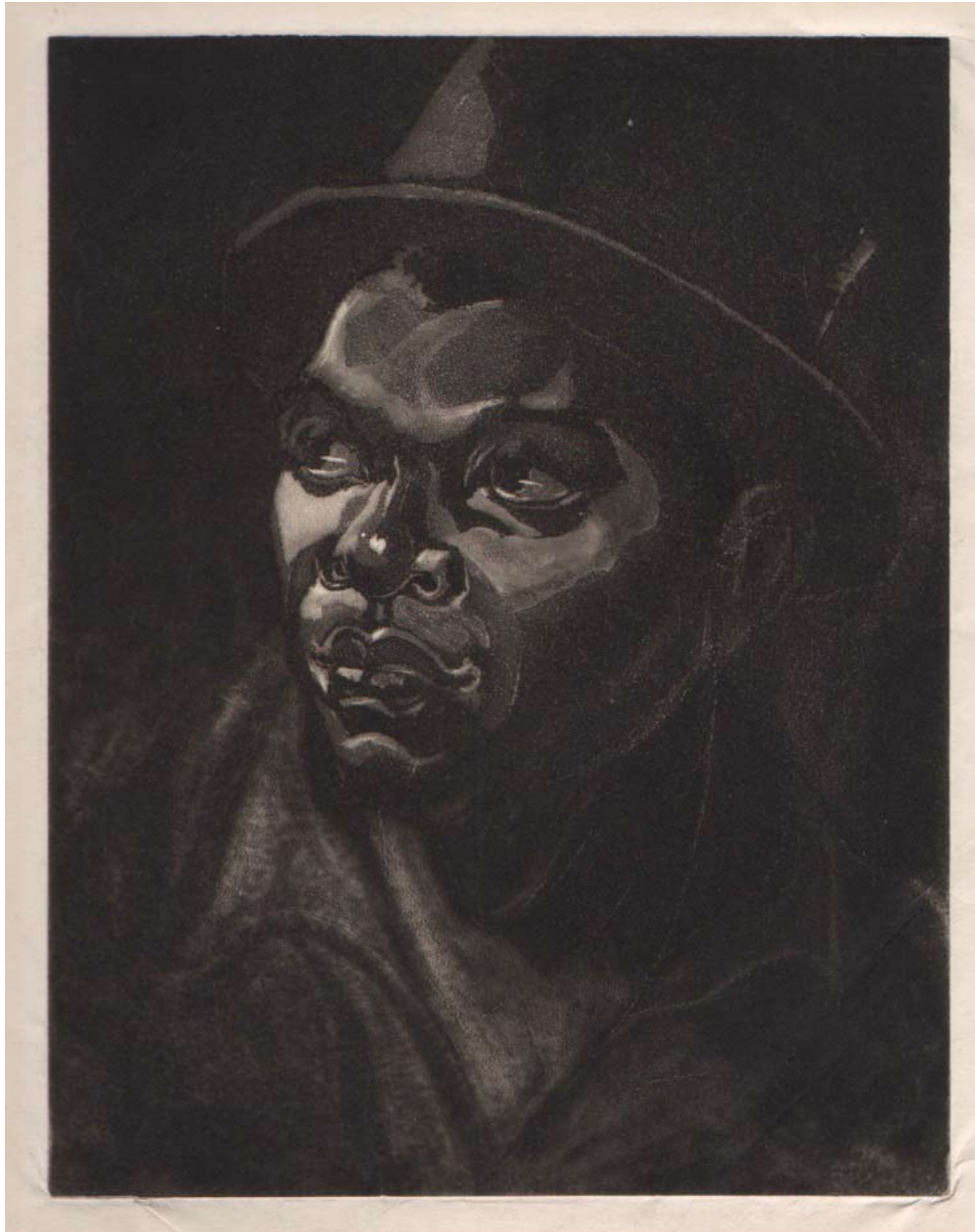


***Saturday Night***

ca. 1944–45

Carborundum relief etching,  
second version

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Second Thought***

ca. 1939

Aquatint and etching

Private collection





## *Silas*

ca. 1937–39

Etching

Private collection

Thrash's sensitive portrayals of African American subjects were in keeping with the "New Negro" aesthetic espoused by intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. Both men encouraged artists to find beauty in black subject matter. As Locke argued in 1925, "Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid."



## ***Still Life***

ca. 1950

Ink, watercolor, and gouache

Private collection, Philadelphia  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Still Life No. 1***

ca. 1940

Aquatint, proof before carborundum  
mezzotint and carborundum relief etching

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Summer Afternoon***

ca. 1950

Watercolor and gouache

Private collection, Philadelphia  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





## ***Sunday Afternoon***

ca. 1941

Etching

Private collection

Like most of his colleagues in the Fine Print Workshop, Thrash developed a proficiency in a range of print mediums, including etching, which he learned not long after settling in Philadelphia by attending evening classes with Earl Horter at the Graphic Sketch Club.

The mirrored similarity between the figures in these two prints suggests that Thrash employed a *Sunday Morning* proof to transfer the image of the strolling woman to the plate. When inking the latter, he purposefully allowed a significant amount of swirling plate tone to remain, creating an atmosphere quite distinct from *Sunday Morning*.



## *Sunday Morning*

ca. 1939

Etching

Private collection

The Fine Print Workshop placed few restrictions on choice of subject matter, so Thrash was free to draw on his recollections of everyday events observed during his youth in rural Georgia. The woman strolling to church in *Sunday Morning* is said to be modeled after his mother, Ophelia, who worked as a cook and housekeeper for a white family her entire adult life. Evidently, she was unrelenting in her efforts to ensure that Thrash and his siblings attended worship services every week. She died in 1936, and at one point after the invention of the carborundum mezzotint, Thrash thought of naming it “Opheliagraph” in her honor.



***The Bugler***

ca. 1937

Carborundum mezzotint

On loan from Reggie Govan, Washington, D.C.  
Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell

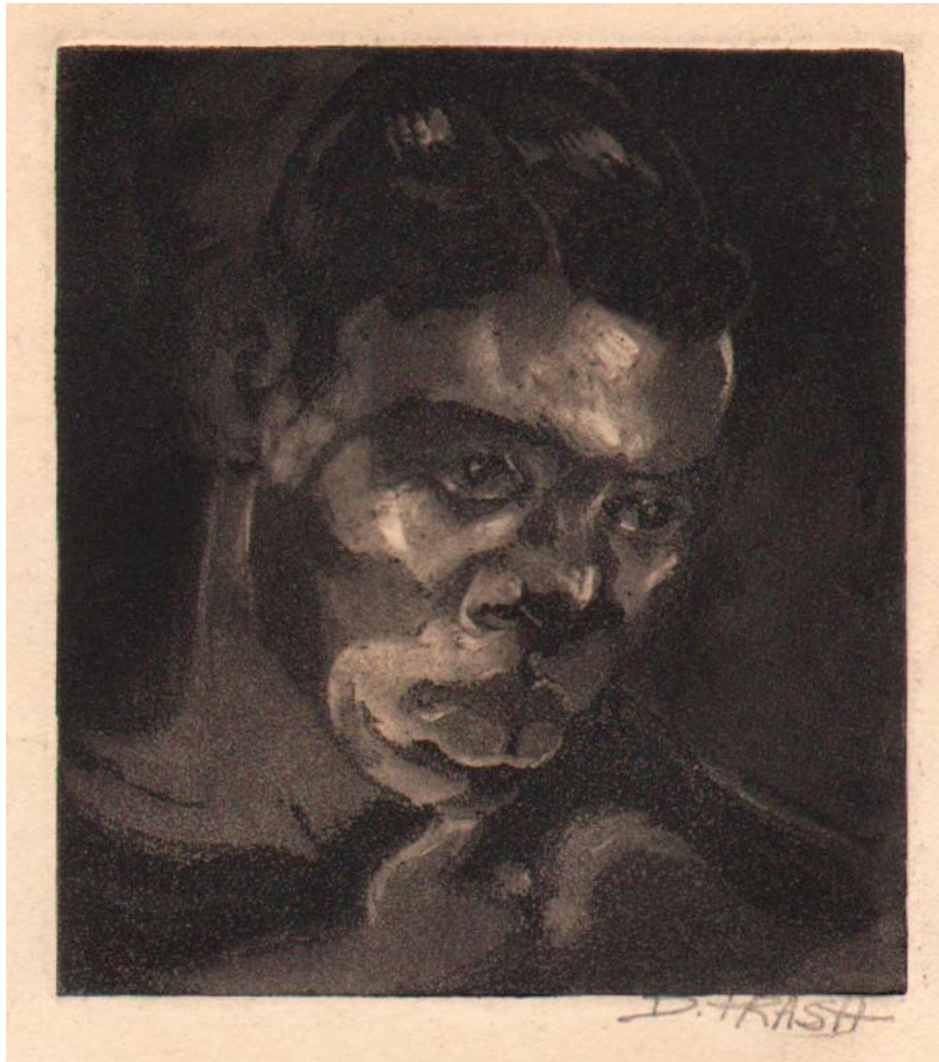


# *The Champ*

ca. 1937–39

Aquatint

Private collection



*The Champ* is generally considered to be a portrait of boxer Joe Louis, who won the world heavyweight championship by defeating James J. Braddock on June 22, 1937. He held the title for twelve years. Well before his victory over Braddock, Louis had become a hero to African Americans across the country. Langston Hughes later wrote of the boxer's impact:

Each time Joe Louis won a fight in those depression years, even before he became champion, thousands of black Americans on relief or WPA, and poor, would throng out into the streets all across the land to march and cheer and yell and cry because of Joe's one-man triumphs. No one else in the United States has ever had such an effect on Negro emotions—or on mine. I marched and cheered and yelled and cried, too.



Ivan Busatt, *Joe Louis, Heavyweight Champion of the World*, 1937, gelatin silver print





***Untitled (Man Standing Tall)***

ca. 1950

Watercolor, graphite, and ink  
on artist's board

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Portrait of a Man***

ca. 1930

Watercolor and graphite

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Portrait of a Woman***

ca. 1940

Watercolor

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



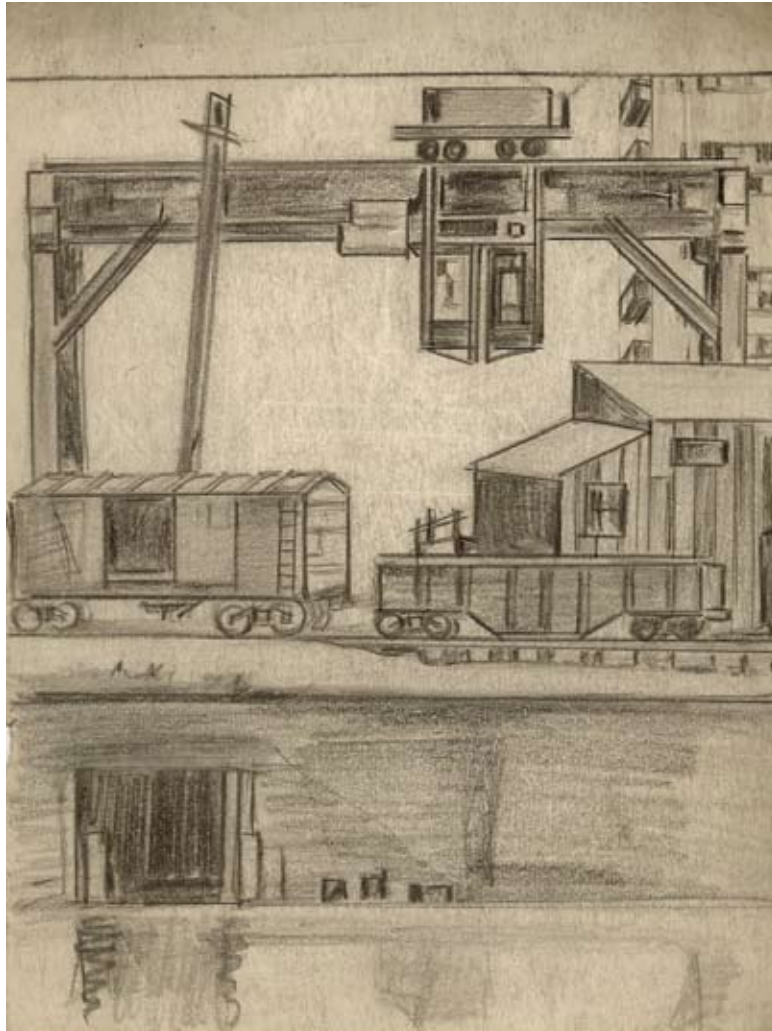
***Portrait of a Young Man  
(Devotion)***

ca. 1940

Watercolor

Private collection





Dox Thrash Railyard c. 1940, graphite on paper  
image/sheet: 10 3/4 x 8 1/4"

## ***Rail Yard***

ca. 1945

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Vacant Lot, Street Scene***

ca. 1940

Ink, graphite and gouache

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***The Vendor***

ca. 1940

Carborundum mezzotint

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





***Woman in Blue***

ca. 1940s

Watercolor

Private collection



***Woman with a Green Hat***

ca. 1940

Watercolor on paper

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell



***Woman's Head***

1940

Ink on paper

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell





***Woman in Profile***

ca. 1930

Charcoal

Courtesy of Dolan/Maxwell