The 1940 Steuben exhibition “Designs in Glass by Twenty-Seven Contemporary Artists” included works by AAA artists Benton, Curry, Wood and Peter Hurd. Plate designed by Benton for Associated American Artists and Steuben Glass Co., circa 1940. Engraved flint glass, diameter 13⅛ inches. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas.


The “American Scene” was a common theme in AAA prints. “Frankie and Johnnie (Frankie and Johnny)” by Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975), 1936. Lithograph, 16½ by 22¼ inches. KSU, Beach Museum of Art.

The 1936 print “Frankie and Johnnie” by Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) is a classic example of the American Scene theme. It depicts a scene from the American Depression era, capturing the essence of urban life and the struggles of the working class.

MANHATTAN, KAN. — “What! only $5 for a SIGNED ORIGINAL by Thomas Benton, the Great American Artist — Yes, Incredible, but True!” ran the snappy advertising headline. Long before eBay or Etsy, a company named Associated American Artists formed a virtual community of art collectors and design enthusiasts that stretched across the nation. In 1934, the retailing virtuoso Reeves Lewenthal launched AAA with the aim of selling limited-edition etchings and lithographs via mail order. Inclusive in corporate thought, word and deed, Lewenthal worked in partnership with artists, design companies, industries, government, media and consumers to fulfill AAA’s public arts mission.

Yet despite AAA’s longevity — the company closed its doors only in 2000 — and its considerable influence — “First American Publisher of David Hockney Prints” is one of its many claims to fame — neither its widespread impact nor even the basic facts of its business history and artistic output have been well documented until now. Much in the spirit of AAA itself, researchers, curators and scholars have teamed up to create a traveling exhibition, companion catalog and — “soon-to-be downloadable” — compre-

(continued on page 30)
Karen Herbaugh mentions that Signature Fabric cabana sets for men were popular, as evidenced by surviving numbers. One has to wonder if they really were favorites or just tucked away and never worn. Swimsuits fashioned in Laura Jean Allen’s 1955 “Imperial Seal” design for Signature Fabric cabana are featured in a Catalina advertisement. Private collection.

In his essay, Bill North offers a technical discussion of Gelatones and paintagraphs, color reproductions by AAA. In collecting circles, Gelatones “have completely fallen through the cracks because they have been thought of as posters,” says Liz Seaton, “Woman with Plants” after Grant Wood (1891–1942), published 1965. Lithograph, 10 by 29½ inches. KSU, Beach Museum of Art.

In her essay, Liz Seaton offers a technical discussion of Gelatones and paintagraphs, color reproductions by AAA. In collecting circles, Gelatones “have completely fallen through the cracks because they have been thought of as posters,” says Liz Seaton, “Woman with Plants” after Grant Wood (1891–1942), published 1965. Lithograph, 10 by 29½ inches. KSU, Beach Museum of Art.

According to advertising text, “The print is an obvious choice for the honey-haired blond. A carefully considered color scheme and wisely chosen furniture create a room that reflects both its owner’s delicate coloring and her brisk, positive approach to living,” Anton Rebay’s “Pioneer Pathways” fabric design illustrated in the April 1952 issue of Living for Young Homemakers.

AAA prints were issued in limited editions of 250 copies, plus 25 artist’s proofs. “Our Good Earth … Keep It Ours” after John Steuart Curry (1897–1946), 1942. Photomechanical offset lithograph (poster), 59½ by 30 inches. KSU, Beach Museum of Art.

AAA teamed with corporations and the Hollywood film industry in a publicity campaign to support efforts on the home and military fronts during World War II. “Our Good Earth ... Keep It Ours” after John Steuart Curry (1897–1946), 1942. Photomechanical offset lithograph (poster), 59½ by 30 inches. KSU, Beach Museum of Art.
Three of these prints were collected over a period of 25 years by an insurance salesman named Raymond Budge of St. John, Kan., whose biography is not unusual for an AAA customer. Seaton, Myers and Windisch edited the nearly 300-page catalog, Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists, 1934–2000. Collectively, they and the other contributors — Ellen Paul Denker, Karen Herbaugh, Laura Kuy kendall, Bill North, Susan Toller, Tiffany Elena Washington and Kristina Wilson — have penned contextual essays, crafted timelines and compiled lists. The catalog begins with a chronology of AAA authored by Windisch, a fact underscoring the emphasis placed on delineating the AAA’s corporate history and product lines throughout the volume. Examples of essays include “Cultural Democracy / Consumer Democracy: New Deal Printmaking and Associated American Artists, 1934–41”; “Modern Art for Modern Living: Associated American Artists and Decorative Home Accessories” and “Textile Art for the Masses.” Lists of prints, AAA’s Stonelain ceramics, textile designs, and companies and designers using AAA textile designs appear as appendices in the catalog. Three of these appendices will be published as Art for Every Home: An Illustrated Index of Associated American Artists, Prints, Ceramics and Textile Designs. This free, downloadable PDF will be available in January at http://fullhandle.net/209/719006. Undeniably, the rediscovery of Associated American Artists is a boon to print dealers, curators and collectors. Those interested in decorative, public and commercial art and in the retailing of art and design will be fascinated, too. The firm and its activities represent the populist movement of self-betterment via informal education that flourished in mid-Twentieth Century America. Through AAA’s varied and ingenious initiatives, the benefits of owning art and fashioning artistic surroundings accrued to a broad swathe of Americans, not solely to wealthy and urban connoisseurs.

