



Paul Landacre, 1951.

The Artistry of Printmaking

Paul Landacre, one of America's top wood engravers, was prominently featured in *Westways* in the 1920s and '30s

BY MORGAN P. YATES

As *Westways* celebrates its centennial in 2009, it's only natural to showcase the paintings that graced the magazine's covers from the early 1920s until 1981, when photography replaced original art. Today, the resulting art collection numbers more than 250 works, creating an artistic time line of regional painting, from plein-air traditional to pop-art fantastic.

But the cover painters had some unheralded company—a smaller number of printmakers, largely outside the public spotlight, who employed their carving tools to produce works of art no less dynamic. None mastered this demanding craft more fully than printmaker Paul Landacre (1893–1963).

A Rich and Varied Life

Landacre's life was scarred by tragedy and hardship and uplifted by artistic triumph and a deeply cherished marriage. His work represented a modernist aesthetic; it was encouraged and inspired by a group of artists and intellectuals who socialized with Los Angeles bookseller Jake Zeitlin in the 1920s. This disparate group included journalist Carey McWilliams, photographers Edward

Weston and Will Connell, architect Lloyd Wright, and writer and librarian Lawrence Clark Powell. It also included Phil Townsend Hanna, editor of *Touring Topics*, the predecessor of *Westways*.

Landacre had one of his first public showings in 1930 at Zeitlin's bookshop, which at the time was one of the few places in town exhibiting modernist works. In addition to forging new pathways in their respective fields, the members of the Zeitlin circle fostered collaboration, which helps explain why Landacre and the others listed above found their way into the Auto Club's magazine.

Landacre's work first appeared in *Touring Topics* in August 1928; the series of woodblock prints accompanied the article "We Had a Lovely Ride!," written by Margaret McCreery, his wife. In February 1929, a Landacre print illustrated a Zeitlin poem titled "Bundle-Stiff's Dream" (see page 44). More *Touring Topics* illustrations followed. Rendered in black ink on white or buff-colored paper, Landacre's prints expressed the underlying musculature of mountains, trees, structures, and animals—a counterpoint to the romanticized landscapes of California Scene painting.

With the magazine struggling to contain costs during the Depression, Hanna turned to illustrators and printmakers like Landacre for cover art, according higher visibility to this less-celebrated medium. Landacre's first cover, a wood engraving of the Glendale Boulevard Bridge, fronted the May 1936 issue. But Landacre's big splash came in 1939, when Hanna commissioned him to produce six wood engravings of birds for consecutive *Westways* covers from July through December.

From an early age, Landacre had developed a love of nature, particularly birds. He spent many hours observing the birds attracted to the custom birdbaths and feeders he installed in the large yard surrounding the house he and Margaret occupied just east of Silver Lake. He even charted the activities of individual birds as they returned to the yard over several seasons. These close observations and the heartfelt affinity for his feathered friends must have made the *Westways* bird covers an especially pleasing project. Landacre created a stylized black petrel bird symbol, which appeared in the margins on many of his prints.

A Challenging Art

Among the various printmaking methods, Landacre preferred the exacting technique of wood engraving, in which the artist carves a design, or matrix, on a wooden surface. The artist then inks the matrix and transfers the design to paper under the pressure of a hand press.

Landacre explained his preferences in a letter to New York gallery owner Carl Zigrosser in 1936. "I don't know exactly why I took up wood engraving," he said, "except that black and white seemed more interesting and colorful than color, and after trying various mediums—etching, dry point, aquatint, lithography, etc., I settled on wood engraving as the medium that had a greater range than anything else."

Landacre's preference for wood engraving meant that he carved his designs on the smoothly polished end grain of a hardwood block. With tools similar to those jewelers use on precious metals, Landacre created nuanced designs with finer lines than would be possible with long-grain woodcut prints.

Tools of the Trade

Landacre's tools varied in size from his diminutive graving instruments to his nearly one-ton Washington-style hand press (pictured below), which had a colorful history of its own. Landacre's friend Willard Morgan, a photographer and author, had discovered it in shambles in the ghost town of Bodie, California. Landacre disassembled the machine, replaced lost or damaged parts, and spent two months refurbishing and reassembling the device, all without knowing whether it would work. Fortunately it did, and Landacre used the press until his death, 31 years later.

Soon after, thieves broke into his empty home and somehow, despite the tremendous effort it would have taken to move it, removed the press undetected in the night. Its whereabouts remained a mystery until 1981, when it resurfaced, standing under an oak tree, exposed to the elements and again in need of rehabilitation. Through photos, researchers confirmed that the press was indeed Landacre's. Manufactured by C. Foster & Brother in Cincinnati circa 1852, it now resides, fully restored, at the International Printing Museum in Carson.

Through the 1940s and '50s, Landacre's work focused on illustrations for book projects. He was elected to the National Academy of

Design in 1946 and taught art at Otis Art Institute in the 1950s and '60s. Throughout this period, he and Margaret maintained a quiet lifestyle in their rustic cabin in the midst of sprawling L.A. When Margaret fell ill with cancer and died in May 1963, the loss proved too much for Landacre, and he took his own life a few weeks later.

Today, Landacre is widely considered among the best American wood engravers of the 20th century. His prints command top dollar, and his modest cabin on West El Moran Street now bears the designation of a Los Angeles historic-cultural monument. **W**

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