

Abramowitz

ARTWORK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 16, 2012

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OUT OF THE VAULT REVISITS D.C. ARTIST BENJAMIN ABRAMOWITZ

Work shown for first time in almost 70 years

“...a creative presence in Washington's art scene for six decades.”

– *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2011

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Next month, the early work of acclaimed Washington, D.C. artist **Benjamin Abramowitz** will be publicly presented for the first time in almost 70 years. Opening at the **Woman's National Democratic Club** at its Whittemore House Museum in Dupont Circle, ***Out of the Vault: Early Prints and Drawings, Benjamin Abramowitz, 1917-2011***, on-view September 20 to November 28, 2012, will revisit the late artist's lasting legacy in Washington and beyond.

Press are invited to attend an opening on **Thursday, September 20 from 6–8 p.m.** at the Woman's National Democratic Club.

A prize-winning artist commissioned at 19 by the Works Progress Administration's (W.P.A.) Federal Art Project in New York City, Abramowitz emerged as a notable artist in Washington D.C. during the New Deal and World War II years.

This new exhibition of his historic lithographs and drawings shine a light on the lives and faces of people living and working in in D.C., as well as in New York, during a particular and important moment in Washington history.

“These works by Benjamin Abramowitz, a W.P.A. artist who established himself in Washington for six decades, exhibit his social and political observations,” said exhibition curator Nuzhat Sultan. “The works are reminiscent of Honoré Daumier in quality and impact. The Woman's National Democratic Club is extremely pleased to have the opportunity to display Benjamin Abramowitz's *Out of the Vault*.”



Originally from New York City, Abramowitz advanced into the Washington art world in 1941 and, within several years, the artist was winning competitions and securing solo exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Howard University, Baltimore Museum of Art, and Barnett-Aden Gallery. Over the years, the work of Abramowitz has been acquired by museum collections including, but not limited to, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Phillips Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Howard University, Newark Museum, St. Louis Museum of Art, as well as more than 40 private collections. Eleven of his lithographs are in The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, including three works on-view in *Out of the Vault*.

During Abramowitz's lifetime, his work was featured in nearly 100 exhibitions – from East Coast institutions to U.S. embassies across the world, selected by ART in Embassies, the U.S. Department of State's program that promotes diplomacy and cultural exchange through the visual arts.

Hailed for his "technical virtuosity and passionate expressiveness" (*Washington Star*, 1946) and noted for his compelling aesthetic vision, Abramowitz has been considered by critics, curators and collectors as one of the most important artists of the 20th century.

"The modern art movement in the Washington region started mid-century, and the first was the work of Ben Abramowitz," said Walter Hopps, museum director and curator, at a memorial service for artist Gene Davis at the National Gallery of Art in 1985.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION



Selected by co-curators Nuzhat Sultan and Susan Abramowitz Rosenbaum, *Out of the Vault* will feature 15 original lithographs and drawings, including three also in the permanent collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and six never-before-seen intimate portrait paintings from the same period.

Out of the Vault is supported by the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, the Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation, the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C., and Arts for the Aging.

ABOUT THE W.P.A.

The **Federal Art Project** (F.A.P.) was the visual arts arm of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Great Depression-era and New Deal Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) program in the United States. From 1935 until 1943, the Federal Art Project is reputed to have created more than 200,000 separate works in posters, lithographs, murals and paintings. Many of the works were destroyed but those that survive still stand among the most-significant

pieces of public art in the country. The W.P.A./F.A.P. gave artists a new found self-respect as productive members of society. The art in the W.P.A./F.A.P. typically championed routine life in America, the American work ethic and celebrated American scenes.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

VIDEO In the artist's own words: <https://vimeo.com/24353574>

The prolific and complex achievements of master artist Benjamin Abramowitz in painting, sculpture, works on paper in drawing and watercolor span almost eight decades. His vast body of work resists categorization. Working outside the geographical spotlight of the New York City art world, Abramowitz' recognized mastery has been often overlooked.

Abramowitz was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1917 to Russian immigrants. As a young child, he craved the artistry of signs, posters and illustrations, and was enraptured by the art in museums. Walking hours to study life drawing at the Brooklyn Museum School, at age 16, the Brooklyn Museum honored him with his first solo exhibition. He attended the National Academy of Design, absorbing the models of the avant-garde and social-realists, studying the masters. In 1936 at age 19, he joined the Work Projects Administration (W.P.A.) under the name of "Ben Hoffman" and moved through the ranks, as teacher, mural assistant, senior printmaker and painter. All of the work he created for the WPA was signed under the alias of Ben Hoffman.



In 1941, with the world at war, Abramowitz moved to Washington, D.C., resumed his birth name Abramowitz, and took on U.S. government graphic assignments. He married and bought a home in then rural Greenbelt, Maryland, one of the nation's first cooperative and planned communities, now recognized as a unique socio-architectural experiment. He chose to make Greenbelt his base for both home and studio for more than half a century.

The postwar years were a time of critical personal and artistic evolution for him. Two young children complicated his daily struggle for time and energy, yet he led a successful and creative multi-tiered existence. By day a lithographer, each and every night driven by discipline, he drew and painted; he even carved out precious moments to study history and philosophy and taught himself seven languages, beginning with Latin and Greek.

By the time he was in his early 30's, Abramowitz had become a celebrated star in the growing Washington, D.C.–Baltimore regional art scene. From the 1940's on, critics, curators and collectors enthusiastically sought out his work. In solo and group exhibitions, he reaped critical acclaim. He competed for and won virtually every prize. Reporters were fascinated by his capacity to turn out large numbers of canvases and also make time for family. His work began to be purchased for major regional collections among them, the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Phillips Collection. The Corcoran Gallery of Art selected his work annually for its biennial exhibitions.



By the mid-20th century, Abramowitz was recognized not only as a painter, but also as a teacher and “art coach” throughout the Washington metropolitan area. The Ford Foundation singled him out and sent him throughout the country, lecturing, conducting seminars and critiques as an artist-in-residence. During this time, he kept journals and maintained an active correspondence with critics, curators and students.

His appetite for visual statement drew him initially to the social and political chaos of the Depression, the tragedies of the poor and legends from the Old Testament. Tender portraits of his family, in a variety of media, continued throughout his life. He moved seamlessly and simultaneously to create hundreds of line drawings and watercolors, emotive and dynamic forces punching through the paper. In time, by the 1970's, he moved beyond the canvas, and turned to making elegant and iconic wall works and freestanding sculptures, some black, some white. He also designed four books illustrating the basic principles of the creative experience.

Until his mid-80's, when diminishing vision prevented him from continuing to work, he created steadily and with the same discipline and vigor that marked his earlier years. In the later years, he worked exclusively with ink, producing rhythmic forms that live and dance on paper.

“I don't know all the answers...I am much more interested in the questions,” he said. By 2008, his early work in the W.P.A. became increasingly valuable and recognized, and is currently featured in a touring exhibition. Only at that time did his daughter identify his early and brief use of the name “Ben Hoffman,” and The Metropolitan Museum of Art has now corrected its registry to reflect both the name Hoffman and Abramowitz.

Abramowitz' distinguished lifework has been cited in numerous prestigious biographical volumes. The National Archives of American Art holds hundreds of papers, letters and other materials.

For more information about the artist, visit www.benjaminabramowitz.com.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

Co-curator and exhibition organizer Susan Abramowitz Rosenbaum is the only surviving child of artist Benjamin Abramowitz. Armed with small seed grants in 2011, Rosenbaum and two assistants registered and photographed more than 7,500 works, including 433 paintings and 162 sculptures. The basement of her townhouse became an archive, with files for the flat lithographs, racks and shelves for the paintings, exhibition spaces on the walls for art and pedestals for sculptures. Rosenbaum named the search and cataloguing “the rediscovery project.” A well-known arts educator and administrator, Rosenbaum was vice president for external affairs at the Corcoran Gallery of Art for a number of years. Head of an arts consulting practice for 16 years, Rosenbaum is currently Chair of the Board of Directors of Arts for the Aging.

Co-curator and exhibition organizer Nuzhat Sultan is the Chair of the Arts Committee of the Woman’s National Democratic Club.

ABOUT THE WOMAN’S NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CLUB

Founded in 1922, the Woman's National Democratic Club (W.N.D.C.) was the first meeting place for Democratic women in Washington, DC. When WNDC opened its doors in rented quarters near the White House in 1924, members recruited influential Washingtonians to speak at club luncheons. The twice-weekly events have endured for nine decades and provide a lively forum for discussion with speakers such as Hillary Rodham Clinton, E. L. Doctorow, Madeleine Albright, Jim Lehrer, Vernon Jordan, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Loretta and Linda Sanchez and other prominent national and local figures.

The historic clubhouse, located in the Dupont Circle neighborhood of 19th century and Beaux Arts mansions, is also a museum with beautifully appointed rooms for meetings, receptions, weddings, and other private events. Designed by Washington architect Harvey Page, and built in 1892-94 for a descendent of the noted Adams family of Massachusetts, the house is a unique transition between Victorian and Arts and Crafts architecture. WNDC bought the former residence in 1927. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

The WNDC Educational Foundation (E.F.) opens club facilities, programs, and activities to the public. The EF oversees the club's museum collections and archives, sponsors an oral history and publication program and conducts community outreach projects. The foundation maintains an historic preservation fund to help conserve the landmark clubhouse.

Image credits:

Page one: *The Politician*, c. 1945 ink wash, pencil and crayon on paper.

Page two: *Campers*, 1935 woodblock, created for the WPA, copy owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Page three: *The Gang*, 1937 Lithograph, created for the WPA.

Page four: *The Bride*, 1938 lithograph created for the WPA, copy in collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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