ALLAN FREELON: PAINTER, PRINTMAKER, TEACHER

Allan Freelon (1895–1960) was an artist, teacher, and activist whose works span media, subject matter, and style. Many Black artists of his time participated in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of culture and intellectual activity centered on the Black experience, but Freelon chose a different path. His decision to work in the Impressionist mode led to aesthetic disagreements with his Philadelphia-born contemporary, the philosopher and “dean” of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke (1885–1954). In his 1925 book *The New Negro: An
Interpretation, Locke championed the formation of a unified Black identity, which Freelon felt could be limiting to Black artists’ creativity.

While Freelon’s paintings recorded life and scenes of the seaside village of Gloucester, Massachusetts, he delved into more political and socially conscious works through his printmaking. Many of his prints look closely at the city of Philadelphia, especially its architecture and its working people. Though his painted and printed works varied in theme, he exhibited them both frequently in his lifetime, particularly on the East Coast. Using plates held by the Freelon family, contemporary Philadelphia
printmaker Cindy Ettinger created the prints on view in this exhibition.

In his extensive teaching career but also within his own family, Freelon impacted future generations of artists. He was the patriarch of a multigenerational artistic family, including his grandson the distinguished American architect Philip Freelon (1953–2019), who played a key role in the design of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, and his great-granddaughter Maya Freelon (b. 1982), who continues the family legacy in the visual arts as a noted multimedia artist.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Gloucester Harbor*, ca. 1929

Oil on canvas

Purchased with Museum funds, 2021

Allan Freelon’s pastel-hued view of the harbor in Gloucester, Massachusetts, places him in line with other American Impressionists working in the area, including
Hugh Henry Breckenridge and Emile Gruppe. Freelon and Breckenridge, both based in Philadelphia, summered in Gloucester. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Gloucester was a thriving artists’ colony visited by such American painters as Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, and John Sloan, who took in the deep blue water and humble working village. Unlike in his prints, Freelon rarely depicts humans in his paintings, opting instead for idyllic views of ships and shores.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Mackerel Boats*, 1925–29

Etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Gloucester Harbor—Three Boats*, ca. 1935

Etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Bridge Construction*, ca. 1935

Etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Resting*, 1925–29

Etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
These four etchings, views of the nautical scenery around Gloucester, represent Freelon’s initial approach to printmaking. Devoid of humans, these prints relate much more to Freelon’s Impressionist paintings than to the urban-based works in the rest of the exhibition. He used quick and rough marks and a minimal amount of relatively fine lines to create the sense of light and space. The stillness of the harbor in Gloucester represented a calm summer reprieve from the loud and busy city of Philadelphia, where Freelon spent the rest of the year.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Elverson Building*, 1928/1929

Aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Number One Broad Street*, 1933

Aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Rittenhouse Flower Market*, ca. 1935

Etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
These four views of Philadelphia recall how deeply connected Freelon was to the city and its art scene. He exhibited frequently with
Philadelphia artists such as Henry B. Jones and Laura Wheeler Waring. Starting in 1941, the Pyramid Club, made up of prominent members of Philadelphia’s Black community, hosted annual art exhibitions where Freelon’s work could regularly be seen. Freelon was also the first Black member elected to the Philadelphia Print Club. In addition, he was a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, the Tra Club (an organization of Black artists founded in 1921), the Philadelphia Art Teachers Association, and many other organizations. Freelon served as the cover designer and editor for the short-lived African American literary journal *Black Opals*, published in the city from 1927 to 1928.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Surgical Theater*, ca. 1935

Aquatint with soft ground etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021

This aquatint depicts a surgical amphitheater, likely at the University of Pennsylvania’s Pennsylvania Hospital. Such medical
classrooms allowed students to observe surgeries as part of their education. In the Philadelphia area, two paintings by Thomas Eakins stand out as predecessors and potential influences for Freelon’s print: *Portrait of Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic)* (1875), which hung at Thomas Jefferson Medical College, and *The Agnew Clinic* (1889), at the University of Pennsylvania. Freelon undoubtedly knew of these works when he undertook his own version, depicting students of the 1930s, updating the scene with the electric lights and more sterile environment of the time.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Nude with Book*, ca. 1935

Aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

_Nude with City Scene_, ca. 1935

Aquatint with soft ground etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Nude with Fruit Bowl*, ca. 1935

Etching and aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

Two Nudes, ca. 1935

Etching and aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021

While it is not unusual for artists to work from and depict nude models, these four prints proved daring and even dangerous for
their time. Several of the models in these compositions appear to be white women, who pose for the artist, a Black man, in a domestic space. Reclining female nudes appear throughout the history of art, with women’s bodies treated as a form of still life, positioned on drapery alongside a bowl of fruit or other tablescapes. The intimacy Freelon imbued in these prints - created in the mid-1930s, when the suggestion of interracial relationships and the perceived improprieties of the scenes might draw negative or even violent reactions – would have surely provoked social tension.
A native of Philadelphia, Allan Randall Freelon was born in 1895 and attended the South Philadelphia High School for Boys where his artistic promise earned him a full scholarship to the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art, today known as the University of the Arts. There he majored in art instruction from 1912 to 1916. Freelon went on to attend many of Philadelphia’s higher learning institutions, such as the University of Pennsylvania, the Barnes Foundation, and the Tyler School of Art at Temple University as well as training under Philadelphia-based artists like Hugh Henry Breckenridge, Earl Horter, and Dox Thrash.
During World War I, Freelon joined the US Army, serving as a second lieutenant at Camp Dodge, Iowa, and in Little Rock, Arkansas, from 1917 to 1919. While serving in the military, Freelon married Marie J. Cuyjet and together they had one child, Allan R. Freelon Jr., in 1925. Following his time in the army, Freelon was hired as an art teacher in the Philadelphia school district. By 1921 he had been promoted to assistant director of art education, the first African American appointed to the superintendent’s office, a role he would serve the rest of his life. He taught elsewhere, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art between 1940 and 1946, as well as at his home studio, “Windy Crest,”
where he lived with his second wife, Mary Kouzmanoff, in Telford, Pennsylvania.

Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Dockside Worker*, ca. 1935

Aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Mending Nets*, ca. 1935

Aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Unloading Fish*, ca. 1935

Aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
These three images appear much darker in tone than his etchings of boats, concerned more with the people who depended upon the sea for their livelihood. Using the carborundum print practice—discussed elsewhere in this gallery—Freelon achieves a dark, grainy texture, adding gravity to these scenes of labor. The men at work in these images form a vital part of the economy of Gloucester, a vibrant fishing community. Though Freelon counted among the “summer people,” going out to Cape Ann for holidays and leisure, he took note of the working class surrounding him on these occasions.
INNOVATIVE PRINTMAKING

Many of the prints on view in this gallery are classified as carborundum prints, invented by Philadelphia printmakers Michael Gallagher, Hugh Mesibov, and Dox Thrash in the 1930s. These three artists all worked for the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, at Philadelphia’s Fine Print Workshop. Freelon, who was working with Thrash during this time, was an early adopter of the technique.

The process involves using carborundum grit made from ground black silicon carbide. This material is typically used to grind lithographic stones in order to remove the previous image, creating a clean, polished
surface. In an innovative move, printers found that using carborundum to abrade a metal plate, rather than a stone, resulted in a textured background on which to make an image.

After preparing the surface with carborundum, an artist either engraved or etched a design onto the roughened plate. Freelon used etching, a chemical process in which an acid-resistant ground is put on the printing plate, then a design is drawn on the plate with a stylus, scraping away the ground. The plate is then dipped in acid to eat away at the exposed metal. The etched portions hold the ink, even when the surface of the plate is wiped clean.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Market Wagon*, 1933

Etching and aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
In *Market Wagon*, Freelon strikes a balance between the idyllic subjects of his summertime work in Gloucester and the city explorations he made in Philadelphia. The wagons loaded with produce, shaded by the overhanging canopy, could be either in Gloucester or Philadelphia. The timelessness of the subject creates a sense of nostalgia present in many American Impressionist works. Created during the Depression, the image also relates to other observations of working-class life by Freelon, in which he deemphasizes the economic struggles of the period.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

Drop Forge, ca. 1930

Etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

Road Menders, ca. 1935

Aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Welding*, ca. 1930

Aquatint and etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
The printmaking process can be seen as mirroring the physical labor of the workers depicted in these three prints. The grinding of the carborundum grit on the metal plate, the scraping of the metal with the stylus, and the acid bath that eats away at the metal mimic the industrial labor of welders, road crews, and steel workers. Made during the Great Depression, with many Americans desperate to find jobs, these studies of anonymous workers are subtly celebratory, presenting images of productivity rather than hardship.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Christmas Window Shopping*, ca. 1935

Etching and aquatint in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
With this observational print, Freelon focuses our attention on the human drama unfolding before the twinkling holiday lights of a department store window. Perhaps a visual metaphor of goodwill during the holidays, the composition features a window-gazing well-dressed couple about to be interrupted by a slight stooped, beseeching man.
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Campaign Headquarters*, ca. 1935

Aquatint with soft ground etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
Allan Freelon, 1895–1960

*Campaign Headquarters Pledge*, ca. 1935

Aquatint with soft ground etching in black on ivory wove paper

Gift of Joel S. Dryer, 2021
These two similar prints provide variations on a topic clearly of interest to Freelon. In both works, the scenes depict a political candidate making a street speech. In *Campaign Headquarters*, the composition is simply arranged, with a diverse group of men listening intently. We see different races, classes, and abilities, although there are no women in the group. The smiling candidate may appear disingenuous, but in *Campaign Headquarters Pledge*, the speaker’s grin seems even more devilish, and the crowd much more indistinct. Freelon had political aspirations of his own, running unsuccessfully for the Pennsylvania state legislature as a member of the Progressive Party in 1948.