



Charles Turzak (American, 1899 - 1986)
Merchandise Mart, 1931
Woodcut on paper
8 3/4 x 11 1/8 inches
Signed, titled and numbered in pencil; edition 19/50
#8436

Charles Turzak

Printmaker, Painter, Illustrator, Watercolorist, Cartoonist, Designer, Author, Lecturer, Teacher

Charles Turzak was the third child, and the only son of his Czechoslovakian immigrant parents. He was born August 20, 1899 in Streeter, Illinois. His father, a coal miner, worked from before sunrise 'till after dusk, so many rural chores occupied Charlie's boyhood years. But, sometimes he would sneak away from his duties to do what he enjoyed most . . . carefully carve peach seeds into miniature monkeys, which he would sell for pennies.

When he was nine he started elementary school; an apprenticeship making violins soon followed. Drawings and cartoons for his school's yearbook and sale bills for local merchants were the channels for his self-taught artistic talent. Shortly before he started high school, the United States entered World War I. His artwork was filled with soldiers and military artillery. But, by the time he was old enough to enlist, the war was over and he settled back into finishing his schooling. His father was determined that young Charles would be a professional man, a doctor or lawyer.

At the time of his high-school graduation in 1920, he won a cartoon contest sponsored by The Purina Company, St. Louis, Missouri. The first prize money and the prestige of being a winner earned him entrance to art education at The Art Institute of Chicago, overriding his father's fiery objections. His excellence in drawing and woodcarving rewarded him with membership in Delta Phi Delta, an honorary art fraternity. Freelance advertising, selling insurance, and teaching a class in woodcut and wood engraving at The Academy of Fine Arts funded him through his college graduation, 1924.

Commissioned in 1927 to illustrate a privately printed book, Charles Turzak created ten amusing woodcuts. The book was titled EASTWARD WHOA! and authored by Ben C. Pittsford, who owned an advertising agency in Chicago, Illinois. The book contains a humorous diary travel log interspersed with boyhood reminiscences, and comical events during the four Pittsford brother's (who referred to themselves as "The Four Horsemen") auto trip to New York City a two week holiday in the spring of 1927.

During the same year he made two prints showing Northwestern University scenes. One was of the first building built on the Evanston campus, titled Old College, and the other in total contrast both in architecture and mood was of the downtown campus, titled Northwestern University (Chicago Campus). Then in December of 1932 he continued the Northwestern University scenes with two more prints: Men's Quadrangle and Union Building. Combined with the two scenes from 1927 they became a suite of four images.

By the late 1920's he had gained public attention from exhibiting and selling his prints of: The Chicago Water Tower, Gypsy Girl, The Wine Press, Dry Docks, Monkey Doorway, Velky Strom, Autumn, The Tribune Tower, Carl Sandburg, Buckingham Fountain, Jewelers Building, "333", Forth Church, Gravel Barges and watercolors of steel mills, boats, harbors, skylines, woodlands, parks, and still lifes. The interest and notoriety helped to establish his commercial career in advertising.

In 1929 he made a trip to Europe. It would be his chance to study "The Masters" first hand. He sailed to England, and from there traveled through Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and France. City after city, day after day, he explored the museums' great works of art. In the streets and countryside he captured European life in flowing watercolor studies. His sketch books were filled with drawings of people, markets, castles, churches, bridges, a carnival at Munich, the peasantry of his parent's home, Spisska Nova Ves, the funeral of his mother's Aunt Julia, even an argument between two women in Vienna over where their garbage should be kept.

On his return to the U.S. the great Wall Street Crash enveloped everything. Businesses, banks, and clients virtually disappeared over night. Three of the watercolors done in Europe were quickly turned into festive multicolored peasant prints requiring from four to seven individually registered blocks . . . Peasants and Melons, Girl with Goose, and Weighing the Geese. Another watercolor was used for a black and white print, Czechoslovakian Landscape. They depicted the little village of his parent's home. Other watercolors were finished as oil paintings vividly picturing the rural and urban life he had seen on his trip.

The following biography was written by and is reprinted with the permission of the artist's daughter, Joan Turzak Van Hees.