Benton Spruance: The Passion of Ahab

La Salle University Art Museum

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The Passion of Ahab

TWENTY-SIX LITHOGRAPHS BY Benton Spruance

La Salle University Art Museum
March 20th – May, 1989
For all its relatively uncontested status as an American classic, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) has attracted few notable illustrators. It may be said that its odd combination of an encyclopedic history of the whale and the whaling industry, together with a densely symbolic fictional account of the vindictive pursuit of one particular whale, has been too complex for even the most interested artist. Whatever the reason, there are only a handful who have made a serious attempt to illustrate the novel—Rockwell Kent (1930), say, Alex Nino (1973), Garrick Palmer (1974), Boardman Robinson (1977), or Barry Moser (1979). But then there is Benton Murdoch Spruance (1968).

Benton Spruance (1904-1967), one of the nation's most distinguished printmakers, spent his life as an artist and teacher in Philadelphia, principally as chairman of the Fine Arts Department at Beaver College and director of the
printmaking department at the Philadelphia College of Art. His numerous lithographs (he produced almost 500) won important prizes, were the subject of many one-man shows, and were eagerly sought for private and institutional collections. He became a member of the National Academy of Design and major art committees across the country, and he received honorary degrees from his teaching institutions.

Spruance was attracted neither to the encyclopedic background on whaling in *Moby Dick* (as Barry Moser has been) or to the key dramatic climaxes of the narrative (as most illustrators have necessarily been). Rather he wanted to treat the underlying philosophy of the story, and so he did not consider himself an illustrator in the usual sense of the word. What he envisaged was a portfolio of prints, with, at most, short passages from the novel to accompany them. He was influenced in this last project of his artistic career, it would seem, both by the recent tragedies in his own life and by a book by his friend Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrels with God*. The latter describes Ahab's pursuit of the white whale that had cost him a leg in an earlier encounter as an angry rebel's struggle against God, a God conceived in the Calvinist tradition as harsh and vindictive.
For Ahab, then, the whale is the symbol, even the actual embodiment, of the evil forces which seek his destruction.

Spruance arranged his prints in five thematic sections:
I  Introduction of the major actors and themes (1-4)
II  The Nine Ships which the Pequod encounters in its long pursuit and which come to some grief thereafter (5-13)
III  Supernatural rituals preparing Ahab for his longed-for revenge (14-17)
IV  The Passion of Ahab in the destructive climax of the novel (18-24)
V Epilogue, the death of the sky hawk as the Pequod sinks and the lone survival of Ishmael, the narrator (25-26)

Spruance did not live to see the publication of his work, but his final legacy was clearly the most important project of his career, a series of awesome visions in weathered grey, black, blue-greens, and earth tones of a terrifying encounter between good and evil, man and God, in the tradition of Prometheus and Job.

Brother Daniel Burke
Director
Check-list

Unless otherwise mentioned, all of the prints are lent by The Hahn Gallery in Philadelphia and are original artist’s proof (usually one of ten) lithographs, listed and numbered according to the catalogue raisonné: Ruth E. Fine and Robert Looney, *The Prints of Benton Murdoch Spruance*. (Philadelphia: Published in cooperation with The Free Library of Philadelphia by University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), which gives the following general description:

*Moby Dick: The Passion of Ahab*

A series of twenty-six lithographs plus title page produced from 1965 to 1967 preliminary to their publication by Barre Publishers in an offset edition with a text by Lawrence Thompson[1968]. The edition comprised 450 copies plus 50 deluxe copies with one original lithograph. Several of the subjects were produced in more than one version.
before the published image was selected. Within each version of each image—published and others—great variation exists and many of the proofs are unique. Examples of the offset reproductions have been mistaken for original lithographs, and there have been attempts to sell them as such. (p. 285)

The first number represents the order of the printed offset edition, the last number is that of the catalogue raisonné.

Items with an asterisk are from the offset edition in The La Salle University Art Museum.

Title Page - Master of the Pequod, 1967 #527

1. Call Me Ishmael*
2. Man Against Monster*
3. The Whiteness of The Whale, 1965 #494
4. Strike Through The Mask, 1966 #505
5. The Albatross; The Ghost Ship, 1966 #506
6. The Town-Ho; 1966 #507
8. *The Jungfrau*  
9. *The Rose-Bud*  
10. *The Samuel Enderby*  
11. *The Bachelor*  
12. *The Rachel*  
13. *The Delight*  
14a. *The Burning Harpoon*  
   Charcoal study for lithograph. Purchased with funds donated by The Art Angel members of The La Salle University Art Museum  
14b. *The Burning Harpoon,...Ahab and The Candles*, 1966  #514  
15. *The Sphinx and Ahab*, 1966  #515  
   Original lithograph signed, dated, titled, and numbered by the artist's widow, Winifred Glover
Spruance.
Given by William J. Henrich, Jr., Esq. to the La Salle University Art Museum.

17. *The Spirit Spout*, 1966 #517
18. *Ahab Aloft: Crucifixion of Ahab*, 1965 #497
21. *Ahab and Starbuck*, 1966 #520/521
22. *Death of The Pequod*, 1966 #522
23. *The Last Thrust*
24. *The Vortex*
25. *Skyhawk*, 1966 #525