

Joe Jones (1909 – 1963)

A painter, printmaker, muralist and political activist, Joe Jones was born on the edge of a slum neighborhood in Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1909, where his father was a house painter.

Jones was basically self taught as an artist, and at the age of 22 in 1931, began earning awards. He began exhibiting his paintings and prints around St. Louis in the late 1920's. He also organized and taught art classes for children of unemployed workers in 1934. At about this time Jones became a member of the Communist party and a leading political activist throughout the decade of the Depression. His views were greatly criticized by mid-western conservatives and thus Jones left St. Louis for New York in 1935.

In 1935, he held his first exhibition in New York, which was acclaimed by poet and critic Archibald Macleish: "There is more scope, more vitality, and more promise as well as more mastery, than most artists a decade his senior."

He is associated with American scene painting and for some time worked closely with Thomas Hart Benton, with whom he remained friends. However, in the late 1940s, Jones' style diverged dramatically from Benton's and became very minimalist and non-representational. His paintings run the gamut from strong social protest to sheer exuberant beauty, and "the wheat fields of the Midwest stirred his passions as much as striking workers in the height of the Depression.

Many of Joe Jones's paintings and prints from the decade of the Depression (including five large murals) were commissioned by the government supported Works Progress Administration. Also, in 1937, he was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and subsequently prizes from the Pennsylvania and National Academies. Also his art was included in important exhibitions at the Carnegie Institute. In World War Two, Jones worked as a war artist for *Life Magazine*.

During his career, Joe Jones's art underwent significant changes. His early paintings and prints (many depicting laborers and farm workers) were at the forefront of both Social Realism and American Regionalism. Until the end of the Second World War the large majority of Jones's prints were in the medium of lithography. Joe Jones made his first experiments in the newly invented art of the colour silk-screen in 1945. After that date he devoted much of his talents to this method. The possibility within the silk-screen of creating large prints with full ranges of colours and tonal values contributed to a transformation of Joe Jones's art. Moving more towards a lyrical almost calligraphic form of abstractionism, Joe Jones brilliantly explored the relationships of line, form and colour. His silk-screens from the post war era, such as this original example, are now seen as masterworks of their time.

During the 1950's, most of Jones's silk-screens were commissioned by the Associated American Artists of New York. Each was published in editions of 100 impressions along with 15 Artist Proofs. This particular impression of Tropical Harbour (Hamilton Harbour, Bermuda) was originally in the collection of the archives of the Associated American Artists and thus in all probability it was published by them.

Associated American Artists: the Associated American Artists of New York was founded in the mid 1930's. The Associated American Artists commissioned original graphic art from such great masters as Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh and others. It published etchings and lithographs of no less stature during the 1960's as contributing artists included Joe Jones, Jack Levine, Chaim Koppelman, Joseph Margulies, James Kearns, Irwin D. Hoffman and Sidney Chafetz.

Prominent galleries that today include the art of Joe Jones in their collections are the Smithsonian Institute, the White House, the San Diego Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, the Saint Louis Art Museum, the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Butler Institute of American Art and the Whitney Museum in New York.

Joe Jones has paintings in Museums and public art galleries including the Butler Institute of American Art, in Ohio (*We Demand*, 1934); the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco (*Fishing Village*, *Missouri Wheat Farmers*, 1938 and *Wastelands*, 1937); The Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts; the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in Illinois (*Missouri Wheat Farmer*, 1938); the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Maine (*Handling Pipe*, ca.1944-45); the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio; Joe Jones at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington D.C. and the U.S. Library of Congress in Washington D.C. (*Wastelands*, lithograph, 1937).