



Mildred Bryant Brooks: The Art of Etching

May 16 – August 9, 2020



The award-winning work of American etcher and master printer Mildred Bryant Brooks (1901-95) explores the physical and metaphorical beauty of the natural world. After graduating high school with a penchant for printmaking, Brooks studied at the University of Southern California (USC), the Otis College of Art and Design, Chouinard Art Institute, and Stickney Art Institute. During her final years at USC, she paired her course load with an assistant teaching position, launching a parallel passion in arts education that would continue for the rest of her career.

Brooks earned twenty-two national and international awards beginning in the 1930s. Driven by a tenacious entrepreneurial spirit and the need to support her husband and two children during the Great Depression, Brooks utilized her growing fame as an artist to build an expansive and enduring one-woman business. In addition to professional etching work, she produced Christmas cards, printed for her contemporaries (a rarity for women artists at this time), and became a local fixture of interior decorating and design. To supplement teaching engagements, Brooks lectured and led technical workshops at colleges, art associations, women's clubs, libraries, and community centers throughout Southern California.

Though Brooks was celebrated throughout her career for etchings of trees – a subject for which she had particular affection and talent – she also turned her keen eye for detail, exceptional technical skill, and curiosity to the diverse desert and ocean landscapes of California. Many prints also explored poignant symbiotic relationships between the human and natural worlds.

Drawn from the gifts of Beth Bryant Tucker and made possible with the Mildred Bryant Brooks Art Fund, this exhibition celebrates the breadth of Brooks' pioneering career as a woman artist and educator in the 1930s and 40s. This digital gallery features a selection of prints from the JSMA's permanent collection; archival photographs of Brooks at her printing press; and excerpts from her 1959 educational film, *The Art of Etching*. This exhibition was curated by Emily Dara Shinn, 2019 Mildred Bryant Brooks intern, with contributions from Danielle Knapp, McCosh Curator, and Jacob Armas (B.A., History of Art and Architecture and International Studies, 2019), 2018 Mildred Bryant Brooks intern.

A Press of One's Own

Brooks received her first printing press as payment for Christmas card designs for the LA-based greeting card company Chryson's Inc. in the late 1920s. With studio space provided by Stickney Art Institute during her time as a student and professor, she began her professional etching career and utilized her talent as a printer to print the work of her colleagues, teachers, and local artists. In the early 1930s, she received from one of her patrons a large printing press capable of 500 pounds of pressure and built by the Augsburg Mechanics Guild in Germany over 200 years prior. Her roles as both a master etcher and a master printer were rare for a woman artist at this time. Though her passion and skill were crucial, her success was also dependent on a space, press, and materials she could call her own.





Tools for Intaglio Printmaking

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; L2020:46.2

Derived from the Italian verb *intagliare*, meaning “to incise” or “to carve,” intaglio refers to a group of printmaking techniques in which the artist scratches, carves, or incises their design onto the support surface of a metal plate. Intaglio is the second oldest form of printmaking, and encompasses the techniques of engraving, etching, drypoint, aquatint, and mezzotint. Etchings are achieved through a chemical process: the artist draws the incised design on the plate through an acid-resistant ground (wax, gums, or resins) and then submerges it into an acid bath. The acid “bites” the incised areas of the plate, which will hold the ink; depth and tonal nuance are achieved through duration and number of baths. A printing press forces paper into the bitten lines of the inked plate, revealing the final design in reverse.

This antique set of simple intaglio tools includes etching needles, the principle incise device; burnishers and scrapers, used for smoothing down rough areas and removing marks on the plate. Modern sets such as those used by Brooks feature more comfortable handgrips paired with diamond, carbonite, and even sapphire tips.

The Art of Etching

The 1959 film, *The Art of Etching*, records Brooks at her German press and provides an example of the lectures and training workshops to which she dedicated herself beginning in the early 1940s. With authority, patience, and brevity, Brooks narrates each step of her process as the camera captures the movement of her practiced hands on the etching plate and the physical process of manipulating the press. Brooks is both artist and chemist, discussing the benefits of copper vs. steel-faced plates; the composition and application of solvents, grounds, inks, and acid baths; and the process of incising the plate. She refers to “the etched line” as “the most personal line known to the artist,” demanding its maker to “draw expressively, choosing and rejecting swiftly and decisively.” For Brooks, this line possesses physical power, supporting the printing process the way “steel girders support a building.”



Brooks at her press, Laguna Art Museum Archives



Benediction, 1938

Etching and aquatint on this cream laid paper; from an addition of 150

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.3

Brooks was a central part of the American Etching Revival, a movement that began in the United States in the 1870s through the influence of European artists who rediscovered the expressive – rather than strictly reproductive – potential of the classic medium. Following a lackluster start at the turn of the century in New York, printmaking societies and workshops brought etching to a new level of creativity and renown in the 1920s. As prominent members, and often leaders, of these groups, women were integral to the development of styles and techniques at the heart of the revival.

Here, Brooks augments her etched design with the nuanced tonality of *aquatint*. The technique, developed in the eighteenth century, produces the appearance of shades of grey through a ground of micro dust asphaltum or resin particles fused to the plate. Multiple acid baths produce a gradation of ink density through variations of biting depths. Though Brooks only used aquatint a few times, her skill is evident in the stunning subtlety of this print. The delicately etched trees retain focus, seeming to emit a whisper of grace and comfort as they peek through the mist, giving material presence to the evocative title.

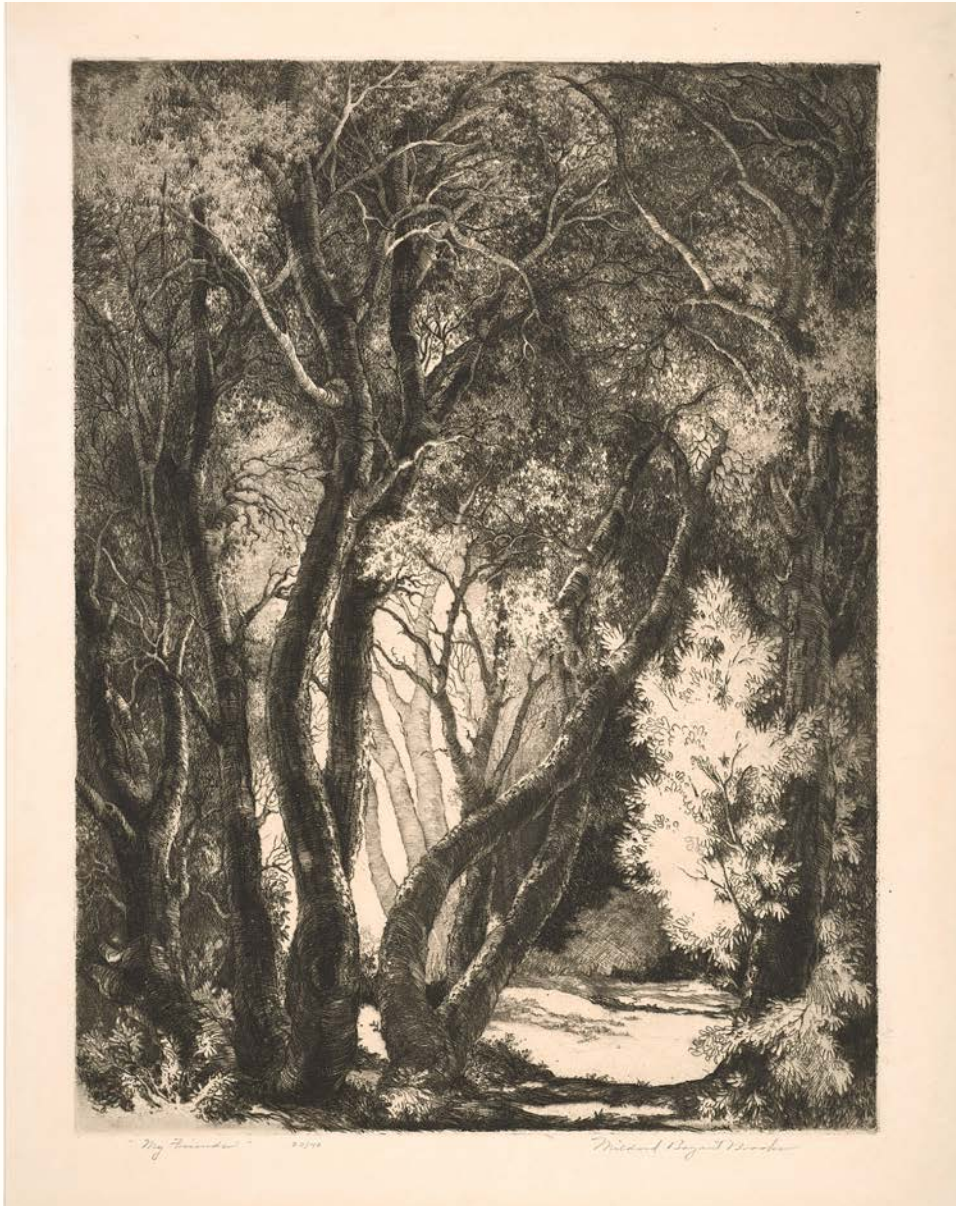
Spring, 1932

Etching and drypoint on paper

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.16

Brooks received her first of twenty-two printmaking awards in 1932. Chosen by the California Society of Etchers for their annual member distribution prize, *Spring* displays Brooks' aptitude for descriptive detail and charismatic compositions. Her attentive linework mesmerizes with intricate details over the entire plate, from the mailbox and blades of grass in the immediate foreground, to the receding crops and undulating hills in the distance.





My Friends, 1934

Etching; edition 33 of 40

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.6

My Friends received the prestigious John Taylor Arms Prize for “best technical execution in pure etching” at the 1934 Society of American Etchers Exhibition. The same year, the Chicago Society of Etchers also presented Brooks with their annual prize for the print. Brooks’ skill and artistry are on full display in the exquisite density of detail and stunning handling of ink to create a dynamic play of light and shadow. Leaves and branches merge together in the canopy as an illuminated path beckons below, inviting viewers into the heart of the friendly forest.

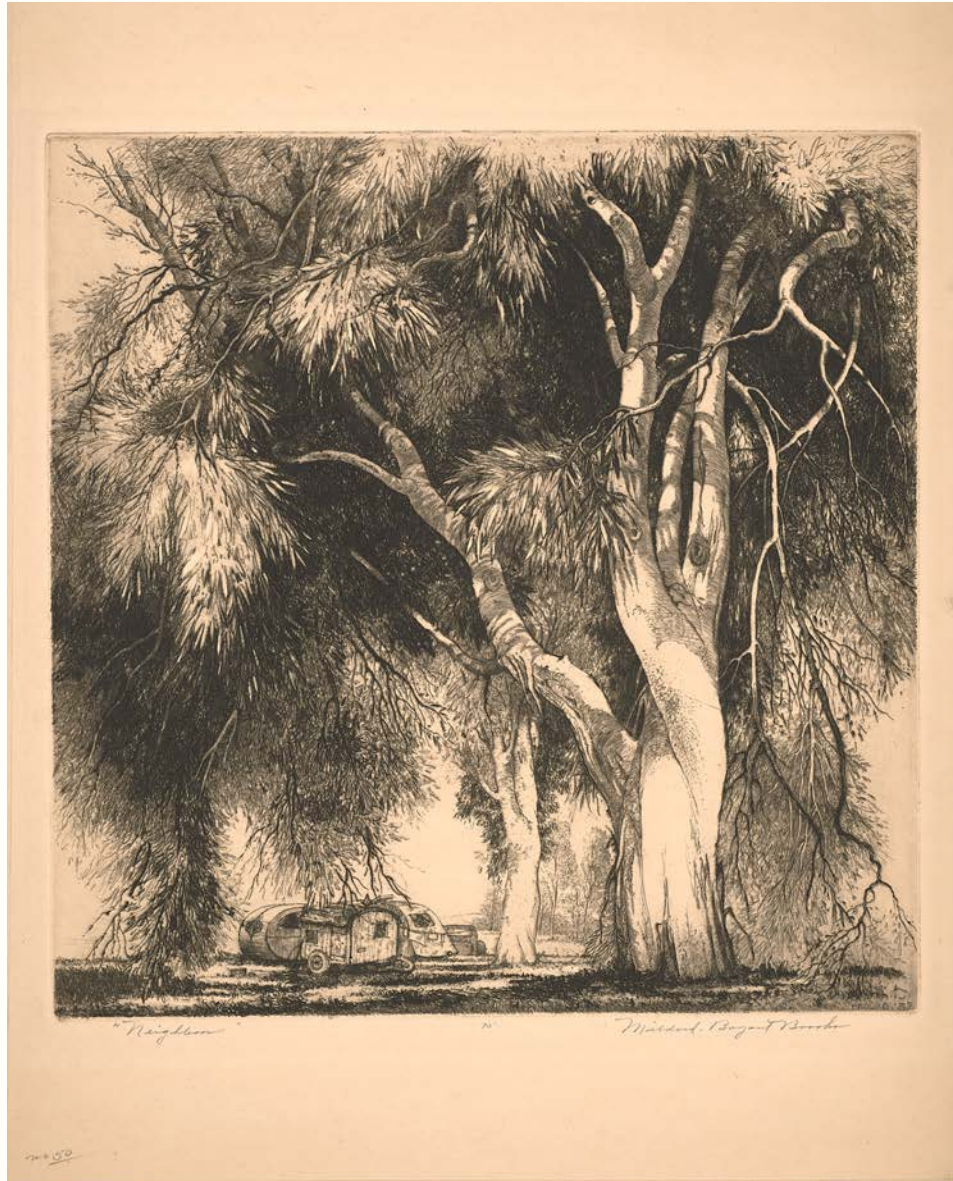
Companions, ca. 1936

Etching and drypoint on cream laid paper

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.6

Many of Brooks' award-winning etchings showcase themes repeated throughout her oeuvre: a subtle anthropomorphizing of the natural world, and a symbolic bond between trees and human beings. This relationship is suggested by the titles of many prints, such as *Companions*, *My Friends*, and *Neighbors*. . The Chicago Society of Etchers chose *Companions* for its annual purchase prize and distribution to associate members in 1937, praising Brooks' attention to trees as "the life of a landscape," her knowledge of her subject "from the ground up," and her compelling compositions with "an outlook of miles away for the wandering eye."





Neighbors, ca. 1938

Etching; edition 50 of 75

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.9

Neighbors, the gold medal winner at the Nineteenth Annual International Printmakers Exhibition in 1938, explores the quiet companionship between trees and humans, and the refuge provided by nature. Similar to her 1934 print, *Vagabonds* (also on view), it shows a huddle of man-made shelters gathered beneath giant trees.

Brooks did not explicitly name the subjects in *Neighbors*, but she could have been thinking of the large numbers of Dust Bowl refugees who fled their drought-stricken farmlands in the Midwest during this period. As hundreds of thousands of migrant families entered California in search of agricultural work, they endured homelessness, food insecurity, and widespread prejudice. Brooks' depiction of these anonymous caravanners, given shade and sanctuary by the leaf laden boughs above, suggests compassion for their plight.

Aspen Meadows, 1934

Etching

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.4

In 1936, Arthur Millier, art critic for the *LA Times* and Brooks' professor from Stickney Art Institute, praised his former student for "making America's best etchings of trees." Though her output was consistently more varied and inventive than this implies, Brooks did cultivate a formidable talent for trees that set her apart from her peers. Through close examination and an empathetic engagement with her subjects, she translated the individual personalities of each species (Aspens, Pines, Oaks, and Cypresses were favorites) and brought to life the details of every twisting branch, sun-soaked leaf, and textured trunk. This Aspen meadow almost glitters with life, showcasing impressive technique with etching tools and acid baths through a vibrant array of inked and non-inked leaves.





Cypress of Monterey (The Dance), 1941

Etching and drypoint on thin cream laid paper

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.7

Like many women artists working in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, Brooks was known through the words of her male professors; her talent recognized in comparison to her male contemporaries, and her work ethic praised in masculine terms. The oft-quoted Millier referred to his protégée as a “dogged worker” capable of “tackling huge plates” and correcting her mistakes “like a he-man” while working her giant press “like a wrestler” despite her “slight, disarmingly modest” frame. The intricacy of Brooks’ linework and intuitive translation of the natural world was also frequently marked with gendered descriptors like “feminine,” “delicate,” and “sensitive.” Her talent outstrips the belittling tone associated with such terms, however, transforming the traits of delicacy, subtlety, and sensitivity into powerhouse accomplishments that bring the nuance of nature to life with exceptional expertise.



Street Scene, 1931
Etching and drypoint

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2018:36.9

In this rare urban scene, Brooks illustrates a familiar tableau of the 1930s, translating the physical and emotional lassitude of her human subjects through a setting comprised of world-weary shadows, barren trees, and dilapidated buildings. Brooks was deeply impacted by the Depression, herself, compelled into the role of primary provider for her young family when her husband could no longer work. Her entrepreneurial spirit was already well honed and ready for action, however. To her successful side job designing Christmas cards, she quickly added the careers of professional etcher, master printer, teacher, and later interior decorator, rising without hesitation to the personal and professional challenges of the Depression and WWII.

Vagabonds, 1934

Etching; edition 50 of 75

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.11

In 1933, Brooks received a commission for six copper plates from the Federal Art Project (FAP), as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which served as a pivotal force in the training and recognition of women printmakers in the 1930s. *Vagabonds* was likely one of the prints produced from this commission, and demonstrates a subject Brooks may have tackled for the others and to which she later returned: nature as a refuge and symbolic shelter for humanity. Using a combination of partially rendered line, subtle application of ink, and hand-chalking to achieve highlights, Brooks energized her forest in a dynamic dance of light and shadow. A radiant glow envelopes her titular characters and accentuates the incredible detail of the distant canopy. In her hands, trees are a vision of physical, spiritual, and creative haven available to all.





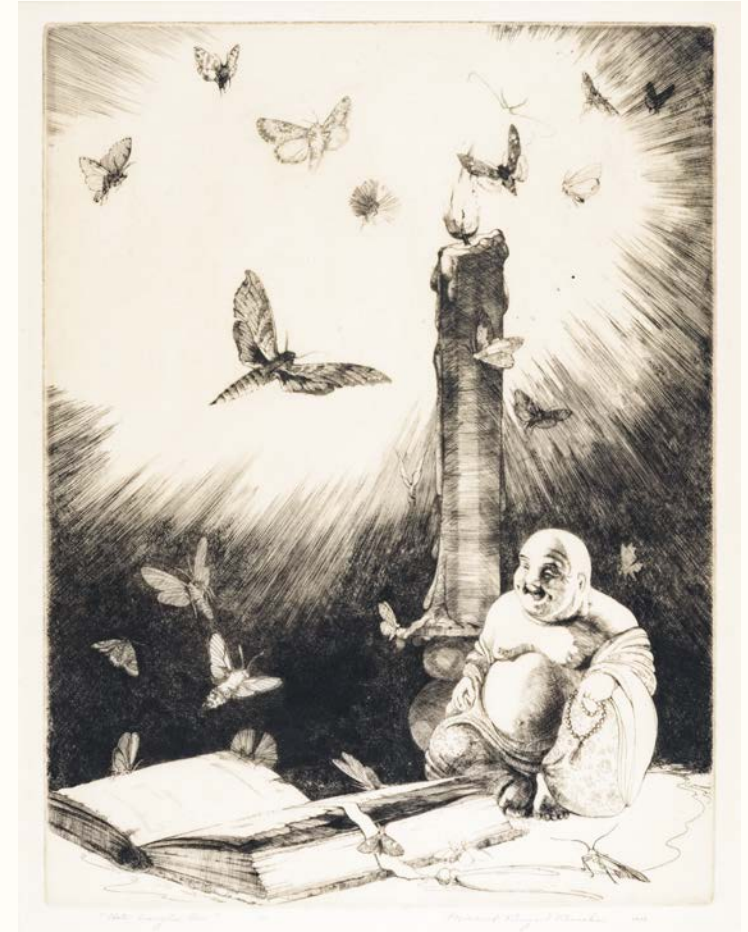
Plum Blossoms, 1930
Etching; edition 18 of 40

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.3



Candlelight
Etching; edition 20 of 75

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.12

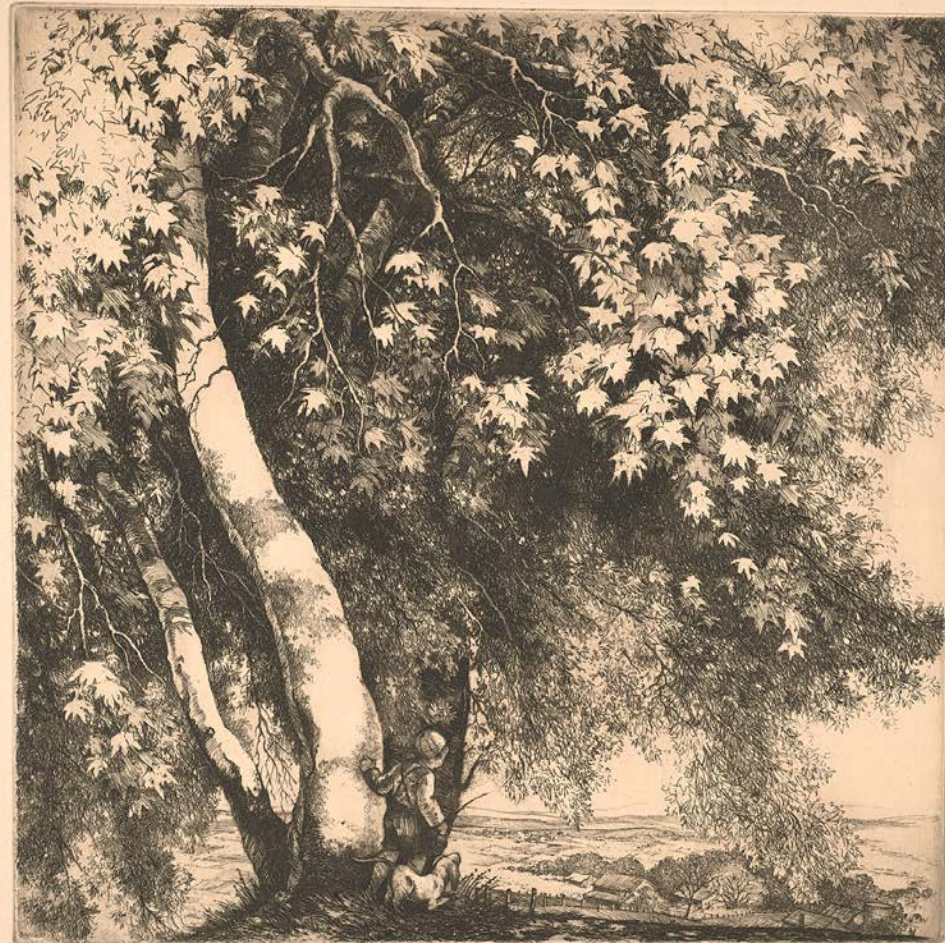


Hotei Laughs On, 1936
Etching; edition of 75

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.9

Little Fugitives, 1937
Etching

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.10





Laguna Rocks, 1936
Etching and drypoint

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2018:36.5

After settling in Long Beach, California with her family as a child, Brooks made the state her life-long home and nexus for education and professional achievement. She became a central member of the creative community in Pasadena in the 1930s, acting as president of the California Society of Etchers eight times while working closely with local printmakers and frequenting the cliffsides, forests, and beaches of Southern California with groups of *plein-air* (outdoor) painters. While her friends painted the vistas in front of them, Brooks sketched and committed her experiences of the landscapes to memory for when she returned to her studio. Movement is a central feature of her coastal scenes. Crashing ocean waves and swirling tidal sanctuaries come to life against the ancient architecture of rocks and cliffs, often watched over by sea birds instead of humans.



The Last Berth, 1936
Etching; edition 40 of 85

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2019:47.2

Memories, 1935

Etching and drypoint on cream laid paper

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.11





Fledgling, 1936

Etching and drypoint on wove paper

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.26

Every element of this scene receives careful attention: the diverse fauna of the forest floor, the sequential flow of leaflets (*pinnas*) on each fern frond, the grooved bark wrapping each towering arboreal body. Brooks frequently used *drypoint* to augment her etched designs, utilizing the ridges, or *burrs*, that result from the drypoint line to add a dynamic yet subtle texture. Brooks further brings to life the recessive depths and fertile earth of her forest with a stunning flood of sunlight achieved through a skilled combination of partially rendered line and highlights added with chalked fingertips. The rays of light stream between branches with a physical presence at odds with their inherent intangibility – a dichotomy to which Brooks frequently returned, particularly favoring the elements of light and wind.

Live Wires, 1939

Etching

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; L2020:46.1

Given Brooks' technical abilities, it is not surprising that she chose to make so many etchings of trees, which writer John Fowles claimed were "thoroughly too various and immense for anything but surface glimpses to be captured... They defeat viewfinder, drawing paper, and the canvas. They cannot be framed". Brooks' skill in pairing realistic details with creative, nuanced compositions enabled her to rise above such hindrances. As Arthur Millier wrote, she captured the "soul" of trees; in her hands "they are not just copied from nature but are recreated on the plate from her profound knowledge."

Brooks also exemplifies a comment by American artist Stephen Fisher (b.1954), known for his own faithful and delicate etchings of trees: "I hope to communicate something of my own spiritual and emotional sense of these places while expressing formal ideas and indulging my appetite for complexity." Brooks fearlessly indulges in her own appetite for new and complex challenges, such as the intersection of leafy boughs and bird-laden electric wires in this print; and the bare oak tree adorned by a flock of crows in the following scene, *November*.





November, 1939

Etching on thin laid paper; edition of 75

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.14

Among Branches, 1941

Etching and drypoint on wove paper
Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.2

Formal concerns and compositional balance were consistently important to Brooks. In *Among Branches*, Brooks takes advantage of the broken and arching boughs of her central subject to reveal additional trees and give the convincing impression of fields extending into the distance. The lowest branches of the large tree obscure the vanishing point and cradle the view behind, revealing a deft command of scale and an ability to merge realistic detail with formal ingenuity to create a more satisfying, balanced image.





The Pines of Monterey, 1935

Etching and drypoint on thin cream laid paper

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.30

The depiction of trees in art has a long, complex history. Trees have been admired for their natural beauty, spiritual and religious connotations, and for the compositional challenges provided by their dizzying root and branch structures. In the 19th century, John Ruskin reflected that the “trees of the wood were more beautiful than Gothic tracery, more than Greek vase-imagery, more than the daintiest embroiderers of the East could embroider, or the artfullest painters of the west could hem.” In the history of etching, trees feature prominently as subjects dating back to the sixteenth century. Titian paid careful attention to each tree’s individual texture and detail, and Rembrandt is remembered for drawing trees with the same formal and psychological dexterity he applied in his human portraits. Brooks integrated these legacies within her distinctly personal sensibility, remaining engaged with art historical examples.

Memorial Court (Pomona College), 1946

Etching and drypoint

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2018:36.3

Brooks was a passionate arts educator throughout her professional etching career. The two paths first intertwined in 1924, when she was given the job of assistant professor during her last two years of study at USC. She continued the trajectory at Stickney Art Institute, replacing her own professor after completing her studies in 1929. During WWII, she started a series of lectures and training workshops that toured around Southern California through the 1960s. Prior to teaching courses at the LA County Art Institute in the early 1950s, Brooks was selected as Artist in Residence at Pomona College in 1946. She took a supervisory role in printmaking classes and became a centerpiece in the fundraising campaign for a memorial gymnasium in honor of students lost during WWI and WWII. She designed a set of Wedgwood Commemorative plates and coasters – auctioned for funding – illustrating architectural landscapes on the liberal arts campus, including the auditorium, music hall, chemistry hall, and library.





Instruments for Wind, 1943

Etching and drypoint on cream laid paper; artist proof

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2017:52.25

Though Brooks's prolific output slowed during WWII due to a shortage of supplies, she continued her etching and printing practices into the 1950s. During this period, her work seems to take on a heightened reflective poignancy and subtle ecological argument, demonstrating her attunement with the natural world and perhaps translating human struggles and conflicts through landscape. Natural elements and immaterial forces like wind frequently serve as emotional catalysts for the forests and tree-laden vistas that populate her oeuvre. The title of this print conjures symphonic melodies, wind whistling through leaves and branches. It also seems to hint at the critical value trees serve as environmental agents for the clean air.

Horizon's Rim, 1944

Etching and drypoint

Gift of Beth Bryant Tucker; 2018:36.11

In one of her final prints with trees as the visual and conceptual focal point, Brooks honors her favorite subject with what seems to be a reverential tribute. Joined by the roots, two trees stand sentinel at the edge of a cliff, dignified guardians of an ancient landscape. A third leans away, beaten down by wind but still strong, while further isolated groups populate the coast into the distance. Brooks gradually withdrew from etching following WWII, reinventing herself as a muralist when her eyesight began failing and expanding her passions for entrepreneurial education into the realm of interior decorating. Throughout the 1950s and 60s she hosted a celebrated annual Christmas showcase in her home featuring do-it-yourself decorations. The latter years of her career maintained the trajectory she began in the 1920s, defining Brooks as an eminently accomplished artist whose talents and ingenuity could not be contained by a single creative or professional sphere.

