

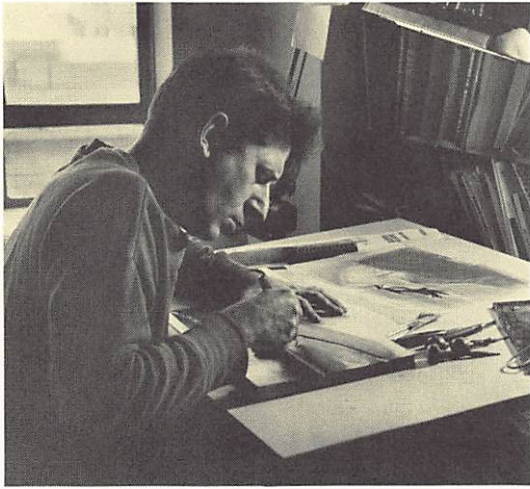
American Artist



A reprint of an article
featuring the Woodcuts of Walter Ferro
210 East 47 Street, New York 17, N. Y.
PLaza 5-1860

THE WOODCUTS OF WALTER FERRO

by William Caxton, Jr.



FOR ALL THE EXPERIMENTING with new materials that is going on today, especially in painting and sculpture, there is a parallel in the revival of interest in ancient media. In the last twenty-five years we have seen the old techniques of fresco, egg tempera, and mosaic restored to favor, an increase in the direct carving of wood and stone among sculptors, and a gradual return to the use of numerous drawing tools employed by the masters, including the turkey quill and reed pens, charcoal, crayon, carbon and graphite pencils. Even the renewed interest in calligraphy and the private press movement has had a disciplinary effect on the graphic arts.

I make a point of that word "discipline," for in citing the revival of the media listed, there can be no real argument that their usage demands a respect for material, manual control, and the heart and skill of a craftsman. These are qualities that are sadly lacking, not only in much that is labeled art today, but in too many of the machine-manufactured things that seem to thrive on the theory of built-in obsolescence.

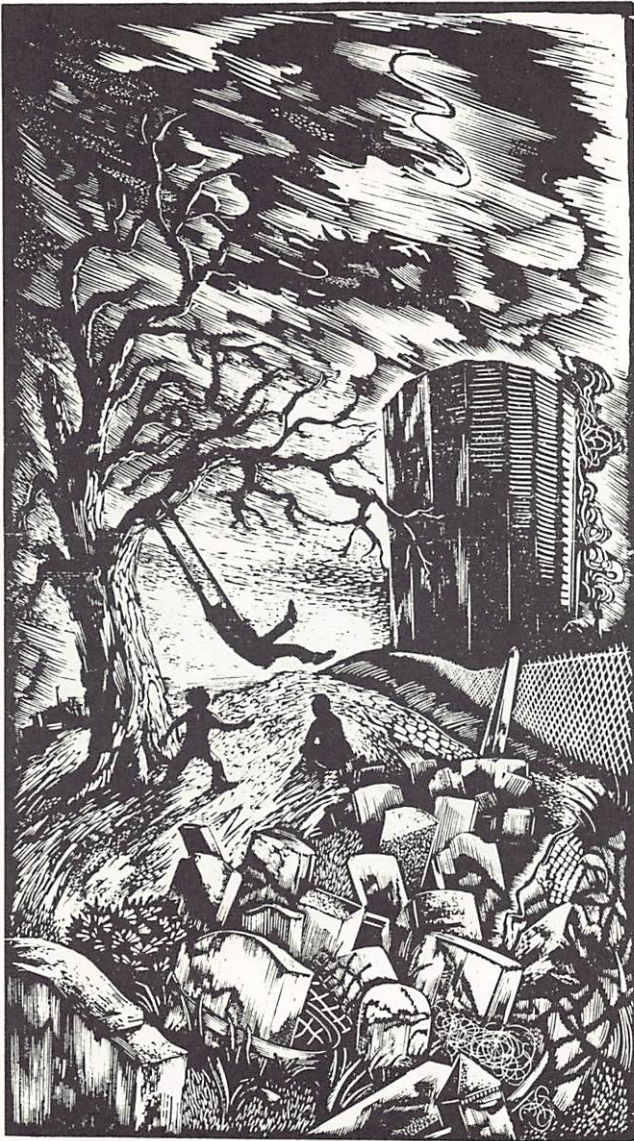
Coming now to the woodcut, we are faced with a medium that has a recorded history of about 1100 years (the first dated woodcut, printed on paper, is the celebrated *Diamond Sutra*, of Chinese origin, made in 868 A.D., and preserved in the British Museum) and is now enjoying a world-wide revival.

As an independent printmaking method, the woodcut, and its brothers, the wood engraving and linoleum cut, have succumbed to the abstract mania in certain quarters and to the oversize color print in others. Yet there is a large body of work being done in relief print techniques for the decoration of books, magazines, and advertising that has the same virile suggestiveness, the same natural affinity for type the medium has always had these past five-hundred years.

Walter Ferro is among a small group of American woodcut artists whose work in both monochrome and



Woodcut decoration for *Catholic Digest*



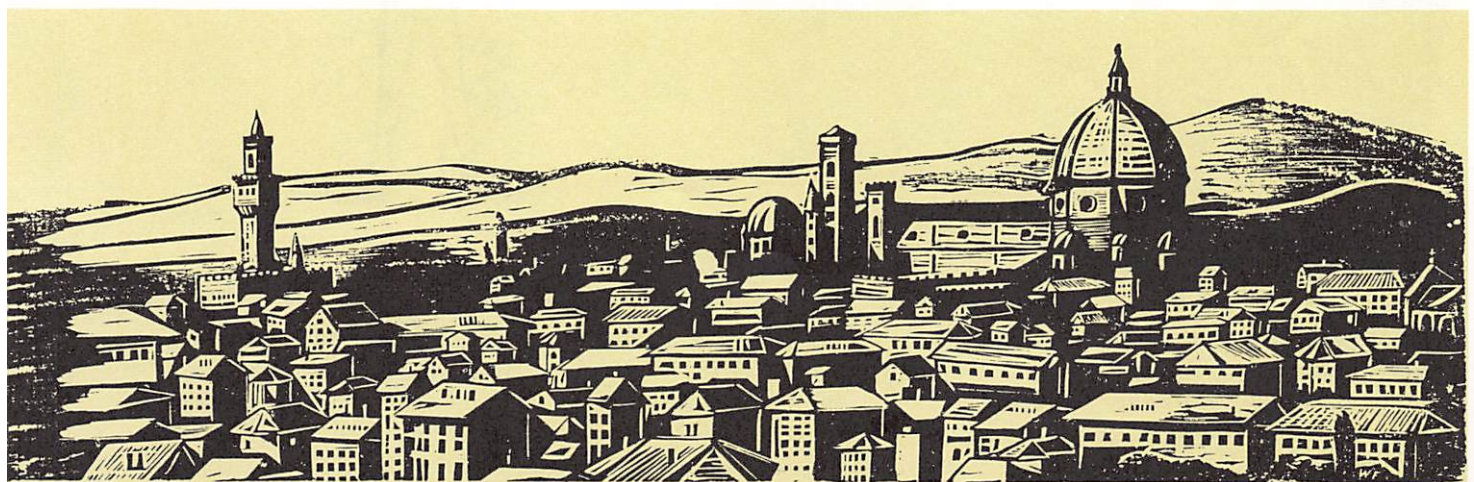
Independent wood engraving, 9 x 5 inches, titled, This Quintessence of Dust



This wood engraving (actual size) won the Kate W. Arms Memorial Prize, Society of American Graphic Artists Exhibition, 1959

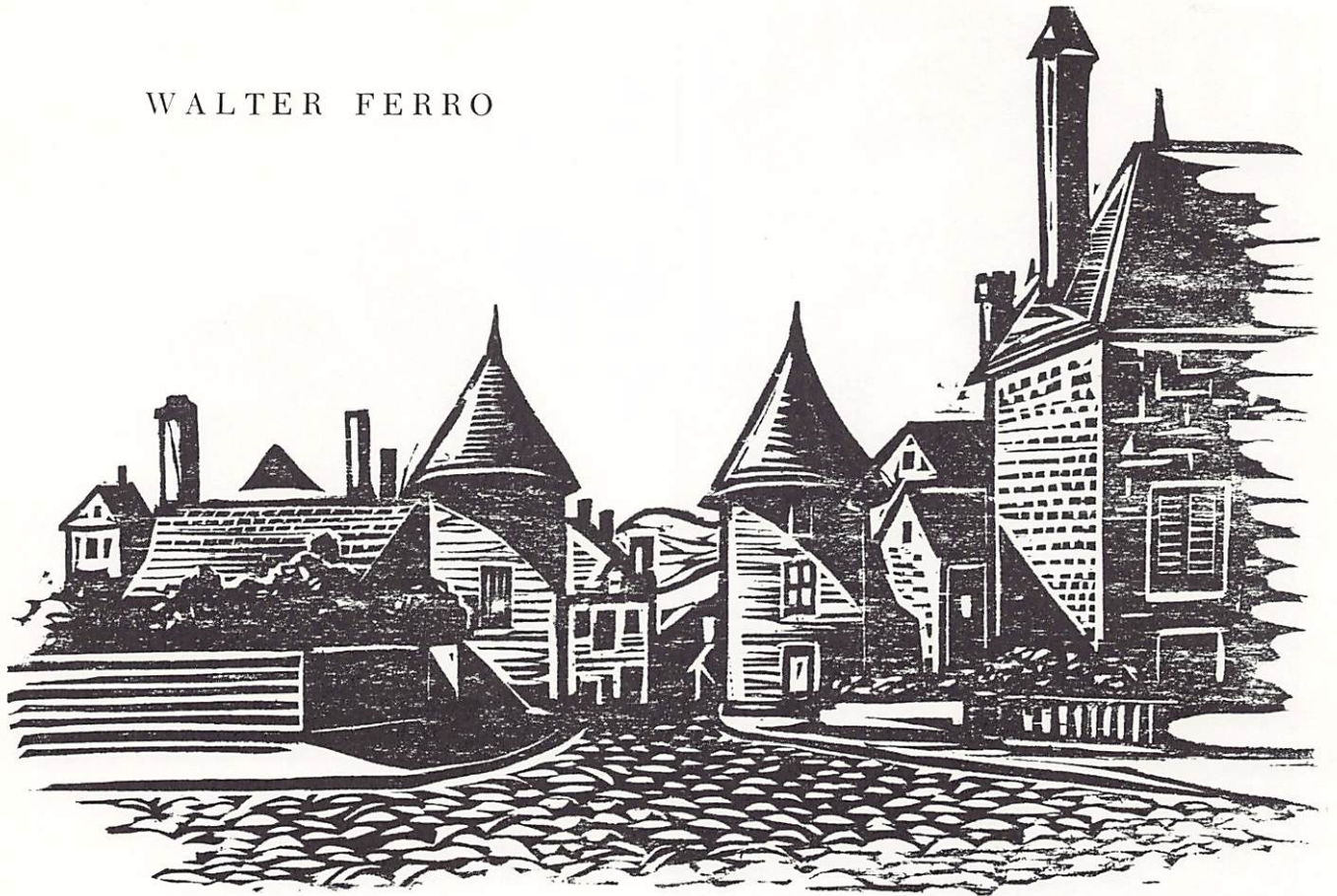


Woodcut decoration (greatly reduced) for Aramco World



Woodcut, 6 7/8 x 21 3/8 inches, for the American Oil Company magazine, Aramco World

WALTER FERRO



Woodcut decoration exploiting the wood grain, 4½ x 6¾ inches, for *Gourmet*



Wood engraving (actual size) for *The Best of Two Worlds* by Joseph Wood Krutch, William Morrow & Company, publisher



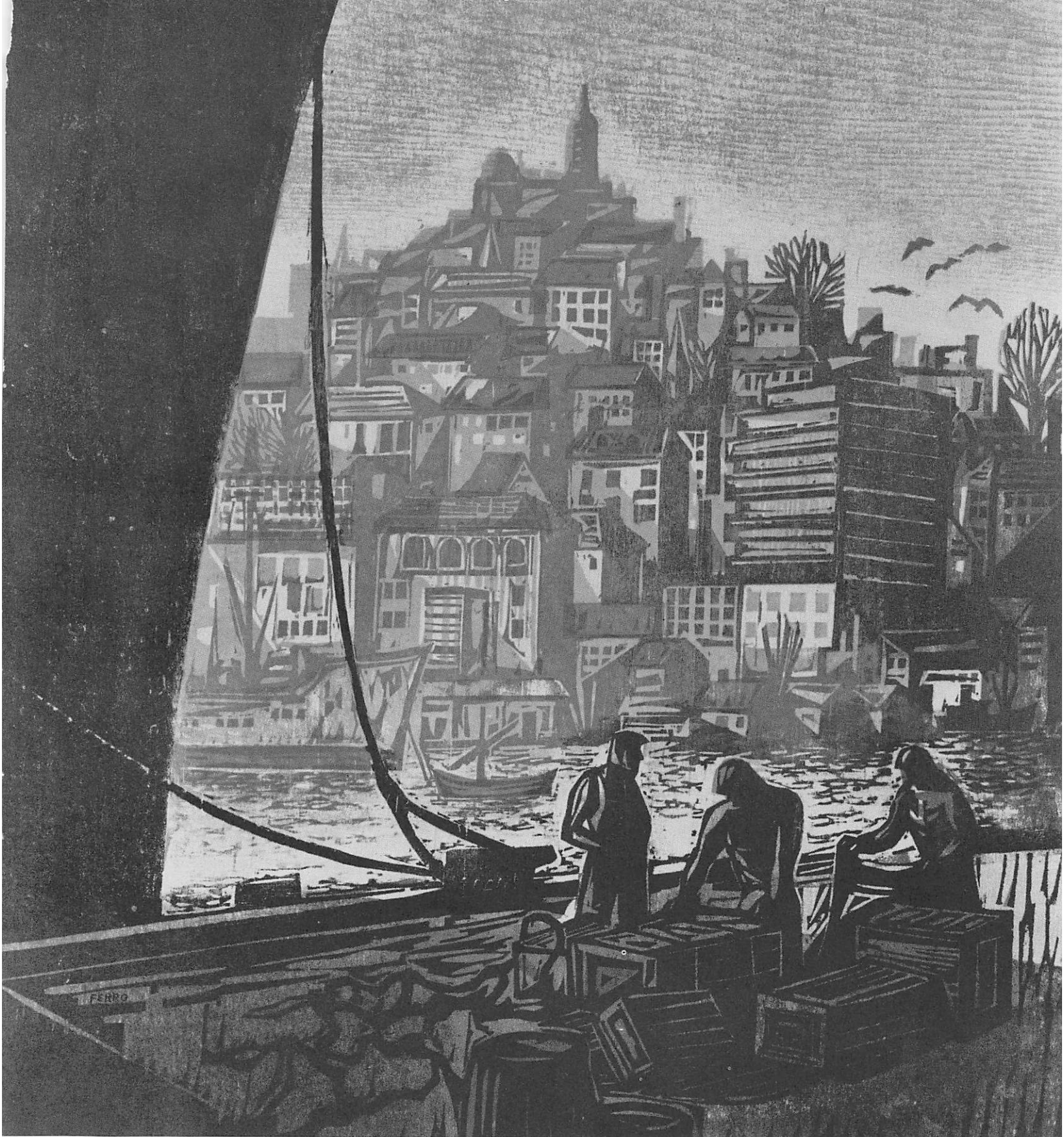
Woodcut decoration for *Aramco World*

color is beginning to invade editorial and advertising pages of major magazines still largely dominated by photography and full-color illustration. Born in Brooklyn in 1925, he began painting in oil as a small boy, and when only twelve years old, won the John Wanamaker medal offered in the New York public schools. During World War II, Ferro served in the

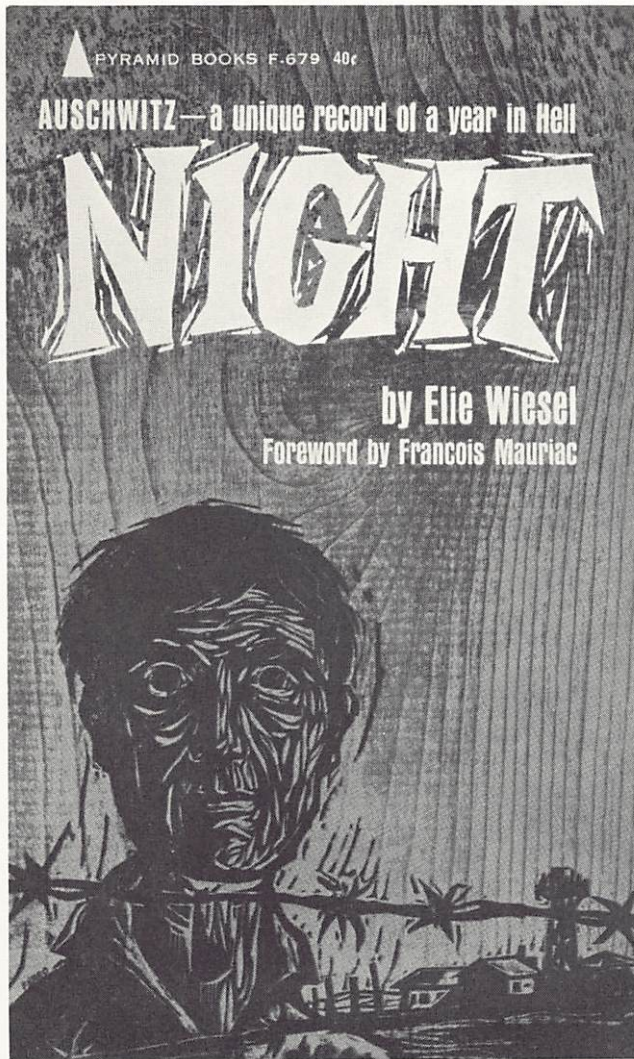
Navy aboard the U.S.S. *Augusta*, until he was transferred to a shore base as a graphic designer.

Following the war, he studied three years at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and the Art Students League, and during vacations worked as a scenic designer in a summer theater. In the next three years, Ferro gained valuable experience in an advertising

THE REPORTER



Color woodcut from seven blocks for a magazine cover. Reproduced by process plates made from the artist's original print. Plates, courtesy, The Reporter, copyright 1961



Two-color woodcut (black and dark blue)
for paperback cover, Pyramid Books, 1961



Woodcut decoration, 4½ x 4½ inches, for *Gourmet*

agency before branching out as a free lance seven years ago.

Knowing that most woodcutters seldom *begin* their professional careers as printmaker-illustrators, I questioned Walter Ferro on this point. He commented:

"I became actively interested in wood engraving during the time I spent in a small agency where, as a one-man art department, I was obliged to do everything from creating finished art and layouts to handling production and printing. I do not remember just what it was that sparked my interest in woodcuts, but, before attempting to make a print, I read every technical book I could lay hands on. One of these was *The Relief Print*, (published by Watson-Guptill and now out of print) which I found of particular help, since it contains detailed methods by such fine artists as Allen Lewis, Ernest Watson, Paul Landacre, and James D. Havens.

"Unlike many artists who had early experience in making linoleum cuts and even plankwise woodcuts before attempting wood engraving, I began my experiments with some fine old Harper's blocks (Turkish boxwood) that had been resurfaced more than fifty years after their original printing. Working with engraving tools on these mellow blocks made an addict of me, and I have been a passionate follower of the wood block ever since.

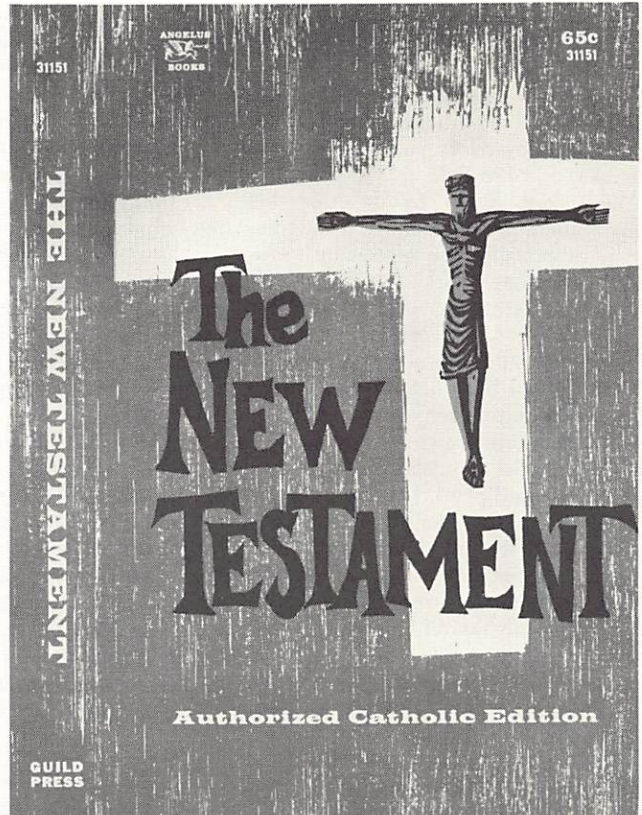
"For some time I continued making wood engravings in small scale, gradually seeking the kind of commercial commission that lent itself to this type of decoration. Along with my commercial work, I made a few independent wood engravings and began submitting these to print juries."

In the 1953 exhibition of the Audubon Artists, Ferro received the Kenneth Hays Miller Memorial Award, and in 1959, the Kate W. Arms Print Prize in the Society of American Graphic Artists Exhibition. Both awards were for wood engravings. His work has also won prizes in competition at the American Institute of Graphic Arts (1956) and the Type Directors Club (1960)



Woodcut of Paula, the artist's daughter, 15¼ x 9½ inches. In hand printing this proof, Ferro used heavy pressure on the baren to achieve the dark accents of the portrait and lighter pressure for the grayed background. The artist has used knife and gouges in a broad and painterly manner, producing a freedom and strong sculptural form which recall the interpretations of Munch, Nolde, and Barlach

WALTER FERRO



Three-color woodcut (black, red, and purple) for paperback cover, The Guild Press, 1960

A few years ago Ferro became enamoured with the broad effects of the bolder woodcut and again began experimenting, this time on the softer woods with knife and gouges. While he has not completely abandoned wood engraving, for he occasionally uses this exacting technique on certain jobs requiring delicate detail, the woodcut (executed plankwise) now claims Ferro's major attention and is finding special favor with his clients. Among those in the magazine field are Fortune, the New Yorker, The Reporter, Mademoiselle, Catholic Digest, Coronet, Woman's Day, Good Housekeeping, and Gourmet Magazine, and such book publishers as Doubleday, Sloan-Morrow, Golden Books, and a number in the paperback field. His woodcuts and wood engravings have appeared in advertisements for Time-Life, Carrier Air-Conditioning Corporation, Arabian American Oil Company, Bristol Laboratories, and American Cyanamid Corporation, to name a few.

Since Ferro's woodcuts created for reproduction are seldom if ever printed from his original blocks, it is his hand-printed proofs that constitute

"copy" for the photoengraver. This circumstance permits him the latitude of working in larger scale than if his actual wood engraved blocks were electrotyped — a practice favored by such wood engravers as Brussel-Smith, Ruzicka, and De Pol.

We asked Ferro to describe his present methods for making woodcuts, for he admits the use of certain innovations he has worked out to suit himself. He stated:

"For most of my commissions, it is necessary to submit a sketch to the art director, and I find that this often presents quite a problem. If I were to make a finished drawing in ink, even one that would simulate the character of my projected print, I would feel obligated to cut my block in exact conformity with it, and the freedom and graphic expression I like to retain would be missing. Instead, I like to submit a rough sketch which indicates a general idea of the subject matter and its design. Fortunately, most of my clients are familiar with my finished work and this suffices; in other cases, I am able to show sketches made for previous accounts and the finished prints from my portfolio of published samples. I am able to point out the value to the art director of allowing me to continue the creative effort in the cutting of my block, and to exploit those characterful lines, masses and edges which I feel give the woodcut its special flavor and graphic uniqueness.

"After my sketch is ready for transfer to the block, I select a particular wood and grain that seems to suit the design. Most frequently it is pine or basswood, though I occasionally use cherry, or for very broad and textured effects, planks from old packing crates!

"A tracing is then made on tissue placed over the sketch, and this in turn is placed face down and anchored securely on the block with masking tape. I insert a sheet of carbon paper. Then, with a hard pencil, I trace only those lines and patterns which require a degree of accurate form. When these basic lines have been transferred, I remove the tracing paper and ink in the design. Like the steps that precede it, the inking-in is a creative process, for by now I am obliged to make decisions about translating the penciled pattern into a web of definite lines and shapes. One might well ask why I don't do this in the first sketch stage, but my answer is that I like to feel my way progressively and, for me, this method works best. Finally a coat of shellac is applied to the surface to harden the block and keep it from warping. Then I darken the whole

surface with a rubbing of burnt sienna or Prussian blue so that I can see clearly each incision of my tools.

"Now for the cutting. I use only a few tools: two woodcutting knives specially ground to a thirty-degree cutting edge and kept razor sharp by frequent honing with an Arkansas stone, and two or three gouges of fine steel set in graver handles. I begin with the knife, often working along the contour edge of a relief mass in much the same fashion that a sculptor would attack a bas-relief in clay; but sometimes I begin cutting the white patterns before I separate the major forms from their natural background. The important thing is to keep the cutting producing good pattern and not become enslaved to the original inked-in design if a modest departure from it can vitalize the over-all effect. By the same reasoning, when I feel that the cutting has produced a fresh appearance and no amount of additional work is likely to enhance it, I resist the temptation to make even one more stroke.

"This is the point when a trial proof is necessary. For small cuts, I use a Poco proof press, but for my larger blocks, I use a spoon or a Japanese baren. This later form of hand printing has endless possibilities for both monochrome and color; certain areas can be intensified by pressure to create dense accents, while lesser muscle can exploit the textural grain of the wood.

"I apply a good grade of commercial ink to the block with a gelatin brayer and place the printing paper over this inked surface. The soft oriental mulberry papers, Goyu and Sekishu, work best for my style of print.

"After taking a few trial proofs, I sit down and study the results. If I feel, as I indicated previously, that nothing more needs doing, this is the end of the road as far as the cutting is concerned. More often than not, however, some refinements are necessary. Rather than attempt these without graphic guidance, I indicate changes on a proof with white paint. It's better to spoil a few prints in a trial-and-error fashion than to plunge in with the knife and do irreparable damage. Your readers must realize that the reason any correction must be done in white, working over areas of the black pattern, is that while white accents and refinements can be made, black additions cannot."

Since we have reproduced one of Ferro's woodcuts in color, we asked him about this method. He told us that he has devised a simple register

frame which works on the principle of the right angle; each separate block is locked snugly into the same right-angle position. Then the printing paper is taped to the printing frame and remains in constant position to insure accurate register, both during the transfer of each color image to the succeeding block, and similarly during the printing process. Concerning his use of color, Ferro often combines commercial printing inks with artists' oil paints in order to achieve particular effects.

Ordinarily, with multicolor woodcuts like the one created for *The Reporter*, Ferro turns in a finished proof which is reproduced photo-mechanically in process plates like any other piece of full-color art. However, for his color woodcuts that can be printed in black and one or two additional flat colors, he is often asked to pull black proofs for each of the separate blocks. Then, with his own hand-pulled proof as a guide, line cuts are made from the separation proofs for the usual commercial press printing. Naturally this device brings the reproduction nearest to the quality of the original print. When the halftone screen is not necessary, most decoration executed from monochrome and limited color fully retains the character of the woodcut.

Taken as a whole, the recent woodcuts of Walter Ferro have a greater kinship with the broad-knife work of a Munch or a Nolde than with the tonal character produced by the graver of a Lankes or a Nason. This change in his work from his earliest small-scale wood engravings to the boldness of his present style may be the result of a calculated effort, but I am more inclined to think that it has resulted naturally from his choice of the soft woods, which dictate a breadth of treatment. But whatever forces have brought it about, his woodcuts can never be mistaken for any other medium; they revel in rich blacks and sparkling whites; the freely cut patterns incite our imagination. Style, a concern of so many artists today, presents no problem to Ferro, nor need it bother any other artist who makes woodcuts. Whatever personality an artist possesses leaves its mark with every incision of the knife or gouge, and is, in turn, transmitted to the print. It is for this reason and the conventions prompting it that the bold woodcut must be regarded an acquired taste. It is hardly a technique for the faint-hearted or for those who favor a soft sunset. It is organ music with all stops open. It is rugged xylography, and it suits the temperament of Walter Ferro.