Lynd Ward & the Novel in Woodcuts

Gods' Man - Lynd Ward (1929)

Being a shorter and more graphical reproduction of Ilias's final paper for LIS 508: History of Recorded Information.

Testimonials

Art Spiegelman: "[*Gods' Man*] established the basis for storytelling that is used today by artists of picture books and graphic novels."

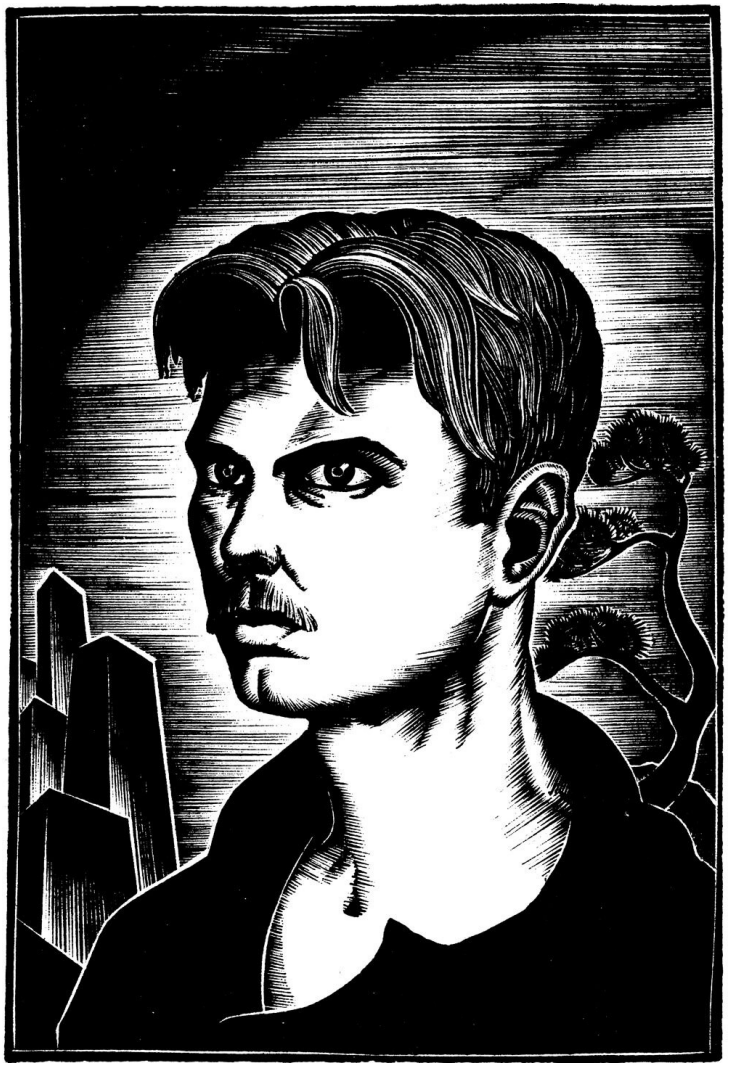
Guillermo del Toro: "[Ward's] 'wordless novels' combine a modern graphic approach with Old Testament damnation. Fearsome.

Will Eisner: "Perhaps the most provocative graphic storyteller of the twentieth century."

Paul Jenkes: "It [*Gods' Man*] had not only a psychic influence, but a profound artistic one which I have never been able to fully explain because of its energy and unprecedented originality."

The Sun - Frans Masereel (1919)

The woodcut novel as a literary genre was invented in the 1910s by Belgian artist Frans Masereel. He was part of the German Expressionist movement and wrote novels focusing on the life of the working class and the horrors of war. His wordless novels became immensely popular in Europe and influenced many artists to make similar works.

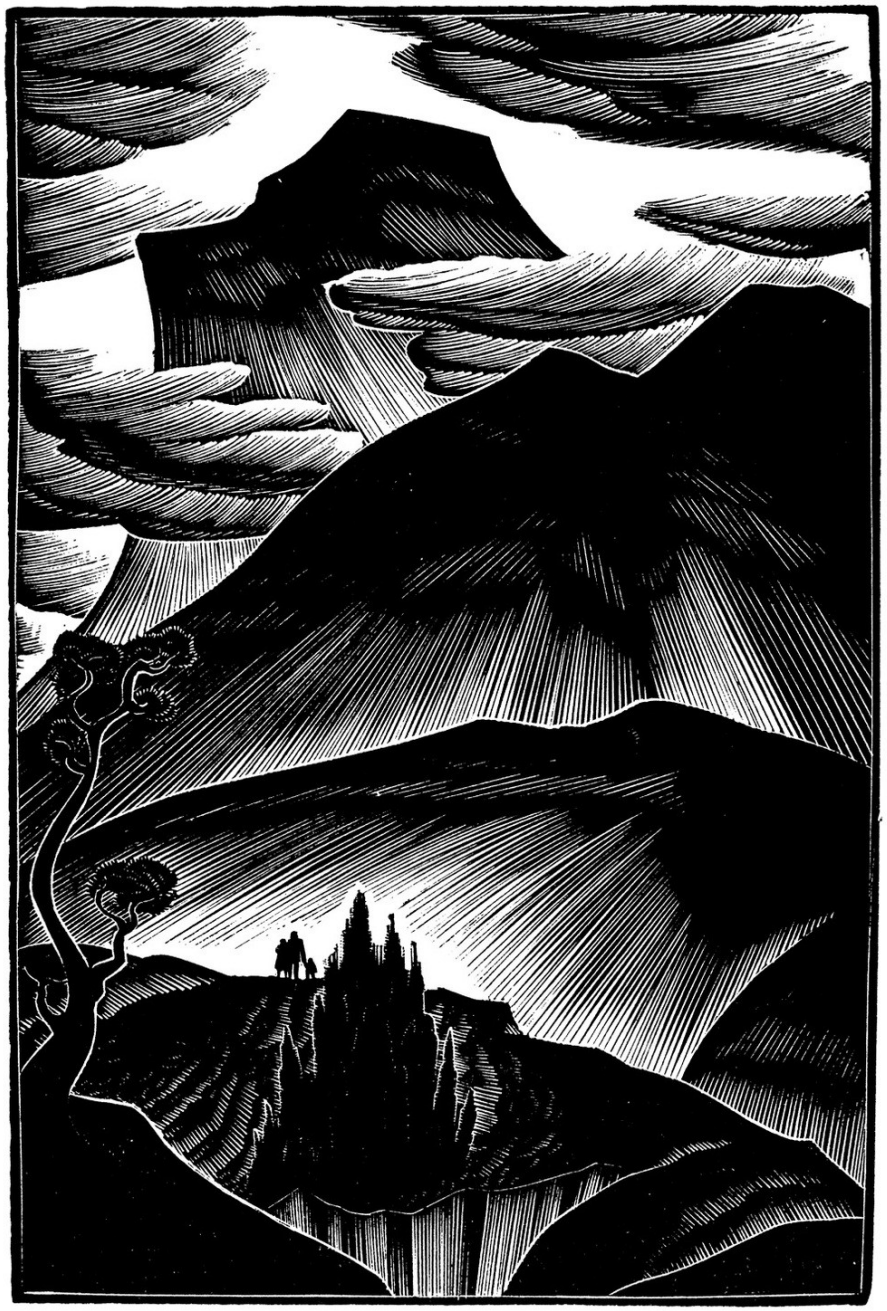


Self Portrait - Lynd Ward (1930)

Lynd Ward was an American artist and illustrator active from the 1920s to the 1980s. He illustrated a large number of children's books and classics, but between 1929 and 1937 he also authored 6 of his own novels without words heavily inspired by Masereel's work. These books, the first of their kind published in the United States, had a large influence on the visual storytelling of modern comics and reflected the anxieties and politics of the 1930s.

Ward's first book *Gods' Man,* was published in New York in October 1929, just before the stock market crash. It nevertheless sold 20,000 copies over the next six years.

Gods' Man explores the Faustian story of a young artist given success by a mysterious benefactor which he ultimately finds hollow. It explores the role of the artist in society, and the place of art in a happy life.



Above and Opposite: Gods' Man - Lynd Ward (1929)

Why woodcuts?

Z Mého Dětství (From My Childhood) - Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová (1929)

To make a wood engraving is to insist on the gravitas of an image. Every line is fought for, patiently, sometimes bloodily. It slows the viewer down. Knowing that the work is deeply inscribed gives an image weight and depth.

-Art Spiegelman, "Reading Pictures"

In the modernist age, wood-based objects and printmaking techniques became a means of recovering and prioritizing the handcrafted over the machine-made, not simply as a sign of nostalgia (although some nostalgia was involved), but as a means of reexamining the notions of "nature" and "human" in the technological century.

-Olivia Badoi, "A Feeling for Wood Itself: Lynd Ward's Arboreal Modernism"

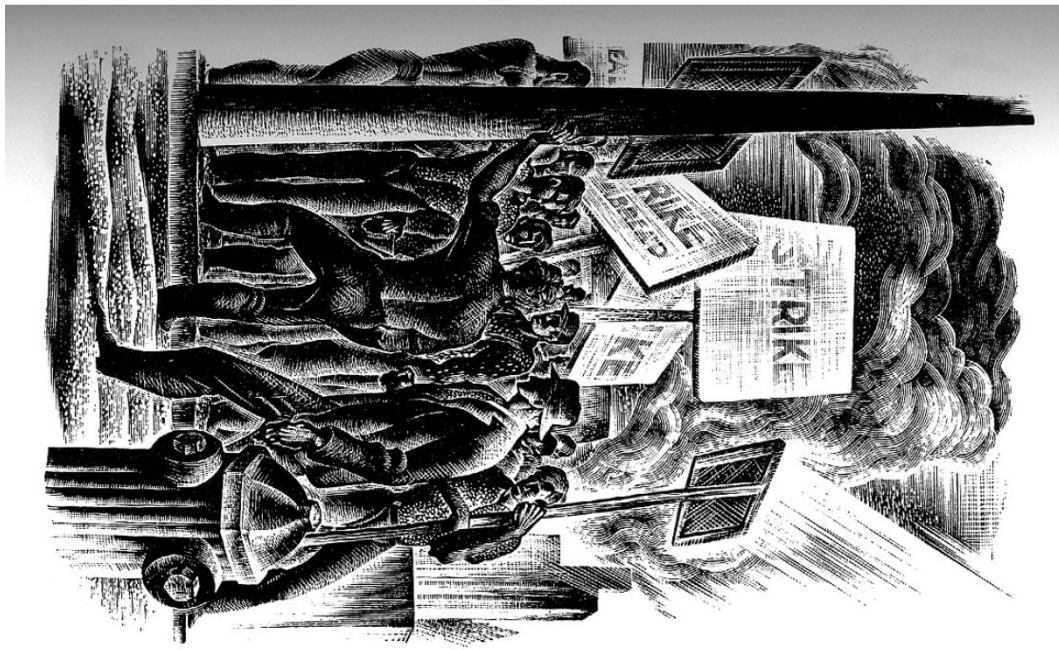
The undeniable fact [is] that working with a woodblock takes on the aspects of a struggle between antagonists. The wood is reluctant, the artist determined, and it is reasonable to suggest that that battle of wills brings about a result quite different from those media in which the hand of the artist moves brush or pencil or crayon freely over the working surface. With wood, every movement of the tool involves overcoming resistance and demands the use of a certain amount of sheer physical force. Every block and every subject is a new challenge. The result is an emotional involvement between man and material that, enduring over the years, somehow takes on the character of an addiction, or a love affair, or something similarly irrational.

-Lynd Ward, "The Way of Wood Engraving

Pacing & Silent Movies

The thing I find most interesting about the pictorial narrative genre is the pacing. Frequently, the genre is discussed in comparison to silent movies, which by the thirties were being replaced by talkies. A lot of the imagery is reminiscent of black-and-white silent films, especially the German Expressionist films of the day, and the shift from image to image to form a narrative is undeniably cinematic. But there is a difference between Ward's pictorial narratives and, for example, a flip book, which has a much more direct connection to the movies. When you read a graphic novel, especially one without words, you choose when to turn the page. You can spend as much or as little time on an image as you like. Details that a viewer wouldn't notice as they speed by on a film reel can be carefully examined by any reader who pauses long enough to inspect the whole image.

Ward talks about the germination of his narratives as beginning like a movie in his head. But then there is a further step he has to do where he cuts it up, removing the connective frames until you're left with a series of images. They can be neither too far apart, lest the page turn seem jarring, nor too close together, lest the reader becomes bored by the repetition. Martin S. Cohen talks a lot about the way the art itself draws you out of the frame, towards the next picture. There is a compulsion in these stories that rivals the pulpiest paperback in page-turnability. And there are pages that require you to stop and really examine them, either to understand what is happening in the plot, or to take in what is undeniably a piece of art.



Prelude to a Million Years - Lynd Ward (1933) pages 17, 18

Writing contemporaneously, Lehmann-Haupt compares the experience of reading a pictorial narrative with that of watching a film:

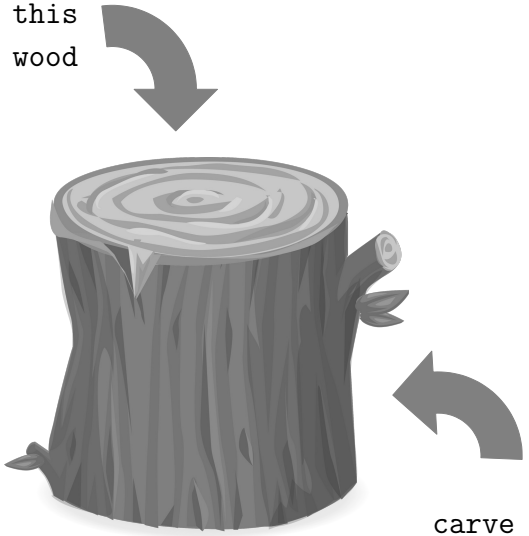
> Only, the pleasure is more subtle, for we are alone in this theater and audience and operator are one person. We can make the story run quickly, we can even skip, but we can also stop altogether. Then suddenly it is not so much a piece out of a story that counts, but an individual picture with its own particular qualities. This is where the superiority of the picture novel comes in.

In this way a wordless novel feels less controlled than a movie, or even a novel that's only or mostly words. The artist cannot dictate the pace at which you move through it. You are the projectionist! And I want to contrast this with Spiegelman's assertion that a wood engraving has an inherent weight to it by virtue of the effort that went into making it. Ward puts so much time and energy into making a single image and then leaves it to the reader to decide how much time to spend on it.

There is a page in *Prelude to a Million Years* where the protagonist runs down the stairs after a disturbing sight, his arm wrapped around his head. It's an extremely evocative image, and one which could be hung in a gallery all on its own. But in the context of the book, it is an in-between panel. It shows the protagonist's response to the previous page, and sets us up to be in a different location on the next one. There are no special details in the background that would reward a closer viewing. Stairs are a famously difficult thing to draw, and Ward has placed this beautiful image which must have taken a very long time to engrave in a position where the story compels the reader to flip quickly past it. A contemporary review in the New York Times Book Review noted that "As art alone, however, [the engravings] are so excellently done that they threaten the wholeness of the book - one is tempted to take them out and frame them." I disagree. I think that the success of the narrative minimizes the intense amount of effort that went into the wood engravings. But certainly they are in tension with each other, in a way that serves to highlight both.

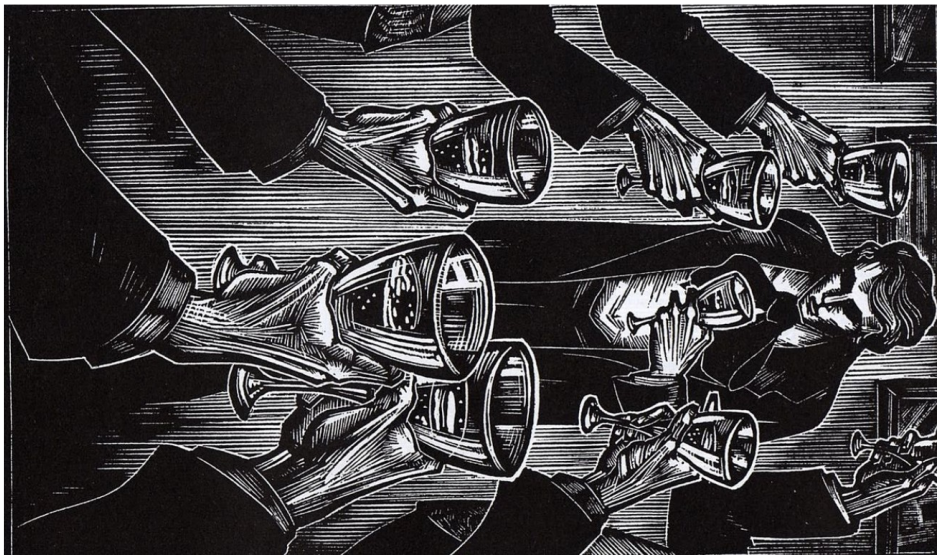
Woodcuts vs. Wood Engravings

Although we talk about "woodcut novels," Ward actually was working in wood engravings. In comparison to woodcuts, wood engraving gives the carver more control over their tools and allows for finer lines.



A lot of sources I read talked about the woodcut as an inherently democratizing medium, because it allowed for cheap reproduction to increase access to text, even for the illiterate. This is in addition to its obvious appeal as an artistic aesthetic compatible with German Expressionism.

Above: The City - Frans Masereel (1925) [a woodcut]
Below: Gods' Man - Lynd Ward (1929) [a wood engraving]



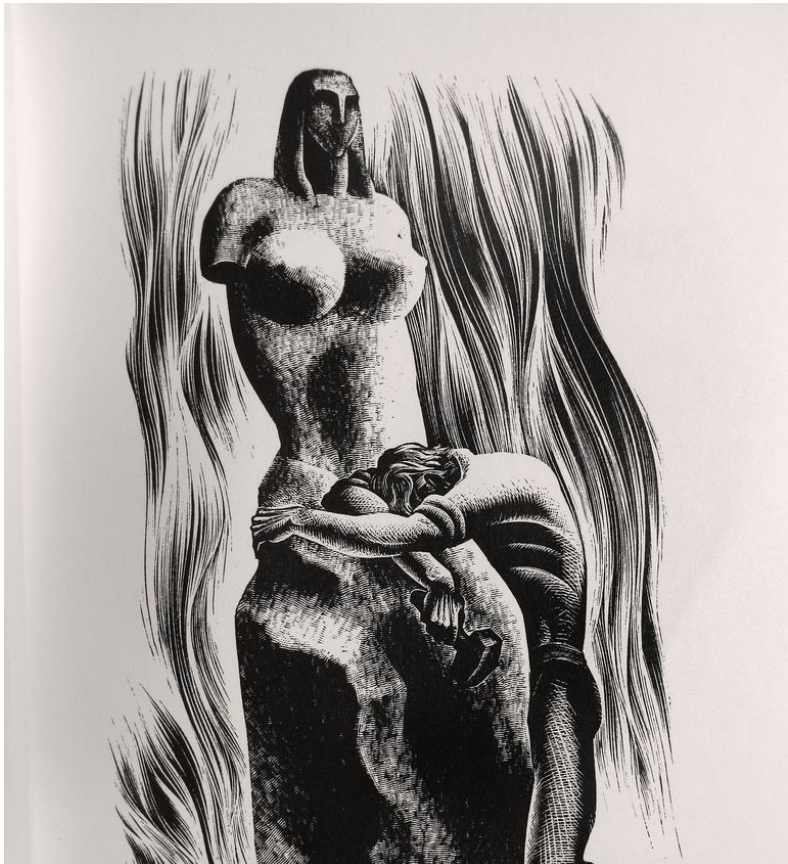
Creation and Despair

In the four years between the publishing of *Gods' Man* and the publishing of *Prelude to a Million Years*, life in the United States changed dramatically. The 1929 stock market crash reshaped much of American society, and the role of the artist was likewise changed. Perhaps also with the hindsight of any author reviewing their debut, Ward wrote *Prelude* as a footnote to *Gods' Man*, with the intention of updating his earlier work to reflect the dramatic changes of the depression on the world of the artist.

In *Prelude to a Million Years*, Ward depicts a world that is defined by violence. The opening image is of a wasteland where gears and bones and the remnants of civilization are scattered in the foreground, and one man lies collapsed in the background in a perfect picture of despair. The final wood engraving shows the artist who has been our protagonist going up in flames along with his home and his sculpture. Ward's vision of the world is a bleak one, and the book wrestles with great existential questions about the value of creation in a world that demands depression from anyone who is paying attention.

In the opening wasteland, a metaphorical representation of the artist's inner and outer landscapes, our protagonist is rendered nude, kneeling, and interacting with a god who appears as a giant hand from the clouds, planting a seed. The seed of creativity sprouts into an idea for a sculpture, the only thing that is growing in this landscape, the only other living thing the artist has encountered. Ward is very literally presenting art as the thing that can reclaim the barren world.

But then it doesn't work. The artist makes his sculpture, and is still ultimately overpowered by the misery of the world. And while his misery seems to be a proportional response to the suffering he sees outside, the artist's studio burning down is not the last image of the book. Once you have looked at the artist and his sculpture going up in flames, and sat with it for however long you wish, you close the book. And then you are sitting, holding this beautiful art object that was "bound by hand and made with loving care."* If the book were produced by a commercial publisher, glued together sloppily with the endbands on crooked, it would read very differently. Instead, by virtue of creating his own press from a group of his friends who are all passionate about the book as an object, the reader is left with a piece of art, no matter what happens in the narrative. The sculptor in the narrative, through his inaction, destroys his art and himself, but Ward has done the opposite, pouring hours and months of his labor into creating art that we now get to share.



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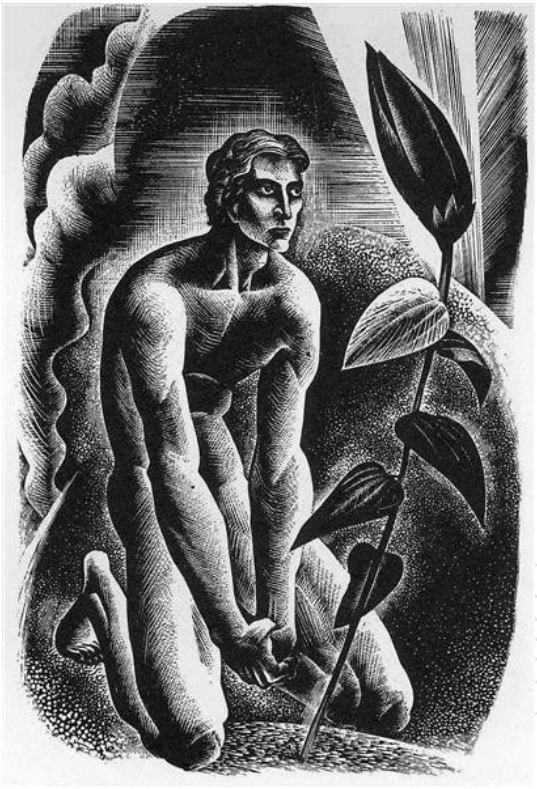

Prelude to a Million Years - Lynd Ward (1933)

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