

# Woodson Art Museum

*in your classroom*

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Whimsical & Wild: Bentwood & Screenprints  
Spring 2013

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Matthias Pliessnig, *Pinch*, 2012, steam bent white oak



Charley Harper, *Pelican Pantry*, 1982, serigraph and *Bittern Sweet*, 1978, serigraph

## **Introduction**

The energy of springtime in north central Wisconsin is mirrored in the galleries of the Woodson Art Museum this April with three exciting exhibitions on view April 13 – June 16, 2013: *Torqued & Twisted: Bentwood Today*, *Beguiled by the Wild: The Art of Charley Harper*, and *Functional & Abstract: New Work by Jason Ramey*. The natural world takes on unusual and enchanting shapes through the screenprints of Charley Harper and the contemporary bentwood sculpture of nine woodworkers from around the country. The lengthy and labor-intensive processes of bending wood are masked behind the graceful lines and forms evident in *Torqued & Twisted*. Similarly, the multi-staged and precise art of printmaking appear effortless when executed with deft handiwork by Charley Harper. Simplicity and elegant design are at the heart of the art forms that unite this spring in the galleries at the Woodson Art Museum under the heading *Whimsical & Wild: Bentwood & Screenprints*.

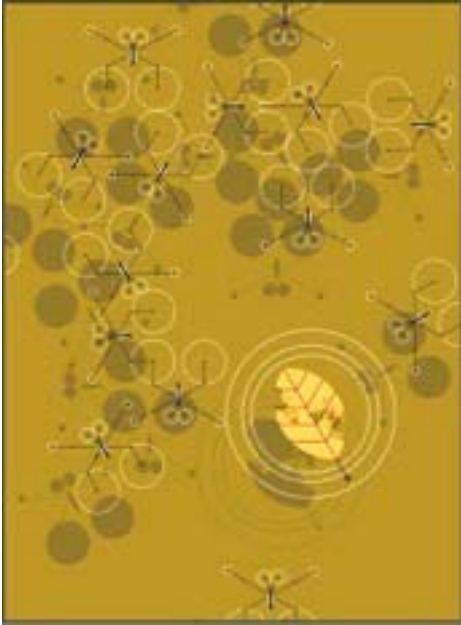
Demystifying complex artistic processes for students and visitors is an ongoing goal of Woodson Art Museum docent-led experiences, programs, and artist residencies. Students visiting the Woodson Art Museum this spring are invited to experience the fresh and unusual sculptures and functional furniture pieces by bentwood artists and artist-in-residence Jason Ramey, who will demonstrate his steam-bending techniques on Sunday, April 14. Printmaker Sherrie York will be in residence, working with students Tuesday, April 30 – Friday, May 3 to create their own linocut prints. In addition, York will oversee an incredible printmaking program on Saturday, May 4, when area teens will ink and print woodblocks using a steamroller in the Museum's parking lot. For more information about York's residency programs, go to the end of these materials.

### **Charley Harper: Artist & Activist\***

Charley Harper's artworks often are described as "minimal realism," a distinct style that combines heavy graphic elements of organic and geometric patterns while perfectly capturing the gestures and character of subjects. When once asked to elaborate on his style, Harper famously replied:

"When I look at a wildlife or nature subject, I don't see the feathers in the wings, I just count the wings. I see exciting shapes, color combinations, patterns, textures, fascinating behavior and endless possibilities for making interesting pictures. I regard the picture as an ecosystem in which all the elements are interrelated, interdependent, perfectly balanced, without trimming or unutilized parts; and herein lies the lure of painting; in a world of chaos, the picture is one small rectangle in which the artist can create an ordered universe."

Charley Harper's paintings and serigraphs, also called screenprints are among the most beloved artworks focused on the natural world in American popular culture. Harper's work had serious staying power in a fickle twentieth-century art market as evidenced by Harper's long and illustrious career in commercial work, fine arts, and environmental poster campaigns. Despite Harper's enormous popularity and ambitious messages of environmental stewardship, his roots were humble and his earnest love of art and the natural world was sincere.



Charley Harper (August 4, 1922 – June 10, 2007) was born on a West Virginia farm where he fell in love with animals and the outdoors at an early age. Harper recalled numerous enchanting scenes encountered in West Virginia, where his particular fondness for water striders hatched while watching the ripples and shadows the insects made as they danced along the surface of a stream. The images stuck with the artist who later reproduced the scene in his favorite painting entitled “Jesus Bugs” (Water Striders) in 1969, which was followed later by a serigraph in 2006 entitled “Shadow Dancers” (pictured left), about which he wrote:

“Can you think of a better name for insects that walk on water? Our ancestors couldn't either, but your field guide calls them water striders. They

hike around on the pond all their lives without even getting wet feet, and in shallow water on a sunny day their shadows sink like stones and tag along on the bottom. But who minds a wet shadow? If you had widespread, waxy feet that didn't break the surface film, you, too, could walk on water. And be famous for fifteen minutes.”

The playful musings that complement works by Harper are as much of a celebrated trademark of the artist as his minimalist style. Charming puns and alliteration in artwork titles and descriptions often mask a more thoughtful, even satirical, message. Such as “Scary Scenario,” which features the head of a polar bear, just peaking above the waterline, presumably created by melting polar ice caps paired with a cheerful and out-of-place ecosystem transplant – the Northern Cardinal. An eerie scenario, indeed, stated simply, a hallmark of Harper's works and a subject matter and prospect that seem all too relevant today.



Charley Harper, *Scary Scenario*, 2008, serigraph

Harper's works are admired for their clean lines and flat planes of contained color. French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery could have easily been speaking of Harper's work when he stated: “Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.” Harper distilled and simplified complex organisms and natural subjects but often arranged them in a complicated manner. The artist successfully strikes a balance: recognizable artwork has instant appeal and if the viewer's eye lingers, one is able to decode the details and intricacies of his compositions

and patterns. What Harper left out in the feathers and details, he most certainly made up for in his use of lines and color.

Early in his art career, Harper lost interest in realism with its laws of perspective and shading and its need to create the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional canvas. Instead, he began to concentrate on simplifying natural forms and symbolizing the design beneath “the surface clutter.” Like many artists depicting bird species and other wildlife, Harper relied on field guides to accurately portray his subjects. Harper employed drafting and mechanical drawing tools (compass, French curve, T-square) to create the straight lines and repetitive curves in his works. Depth was achieved by overlapping shapes as well as color and size relationships. The artist mixed all his color pigments by hand.



Harper at work on Cornell Lab of Ornithology painting, 2005

Harper would start a design with thumbnail sketches, then make full-size rough sketches on tracing paper, and make the final design with cut-out paper for the larger shapes and colors for the lines and smaller shapes. For example, in designing the poster “We think the World of Birds” for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, he cut out many bird shapes and pushed them around to try out different combinations and compositions easily.

Harper created acrylic paintings, serigraphs, and limited-edition prints throughout his art career. Serigraphy – or screenprinting – is a stenciling method that involves printing ink through stencils that are supported by a porous fabric mesh stretched across a frame called a screen. It is ideally suited to bold graphic designs, such as Harper’s. The process produces editions of artwork where each print in the edition is considered an original work of art, not a copy.

The screenprinting process has a rich history in ancient and contemporary arts. Serigraphy comes from the Greek words for “silk” and “writing.” Stencil-based printing

methods are the oldest form of printmaking, dating back to the use of stencils on Egyptian tombs. The Japanese developed the method of using a piece of silk stretched across a frame as a carrier for hand-cut stencils. This method found its way to the West in the 1400s. Serigraphy reached the status of an art form in the US in the 1930s and was used to distinguish fine art from commercial screenprinting. Serigraphy was popular in the 1960s with pop artists such as Andy Warhol because the process lends itself to bold areas of flat color. Despite the popularity of screenprinting, the process to create a serigraph is complex and time consuming, requiring precision and patience.

The screenprinting process step-by-step:

1. The artist produces an original image.
2. The artist develops a separate stencil for each color in the original image.
3. Each stencil is adhered to its own screen. Stencils can be hand-cut or made from photosensitive coatings. Each is a negative image and defines the image to be printed for each color. Stencils must be impermeable to the printing ink.
4. The screen is a porous mesh stretched tightly over a frame. Screens were originally made of silk, but polyester is more commonly used today.
5. The screen with its stencil is placed over a sheet of paper.
6. Ink is placed on the screen and forced through the fabric by drawing a blade or squeegee across the screen and applying pressure. Inks are custom-mixed by the artist to match the colors of the original.
7. The printed paper is air-dried or dried in a drying oven.
8. The process is repeated for each new stencil and new ink color.

Artists usually make a limited number of prints or an edition, with all printed at the same time. The number of prints in an edition can be limited by the printing process (i.e., a stencil wears out) but usually is controlled by the artist. The number printed may range from 1 to 1,000. All the prints of the edition are run using the first stencil, then the second stencil, and so on. Typically, 10% of the images in an edition are rejected for printing errors. Stencils are destroyed after the edition is printed. Prints are signed by the artist and numbered with what looks like a fraction. The upper number is the impression within the series (order in which it was signed); the lower number is the edition size.

**Example:** 5 / 500 means the 5th of 500 total prints.

*\*Charley Harper educational materials created in part from information provided by exhibition organizer, the Virginia Living Museum.*

## Contemporary Bentwood



Frank Gehry, *Power Play Chair*, 1990, laminate maple, manufactured by Knoll Inc.

*Torqued & Twisted: Bentwood Today* features the work of nine contemporary artists who draw on the tradition of bending wood. Artworks on view include large sculptural works and functional, yet abstract, furniture pieces, including chairs and a table. Delicate and graceful lines are created by using steam and hot water to soften and then shape the wood. Artists must work quickly before the wood returns to its naturally hardened state. *Torqued & Twisted* is co-curated by Tom Loeser, University of Wisconsin-Madison professor and Katie Lee, of the Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

Bending wood into new and enticing forms can be achieved through three main processes: steaming, laminating, or greenwood bending. Steam bending relies on the use of a manmade steam box, which is a long sealed container or chamber used to make pieces of wood pliable. Steam boxes are effective tools, used to push the boundaries of wood's inherent nature, allowing wood to be shaped and bent beyond its dry breaking point. Additionally, in most cases, steam-bent wood actually is stronger than an identical straight cut piece because artists follow the wood grain to form the bend, which retains the wood's strength, while a large cut piece of wood would snap along crosscut grains and angular joints. Powerful, large-scale steam bending is used to create the framework for boat hulls – a process and history that inspires the work of *Torqued & Twisted* artist Matthias Pliessnig. Pliessnig explains:

“I use steam-bending techniques to construct my work. The strips of wood are put inside a tube filled with hot steam. Ten minutes later, a strip is taken out and bent into the desired shape within thirty seconds. After eight hours, the wood is back to the original strength.”

In addition to boat building, steam bending has a history of small-scale production of musical instruments, walking canes, and most famously the rocking chair. Austrian



furniture maker Michael Thonet is credited with designing and streamlining the bentwood process through the mass production of steam-bent rocking chairs in nineteenth century Europe. An iconic Thonet rocking chair (*Model no.10*) is featured in *Torqued & Twisted* alongside the whimsical designs of contemporary artists relying on the same tradition pioneered by Thonet.



Work in progress in studio of Matthias Pliessnig in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Laminating wood relies on thin and flexible layers of wood joined by adhesives and clamped against a form until the adhesive sets. The layers of wood are “laminated” and hold the desired shape of the artist’s form. Greenwood’s high moisture content makes it ideally suited for bending by hand. Wood needs to be moist before initiating a steaming process and is generally soaked prior to bending although greenwood is often used in steam bending, too. Hardwoods overall are better suited for steam bending than softwoods.

While some *Torqued & Twisted* artists, Matthias Pliessnig and Clifton Montieth, for example, set to work bending dozens of thin strips of wood to create an overarching structural form, artist Mike Jarvi uses a single piece of wood to create his *Jarvi One Piece Table* (at right). Jarvi splits and unfolds his elegant and stately bentwood bench using steam bending and a single plank of wood. Jarvi is well aware of the pressure of getting his work right the first time: “Billowing steam pours out at 210 degrees Fahrenheit as the chamber pops open, the clock is ticking and every move has been rehearsed – there is no time to waste. Cooking for four hours and now there is only six minutes to twist it into its new shape. The jigs are ready and built to take the strain.



Putting the fear of failure behind me, it has taken numerous attempts before achieving my goal to form a bench by bending one solid piece of wood.”

*Functional & Abstract: New Work by Jason Ramey*



Jason Ramey, *J4 Ultralight Hall Table*, 2009, mahogany and curly maple

Jason Ramey’s work in *Functional & Abstract* includes stylish, contemporary furniture as well as conceptual sculpture that creates a metaphor for human existence within a defined, familiar space. Ramey’s keen interest in narrative and use of space are evident in his juxtaposition of historic and contemporary elements of furniture design and decorative arts. Jason Ramey offers the Wisconsin connection amid the contemporary bentwood artists featured in *Torqued & Twisted*. After Ramey completed his art degree from the Herron School of Art and Design in 2008, he pursued a master’s degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he now teaches in the Art Department’s wood and furniture design program.



Jason Ramey, *Queen Anne of Diamonds*, 2012, found buffet/dresser, paint, plaster lath



## In the Classroom

### *Compare & Contrast*

Bentwood has taken many forms and shapes throughout its history and at the hands of many artists. Ask students to compare elements of line, form, pattern, and movement in these bentwood artworks. Coax students to use descriptive words to articulate their emotional reactions and personal preferences when viewing these pieces.



Jason Ramey, *Lathchair*, 2012, pine and found chair; Clifton Monteith, *Carlton Chair*, 2010, willow aspen and gold leaf



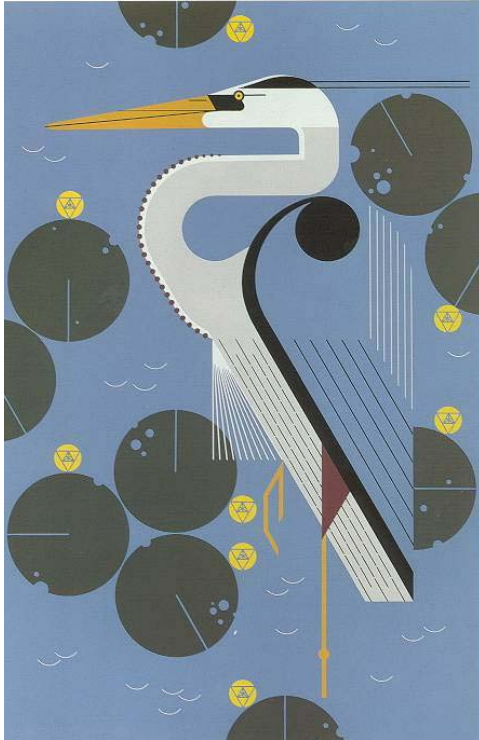
Yuri Kobayashi, *Courage*, 2011, ash



Michael Cooper, *Big Bang Theory*, 2007, various hardwoods, steel, aluminum

## Word Play

Charley Harper's love of wordplay is evident in the titles of his artwork and in the captions that accompany many of his designs. He viewed puns as "taking two words never connected, and making a new creation – that equals creation at its purest."



For example, take the caption for his work "Herondipity:"

"Every sighting of a great blue heron is serendipitous. They're always just around the bend, solitary and alert, regal and majestic, waiting to be discovered by accident and good luck. You're canoeing in Wisconsin, exploring an Everglades slough, rafting in Jackson Hole, hiking a Hatteras beach, when WOW – suddenly and fortuitously, there he is! Or is it she? They look so much alike that it's easy to be herroneous. Only they know the difference between his'n and heron."

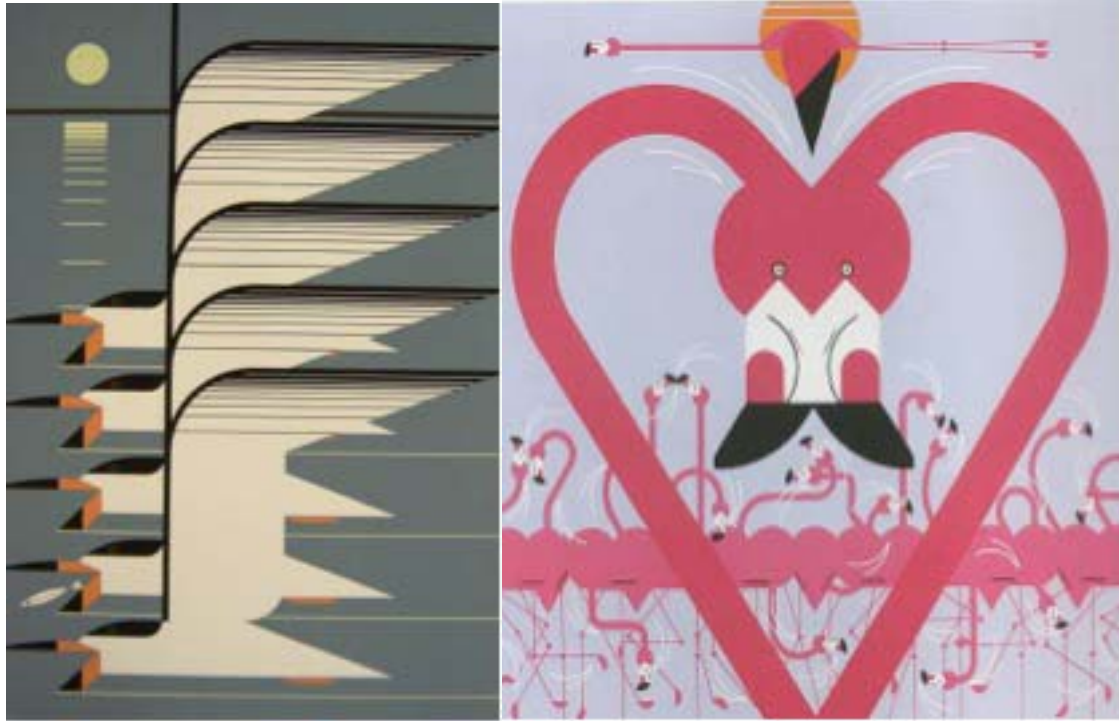
Invite students to create their own puns and playful descriptions of Harper's prints or their own original artworks.

Charley Harper, *Herondipity*, 1985, serigraph

## Design Time

Charley Harper asks those who enjoy his art to "remember that I didn't start out to paint a bird – the bird already existed. I started out to paint a picture of a bird, a picture, which didn't exist before I came along, a picture, which gives me a chance to share with you my thoughts about the bird. Once you accept this seemingly simplistic but really quite profound premise, you will appreciate the many varied approaches to the making of pictures, all of which start where realism leaves off, but all of which require an understanding of realism for their successful execution."

Although Harper took a firm stand against anthropomorphizing, or projecting human emotions and characteristics onto animals, his wildlife subjects certainly have a lot of personality. Invite students to select a favorite animal subject to depict in Harper's minimal realism style, challenging them to incorporate an animal's disposition and highlight the animal's most recognizable or iconic traits – the long curved neck of the flamingo or the angular scissor-like bill of the skimmer, for example.



Charley Harper, *Skimmerscape*, 1976, serigraph, and *Flamingo a Go Go*, 1988, serigraph

### *Basic Shapes Aren't So Basic*

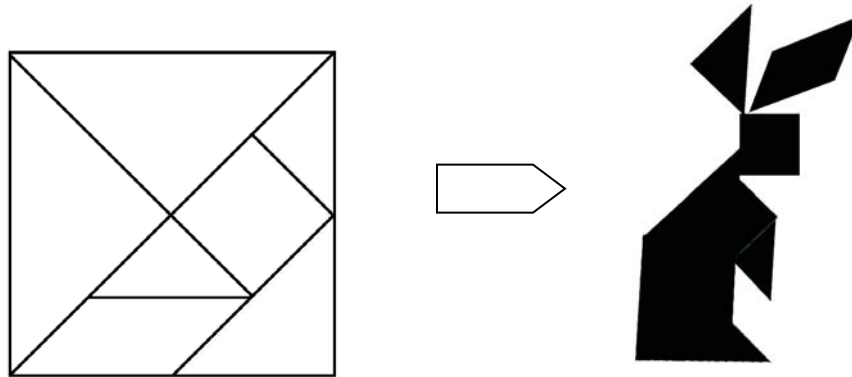
Charley Harper uses deceptively simple geometric shapes to create his paintings and prints of animal and birds. Viewers can easily recognize the circles, ovals, triangles, polygons, and squares used to break down the body forms of his subjects. While his design aesthetic may be easy to recognize, the process of making geometric forms look effortlessly organic and lifelike is a challenge.

One exercise artists and designers use to experiment with basic shapes and flex their creativity is tangram puzzles. A tangram is an ancient Chinese puzzle consisting of a square cut into seven standard pieces – 5 right triangles, 1 square, and 1 parallelogram. Each piece is called a tan. Tangrams are excellent tools for teaching spatial relationships, geometry, and fractions.

When creating pictures from tangrams, the rules are simple:

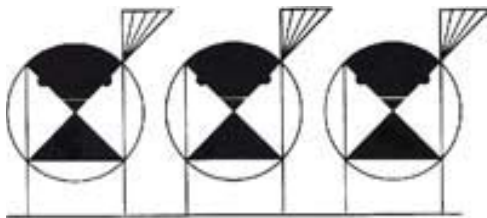
- 1) All seven tans must be used to complete the picture.
- 2) The tans must lay flat.
- 3) The tans must touch.
- 4) The tans must not overlap.

See an example of a tangram on the following page and encourage students to create their own tangram animal.



### @ The Woodson

During your visit to the Woodson Art Museum, a docent will lead your group through the galleries offering insights and encouraging thoughtful dialogue inspired by the artworks. Students visiting the Museum will glean inspiration from *Beguiled by the Wild* and working in the Museum gallery, alongside Harper's work, will create their own Charley Harper-inspired sketch. Harper's lengthy and thoughtful design process began with a thumbnail sketch and drafting tools and stencils, which students will use to layer basic lines and shapes to create an animal subject or patterned composition.



Charley Harper, chickadee detail from *A Family of Chickadees*, 1994, serigraph

### Activity Guides

Each student receives an Activity Guide to extend learning in the classroom and at home. When students leave the Museum with an Activity Guide in hand, they are able to share their Museum visit with friends and family outside the gallery walls, along with their newfound expertise and enthusiasm.

### Woodson Art Museum Information

Please encourage your students to visit the Museum with their families and share what they've learned. Admission is ALWAYS FREE! The Museum is open 9 am – 4 pm, Tuesday – Friday, and Noon – 5 pm on Saturday and Sunday. On the first Thursday of each month the Museum stays open until 7:30 pm for Night Out @ the Woodson, featuring hands-on art for all ages. Call the Museum or visit the website for more information:

### Woodson Art Museum

700 N. 12th St.

Wausau, WI 54403

[www.lywam.org](http://www.lywam.org)

715.845.7010



# Let the Good Times Steamroll

Sherrie York Residency

Tuesday – Sunday, April 30 – May 5

Artist Sherrie York leads a relief-printing extravaganza – culminating on May 4 in the Museum parking lot where a huge press, a steamroller! – will print woodblocks created by area high school students. Inspired by Charley Harper’s bold animal graphics, students based their woodblocks on the theme “Wild About Wisconsin.”

**April 30 Tuesday 4:30 – 6 pm**

## Little Masters/Young Artists

### Make the Cut

Youngsters, 5-12 years, inspired by Charley Harper screenprints, learn how to make linocuts with the artist. ☎

**May 2 Thursday 5:30 – 7 pm**

## Art History 101/Hands-on Art

### Relief Printing with Sherrie York

This Colorado printmaker shares her techniques and process for creating linocuts and leads participants in making prints using their own designs drawn into Styrofoam and Sherrie’s examples of linocut and woodcut blocks.

**May 4 Saturday Noon – 5 pm**

## Steamroller Printing!

Sherrie York directs the oversized printing – via a steamroller in the Museum parking lot! – of woodcuts created by more than 100 area high school students. Witness this event and support students’ creative efforts.

**May 5 Sunday 1 – 3 pm**

## Sherrie York Gallery Walk & Demo

Join Sherrie for a tour of the Charley Harper exhibition and watch her demonstrate her printmaking process.



“Let the Good Times Steamroll” funding comes from a Community Arts Grant from the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin, with funds from the Wisconsin Arts Board, Community Foundation, and the B.A. & Esther Greenheck Foundation.



**May 4 Saturday 1 – 3 pm**

## Art Park Open Studio

Bring the whole family to try drawing and printing your own designs during this monthly, drop-in program for all ages.



Left page:

**May 10 Friday 7 – 9 pm**

## Teen Mystery Party

Teens are invited to bring friends to solve a mystery that unfolds during a mock art auction. Gather at the Museum for the Teen Art Council’s second Mystery Party – a fun-filled night that includes food, music, and sleuthing.

☎ Call 715.845.7010 to register