

PETER MILTON

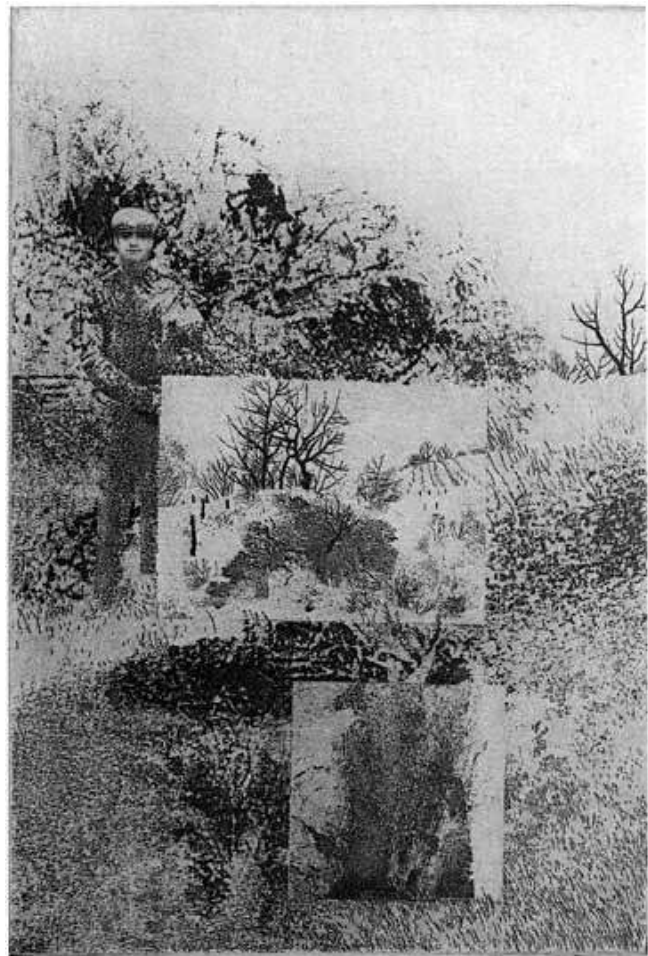
The following article was originally published in "Artist's Proof; The Annual of Prints and Printmaking," volume XI. Published by the New York Graphic Society and Pratt Graphics Center, New York, NY, 1971.

Julia Passing: The World of Peter Milton

by Irving L. Finkelstein

One's first sensation on viewing Peter Milton's prints is generally one of awe inspired by the microscopic detail and pictorial complexity of his work. But it is the complexity of psychological content and technical execution that makes the viewing a profoundly meaningful experience. The compositions are permeated with a surrealistic feeling, for many of the qualities often associated with surrealism are found throughout Milton's work: very deep space, an almost frozen stillness, a questioning of what is real and what is unreal, and a powerful tension resulting from the combination of nearly photographic detail, ambiguous spatial relations, and equally ambiguous meaning of the figural confrontations.

Surprisingly, however, it is impossible to point to explicit surrealist borrowings in any of Milton's works. The imagery of his prints has been derived mainly from personal experiences; looking from print to print one finds his two children at different moments of their infancy and childhood, his two cats, montages of scenes from Baltimore, where Milton lived for seven years and where he observed from his window the tiny park with benches and narrow walks running the length of the block and separating the two directions of traffic. The rows of brownstone tenements dating from the Victorian era, the cast iron fence railings, the backyard stairs and porches, and the tall, straight trees that articulate the space in the prints are to be found within a few hundred feet of the Milton house in Baltimore.



Yet it would be mistaken to think of Milton's work as a series of literal illustrations of his surroundings. On the contrary, the prints reveal the rapid growth of a very sensitive and imaginative mind and its innermost preoccupations.

Peter Milton was born in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania, on April 2, 1930. He attended Yale University, where he studied with Josef Albers and Gabor Peterdi. He received his BFA degree in 1954, in which year he also was awarded a traveling fellowship grant from Yale University. He spent a year in Europe, and after some five years he returned to Yale, where he was offered a teaching assistantship and where he earned an MFA in 1962. He moved to Baltimore where he taught at the Maryland Institute from 1961 to 1968. There he began to devote his creative energies to printmaking, specifically intaglio printing.

To compare Milton's earliest efforts in printmaking with his recent, most characteristic, compositions demonstrates one of the basic qualities of his stylistic evolution and his method of working: the development from simple to complex. His first print, Milton recalls, was small and it consisted of a single tree. He experimented with a variety of plant motifs, including some marvelously decorative and writhingly animated vine patterns, and he gradually evolved a type of panoramic landscape, of which 'Brueghelscape #1,' executed in 1964, is more or less typical. Although his compositions of this genre impress primarily by their picturesque quality, they are also remarkable for their technical control and their variety and delicacy of effect. But more important, they show the artist's preoccupation with the articulation of space, through his skillful suggestion of the advancing and receding surfaces of the landscape. By opposing the precisely delineated details and the broad overall tonal patterns the artist created an optically active field, moving the viewer into the space and bringing him forward again.

Milton made his first significant attempt to incorporate the human figure into his landscapes in two small prints, 'Clap Hands! Here Comes Charlie,' 1965, and 'Two From Charlie,' conceived about the same time but completed in 1967. In the first the figure is hardly more than a tiny imposition into the landscape space; in the second the figure is an integral part of the composition, displaying to the viewer what appear to be a pair of paintings of the landscape within the landscape itself. Here the relationships become disturbingly ambiguous. The pictures within the picture can be read as transparent planes, such as panes of glass, through which the viewer sees the environment continued, but on a different spatial level, as if refracted or somehow dislocated. The picture within a picture was also a favorite device of Rene Magritte, with whose paintings Milton's later prints suggest a vague kinship. However, Milton's position on this is very clear.

I have not thought very much about Magritte. The picture within the picture comes up for the same reasons as the deep space and the windows, mirrors, stairs and platforms: as the simplest way to establish multilevel readings. Also, my drift toward surrealism was provoked by the cinema. As you know, I am extremely suspicious of it [surrealism] in the plastic arts. Bergman, Fellini and the Czechs and Poles have had a much stronger effect on me than any pictorial artist and are the only influences I am truly conscious of. I think the slow motion ending of *The Shop on Main Street* has had a more profound effect on me than the entire sixteenth century, Brueghel notwithstanding.¹

Milton derived the title 'Clap Hands! Here Comes Charlie' from a selection in a jazz record album of Lester Young. Although the two prints succeed only moderately in linking figure and landscape, they paved the way for Milton's subsequent combinations of landscape, figural and architectural elements into some of his most original and powerful graphic statements.

Into this group fall only about a dozen prints, which are in fact all that Milton produced between 1965 and 1970.² The reason for such an extremely small output is obvious: he has worked on each composition for up to five or six months before feeling sufficiently satisfied with his pictorial statement to pull prints for exhibition and sale.

To be able to evolve works of such complexity and detail the artist has exploited and developed the lift ground technique. To produce the seemingly microscopic detail, Milton draws his images on the plate with very fine crow quill pens specially sharpened by him for that specific purpose. Out of the five or six months of work on each plate, as many as four are spent in persistent drawing, changing, and redrawing with the sugar ink. Only when all the compositional elements have been rendered in the lift ground are the plates etched. Milton adds hard ground work later only if he feels he has miscalculated a lift ground effect, and any subsequent engraving of the plate constitutes merely the minute refining and enhancing of the images already fully developed by the action of the acid.³



Peter Milton: 'Brueghelscape #1' 1964 intaglio.

There are essentially two approaches by which Milton evolves his compositional ideas. On the one hand he may organize a preliminary montage of figural and other images painted or pasted on clear acetate the size of the plate, later to reproduce those images on the plate by drawing with the lift ground. On the other hand he may begin with a single basic pictorial idea or prototype, a nucleus for expansion and refinement on the plate over a long period of painstaking work. As the compositions become increasingly complex in their iconographic content and spatial relationships, Milton remains constantly mindful of what he considers his greatest artistic challenge: to combine all the elements—figures, architecture and landscape—and make them work as a whole, without seeming contrived and without letting the myriad details call attention to themselves at the expense of the total statement, however complex.

Even after a composition has been completed and printed, Milton has felt the need to expand and develop further the possibilities inherent in the basic idea. This has led him to evolve second states of several of his works, and he has expressed his desire to develop and modify others with which he has experienced growing dissatisfaction. In each instance the evolution of a second state has entailed the addition of new elements to render more emphatic the effect of the original composition. In no case has there been a reduction or simplification of the original scheme.

Possibly the most widely known work of this later group is the print 'Julia Passing,' which exists in two states, the first completed in 1967, the second in 1968. Organized on a one-point perspective construction, the architectural framework sweeps the viewer into a deep and very active space. The downward movement of the stairs forces a dislocation of the horizon. The viewer must shift his position and travel in more than one direction at a time. The coexistence of rows of houses on one level at the upper right and a man on a chair in the area at the lower left, oriented to a different horizon line, produces a tension, perhaps even a feeling of frustration at not being able to establish a logical relationship of all the parts of the scene. Similarly the rhythm created by the figures of the children advancing toward the picture plane and ultimately into the viewer's own space counteracts the physical movement downward and backward with a psychological movement upward and forward. The children seem real, warm and alive, and they engage the viewer emotionally. But only for a moment. For they are passing, as it were, from one state to another, from one period of time to another. The whole configuration, then, takes on the effect of a dream, or of a collection of memories of what once was, and projections of what is to come. Are they the dreams or the memories of that seated aging man at the lower left, longing perhaps for youth, for innocence, and possibly also preoccupied with inevitable death? The work remains largely an enigma.

Unlike the earlier 'Clap Hands! Here Comes Charlie,' the title of 'Julia Passing' is generically tied to its content and inextricable from the feeling that permeates it. Julia, the artist's grandmother, died at the time he began to work on the composition, at that point only a vague idea. During the months that followed, as the work progressed, Milton experienced memories of past days, of intangible, non-material things which were gone and could not be recaptured, except in dreams and memories. However, the artist assures us that

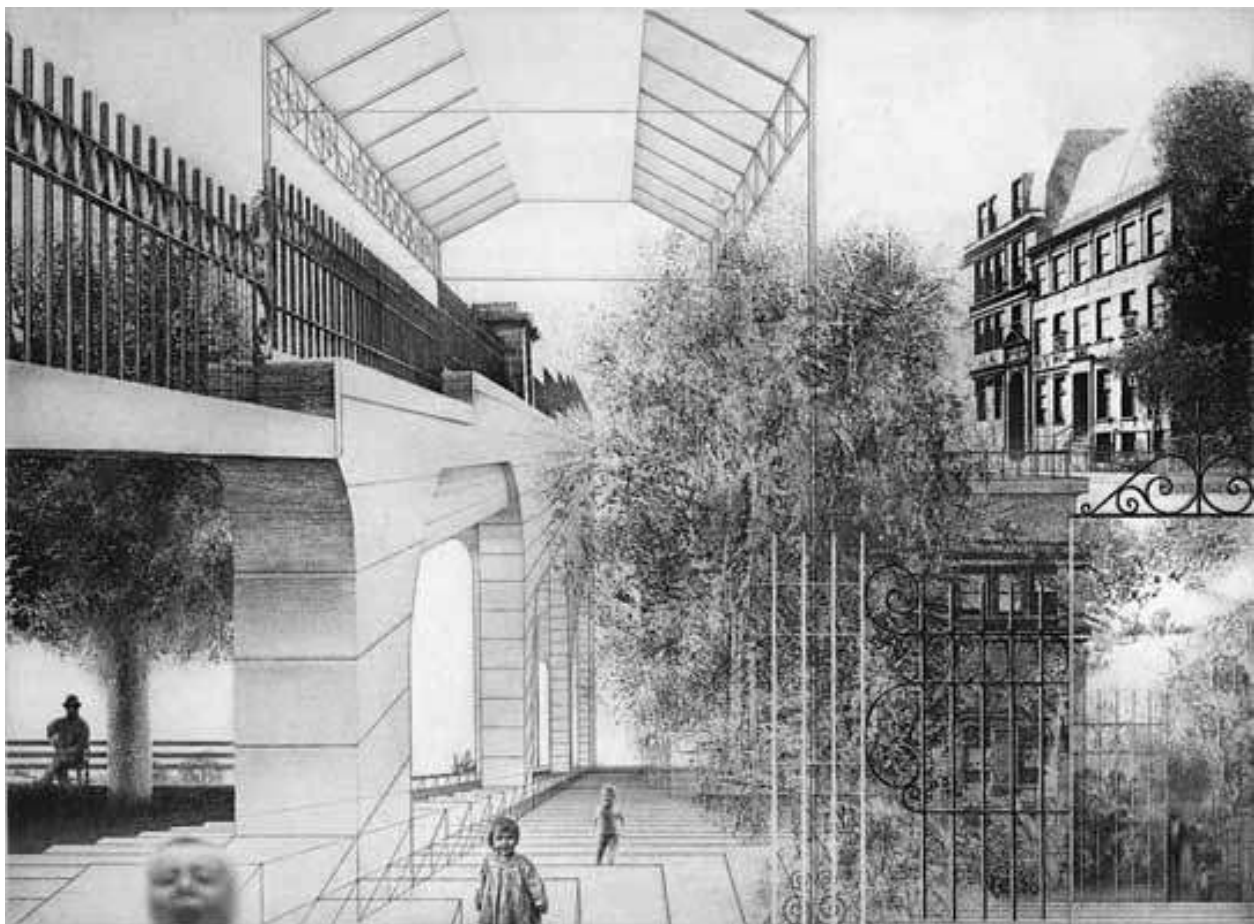
. . . there are no personal memories consciously put in the print. It is more about the idea of remembering, specifically my grandmother's remembering back ninety years to her

own childhood (she died at ninety-seven, clear, vivacious, and thoroughly impatient with the infirmities of age). The print is a sort of metaphor for the mnemonic machinery. And certainly a celebration, not of her passing, of course, but of the ninety-seven year durability of her remarkable warmth.

This dreamlike confrontation of what is here and of what is gone and unattainable, is an undercurrent running through Milton's compositions. The disturbingly enigmatic image of 'Return,' 1969, comprises the towering figure of a child (from a photograph of Milton's son, Jeremy) in a doorway, with a soldier at the right in World War I uniform. Is this child, standing so proudly and heroically, the peaceful and innocent being that the soldier once was, or is the soldier, symbol of man's belligerent and destructive instincts, what the artist's child must inevitably become?

'Mornings With Judd,' 1968 (second state, 1970), poses very similar questions. The central figure in a bowler hat, with his arm on the boy's shoulder, is derived from a turn-of-the-century photograph of Milton's grandfather, Henry. Henry's brother, Judd, is embodied in the crouching figure in the subdivision to the left of the main grouping. Discussing the content of the print, the artist recalled that

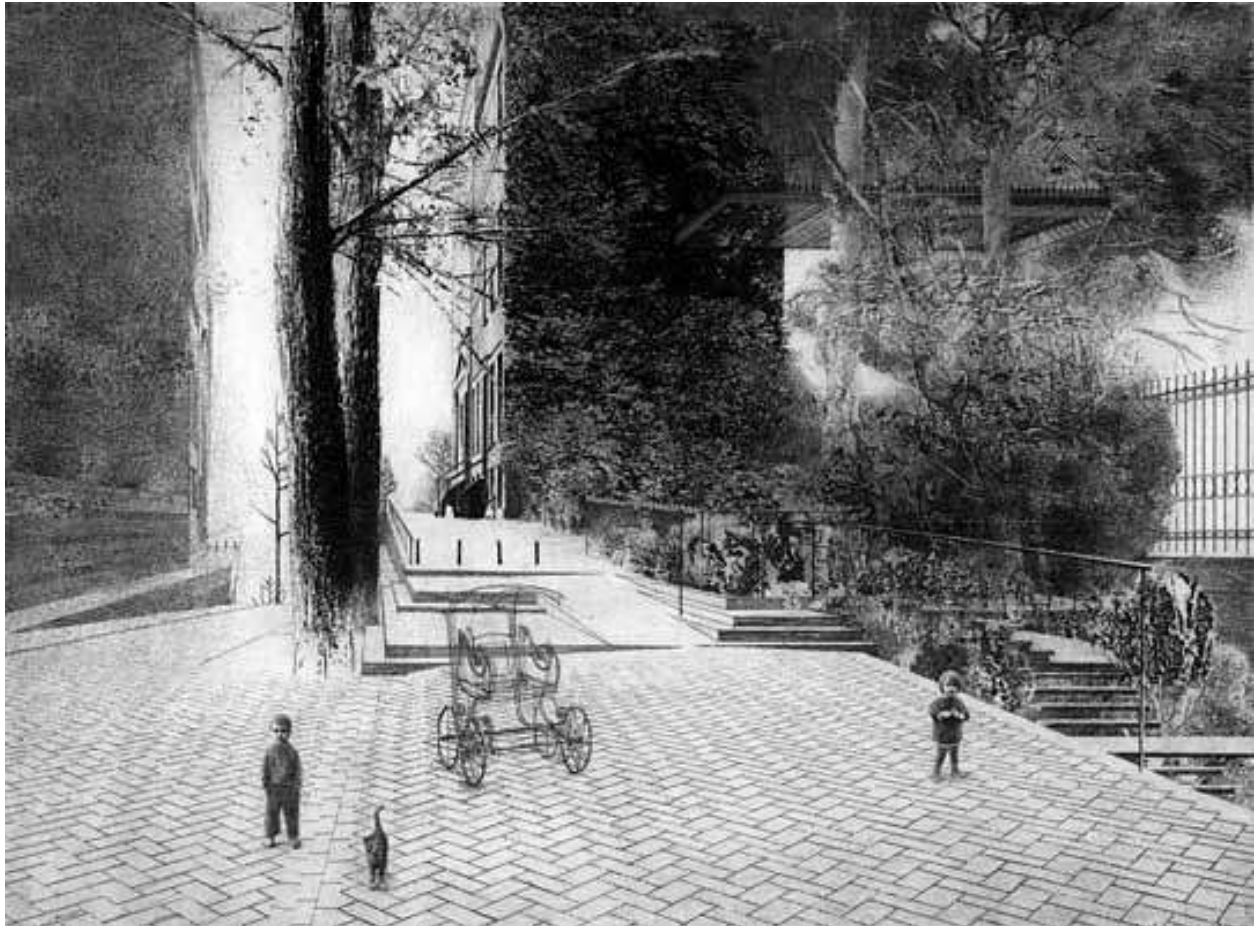
Henry was the meticulous, quiet one and Judd the jocular, playful one. The model for



Peter Milton: 'Julia Passing' 1968 intaglio, 2nd state.

Judd is actually taken from a photograph by Thomas Eakins of one of his models (Franklin Schenck). The boy with my grandfather was one of his three sons, all of whom died within five years of one another. One of the sorts was shot down over Normandy in the First World War and is the soldier in *Return*, the photograph taken shortly before his last flight.

The strange hide-and-seek type of game taking place at the upper left also suggests a pictorial dialogue between present and past, and man's pursuit of that which is lost or unattainable.



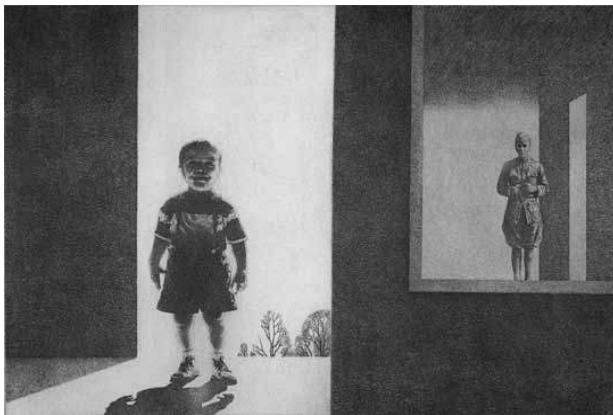
Peter Milton: 'Victoria's Children' 1967 intaglio.

It is a strange and often disquieting world Milton creates in these compositions, but there is never a hint of moralizing, nor do the visions and memories of his inner world become morbid. His imagination combines all the elements with wit, humor and a touch of the sentimental and it succeeds in endowing the prints with a universal appeal.

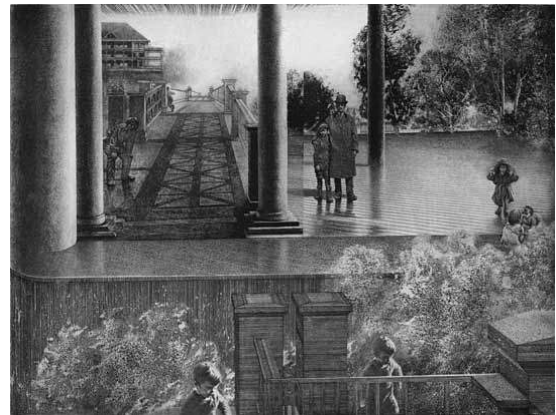
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1. All statements quoted here are from correspondence by Mr. Milton with the author.
 2. During 1970 Milton evolved a series of twenty-one illustrations to Henry James's short story 'The Jolly Corner,' a project commissioned by the Aquarius Press and published in

book form in mid-1971. Proofs of the prints making up *The Jolly Corner* suite were shown in an exhibition of 47 of Milton's intaglio prints held at the De Cordova Museum, Lincoln, Mass., November, 1970, to January, 1971.

3. 'Because this painstaking procedure required so much time, it was necessary for Milton to find or invent another method that would allow him to evolve and complete *The Jolly Corner* suite within a reasonable time without compromising the quality of those works technically or pictorially. Utilizing the same sugar ink solution that he used with the lift ground, the artist made a total of eight drawings, each on a transparent sheet of Mylar, a more durable form of acetate. When the drawings were thoroughly developed, Milton coated each copperplate with a thin coat of Kodak photo resist liquid which, when dry, becomes photo-sensitive to ultra-violet light. The transfer process, then, was merely a matter of placing the Mylar sheets containing the drawings in contact with the coated plates and exposing them to the proper light, as the areas not receiving the light because of the opacity of the ink could easily be washed away in a special chemical, thereby exposing those areas to the acid when the plates were etched. As he did in his earlier prints, Milton made subsequent minor changes and refinements with the burin and etching needle.' (Quoted from the writer's introduction to the catalogue of the De Cordova Museum exhibition cited in Note 2 above.)



Peter Milton: 'Return' 1969 intaglio.



Peter Milton: 'Mornings with Judd' 1968 intaglio, 2nd state.

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