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Study in printmaking

Randolph Knute Robbin

The University of Montana

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A STUDY IN PRINTMAKING

by

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INTRODUCTION

A great quantity of material has been written and researched concerning the Printing Arts. The common approach has been to compile a multitude of technical facts, resulting in a reiteration of what is already known.

Therefore, this is a philosophical approach to the subject--an effort to introduce original thought which may stimulate the intellectual attitudes of other printmakers.

The works illustrated compose the thesis. This paper is but a statement of the concepts involved, and no attempt is made to explain the photographs and examples of the work. The reader is encouraged to observe and compare one printing media with another, the prints with the paintings, and coordinate them with the written material.
A STUDY IN PRINTMAKING

Art has become a highly specialized profession. Artists are categorized as painters, ceramists, sculptors, and printmakers. More specifically, they are painters of watercolors or painters of oils; sculptors of clay or of metal; and as printmakers they may do intaglio, silk screen, woodcut, and a variety of other types.

Each area is so involved that the artist with professional aspirations is forced to engage in a specific media, perhaps with a bit of dabbling in secondary interests. Some appear to be more suited to the field of prints. This is not to say that good painters or sculptors, for instance, are not successful printmakers. However, it is apparent that printmaking demands a great degree of patience and control in the technical preparation of blocks, plates, etc. Many artists are reluctant to engage themselves in such time-consuming labor. They fear that spontaneity is lost and the creative process inhibited—an attitude which is less than valid, and denotes a certain misunderstanding of printmaking. Even though it does take time to involve oneself with the various technicalities of printmaking, such as scraping plates, cutting wood, etc., the changes and approaches which can be employed challenge the most creative mind.

"Within the past ten years or so, the "face" of printmaking has undergone violent plastic surgery. The
small intimate, black-and-white impression known, collected, and loved since the fifteenth century is being displaced by prints which rival easel paintings in size, color, and importance. New techniques and new materials fuse to produce prints that confuse the old connoisseurs; they can't tell one medium from another any more without a catalog to aid them. The layman is even more bewildered by this dazzling display of technical virtuosity. Art students and professional artists not familiar with these new techniques in the graphic arts are similarly bewitched.¹

So states Jules Heller. A similar attitude is expressed by Lee Chesney, noted printmaker: "In the minds of many, printmaking seems to be largely a technical exercise, a huge craft in which those inclined toward methodical procedure and devious thinking hold sway while more elevated concerns are left to the practitioners of painting and sculpture. This is definitely not true as anyone who has seriously studied printmaking well knows."²

Printing abilities are reinforced when one has other works in progress. These might be paintings, sculpture, other prints, or sketches of new ideas. Such an approach


lessens the possibility of becoming "bogged down". For example, work in one printing media can lend itself to another type of printing. A discovery made with a wood-block might prove successful in the manipulation of an intaglio print. The preceding is not a new observation, but one which is commonly overlooked by artists. It is not unlike the three-dimensional experience in sculpture which transfers meaning to the two-dimensional painting process. A case in point is Jacob Landau: "I do not consider myself a printmaker but an artist in the sense that I do not restrict myself only to making prints".\(^3\) Also, an artist is often unaware of the type of printmaking in which he is most capable. For example, the challenge of etching and gouging a metal plate might prove far more exciting than woodcutting or screen printing.

The novice printer should begin with moderately sized prints. There are several reasons for this approach, the first being that of technical involvement. Processes, materials, and styles of printing are complicated in themselves. It is better to learn a basic understanding of fundamentals before approaching complex compositional problems which arise in larger works. There is also an expense problem. The beginning printer will use a quantity

of metal, wood, ink, paper, and tools. Until he has reached a certain degree of proficiency, it is senseless to waste valuable supplies of printing equipment. Of course, under certain educational circumstances there are exceptions to this theory.

Here arises the question of print size for the experienced artist. Contemporary printmakers are producing works which vary in dimension from the enormous woodcuts of Leonard Baskin (which are sometimes several feet in magnitude), to the tiny size of bookplates. Such size variation affords a good deal of leeway. Compositional and technical factors are greater among large prints, and thus offer a greater challenge. In some cases a print is designed for a specific purpose, such as an illustration, creating a need for a definite size.

The human factor dictates print size: one artist may work on a large scale, another artist may work small. The printer should establish his own mode of operation, perhaps working small for a time, then large, creating a variety of objectives.

Good drawing, a knowledge of color and design, and the facility to use basic fundamentals are indispensable to the printmaker. Ben Shahn writes: "Draw and draw and paint and learn to work in many media; try lithography and aquatint and silk-screen. Know all that you can about
art, and by all means have opinions. Never be afraid to learn to draw or paint better than you already do; and never be afraid to undertake any kind of art at all, however exalted or however common, but do it with distinction."⁴ Many artists are ill-prepared. They lack control. One must continually draw and compose and develop his capacity to observe. These abilities become apparent in the most abstract works, as well as in representational works. They are further cultivated through reading. Ben Shahn stresses the importance of reading by saying: "in college or out of college, read. And form opinions! Read Sophocles and Euripides and Dante and Proust. Read everything that you can find about art except the reviews. Read the Bible; read Hume; read Pogo. Read all kinds of poetry and know many poets and many artists."⁵ The artist-printmaker must contemplate and absorb the techniques, philosophies and histories of other artists, past and present in order to utilize his own capacity to create.

The printmaker, like the painter of Abstract Expressionism, is often misunderstood by the laity. The complicated processes, and the abstract nature of his work are too involved for the man-on-the-street. He finds himself confronted with the matter of whom to please, himself or

⁵Shahn, p. 114.
the public.

The very nature of printmaking—the cutting, the burnishing, the gouging, offers up an appeal to abstract thought. It has the inherent quality of stimulating intellectual knowledge and the awareness of its complexities. As makers of fine art prints, artists are obliged to the idea of exploration; they must involve themselves beyond the comprehension of a common man; and they are indebted to the scheme of creativity.
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