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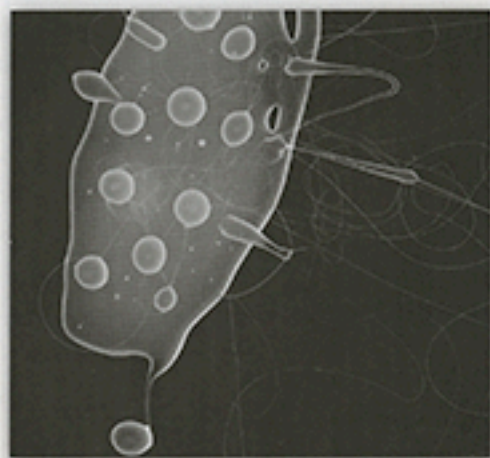
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Innovative Printmaking

ANDRÉ VAN DER WENDE



Clockwise from upper left: Constance Jacobson, *Protist 3*, glue gun drawing on acetate, scanned as a transparency; Janet Turner, *Guinea Fowl*, 1956, linocut on cream Japan paper, edition of 75, 24 1/2 x 13 1/2, Boston Public Library; Calvin Burnett, *Sisters*, 1959, screenprint on cream Japan paper, edition of 6, 30 x 20", Boston Public Library; Sergio Gonzalez-Torero, *Xombu*, 1983, drypoint and scraper on cream wove paper, 2/75, 18 x 14 1/2", Art Complex Museum; Ture Bengtz, *Girl with a Horn*, 1940, lithograph on cream wove paper, 16 1/2 x 11", Art Complex Museum; Debra Olin, *Cosmic Inclusion 3*, 2005, 39 x 20", monoprints with collage, drypoint, and stitching on Okawara paper.

Prints appeal both to obsessive technicians and connoisseurs alike, in part because of their layering of color and complexity and, in part, because of the pure simplicity of the handmade work.

Printmakers love to trade techniques, as much as collectors love to trade prints, and they greatly value their associations, guilds, conferences, annuals, and biennials. It's precisely this clubbiness that gives the printmaking community such an undivided sense of collaborative synergy and artistic solidarity.

Of all the printmaking organizations in New England—and there are many—the most highly regarded is the Boston Printmakers. Formed in 1947, the association emerged out of a need for printmakers to exhibit their wares. "At the time, it was actually popular around the country for printmakers to use clubs to get their work shown," says David Acton, curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Worcester Art Museum, and author of the recently published *60 Years of North American Prints 1947–2007*. "That was sort of the typical way during the 1930s and 1940s for American printmakers to establish reputations, but there was no such thing in Boston."

Initiated by students, along with support from Arthur W. Heintzelman, keeper of prints for the Boston Public Library; Turé Béngtz, a lithography instructor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston; and Otis Philbrick from the Massachusetts College of Art, the Boston Printmakers held its first members' show in 1948 on the fourth floor of Paine Furniture Company. Thirty-nine artists exhibited a total of 127 prints; prices ranged from \$5.00–\$35.00.

Back then, printmaking tended to be conservative, relying on traditional engraving techniques and book illustration; however, the Boston Printmakers always encouraged an exchange of new ideas from national and, eventually, international sources. "[The North American Print Biennial] started to shift Boston printmaking from something traditional, to something that was proud of the American bookishness of printmaking, and yet looked to lithography; the new, postwar interest in creative intaglio printmaking; and screen printing," explains Acton. By encouraging broader national participation, the Boston Printmakers helped take New England well beyond regionalism.



Constance Jacobson, *Cormorant with Head*, 1933, woodcut, with drypoint, on cream Rives BFK wove paper 39 1/4 x 29 1/2". Boston Public Library.

The one discourse that has occupied the print world for over twenty years now—and is perhaps more shrill than ever—is the impact and legitimization of digital media. As a tool for developing images, digital use and acceptance is established and widely used. However, as a means of fine art printing, its use and manner of execution is still under scrutiny.

"It's a constant struggle to define what printmaking is," says Marc Cote, current president of the Boston Printmakers. "Now, more so than ever, the line between digital photography and digital printmaking is very blurry.

What defines a print? What defines a photograph? And what defines a simple reproduction? Now there are so many people working with photographic processes. Some people define themselves as doing prints. Others define themselves as doing photographs. I think the intention is very important."

About this new technology, Acton says, "The technologies are changing so fast that it's hard to actually get a physical object that fits into our traditional printmaking mold.... Digital prints are very often products of computer code that can be reproduced infinitely

and, because of that, the hands-on commitment of the artist is very cloudy. I am bothered by the notion that a bit of code can be put on a thumb drive and then can be used to reproduce the same thing over and over again effortlessly. It makes the artist's intent less clear, and so it makes curatorial problems much less clear, too. When was this printed? Who was this printed by? Does this really represent the intent of a certain artist, or is it something that is tinkered with—Photoshopped—by someone else? Stolen?"

The emergence and proliferation of the giclée print demonstrates the type of fraudulent activity that can result from digital printing. "Giclée is a sinister thing," says Clifford Ackley, curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. "People publish reproductions and call them giclée prints. They have that velvety look on watercolor paper. They're often nothing original. Giclée is just a euphemism, and it usually conceals the fact that it's really just a fancy reproduction, most often for commercial purposes." In other words, giclée becomes a deceptive marketing tag.



Jacques Hniažovský, *The Sheep*, 1961, woodcut on white Japan paper, 25 x 19 1/4". Boston Public Library.

digital prints are not seen as fine art prints, whether or not they are archival in quality and limited in edition size. In other parts, it is the work that is evaluated, not the medium. The theoretical discussion is moving toward whether digital means should be a separate medium, not depending on whether the final form is static (print on paper) or dynamic (video). The digital matrix itself then defines the medium."

With its ability to endlessly layer, erase, and manipulate, the digital medium is a creative boon for some printmakers. In his late seventies and living in Manchester, New Hampshire, Peter Milton—long regarded for his intricate, montage-like etchings and engravings—has started creating digital prints in limited editions.

Fortunately, the art world is beyond the newness of digital manipulation, says Ackley. "There was a moment where everyone was so thrilled with the novelty, but they didn't look at the images they produced," he says. "I think we're getting over that. I think it's just becoming another tool." That certainly bears out in our schools and institutions, where analog and digital are comfortable bedfellows. At Boston

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—Deborah Cornell

"Many people assume that all inkjet prints are giclées, which is not the case," says Boston printmaker Martha Jane Bradford, who was once a traditional print artist, but who now works exclusively in digital. She created her first digital drawing in 1992 and her first fully digital print five years later. She acknowledges the resistance to accept digital prints on the

grounds that they are not "real," but claims, "They consist of pigment on paper, caused to be there by the artist's hand, just as with traditional media."

"There is still a lot of defining going on in the printmaking discipline," says Deborah Cornell, associate professor of printmaking at Boston University. "In part of the discipline,

University, says Cornell, "We teach traditional techniques and also enhance the curriculum with digital printing. Digital technology is presented as an artistic resource along with everything else we teach."

Constance Jacobson, assistant professor of printmaking at the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University, runs an alternative print-

making class that includes printing from Pronto-Plates—cheap, polyester lithography plates that can be output from a laser printer. By transferring a negative image to a Pronto-Plate and then printing it to a copper plate, traditional etching techniques can be applied to the image. Jacobson says, “In the past, we have also used Lazertran [a decal paper] to transfer onto a copper plate. We also do simple inkjet transfers, out-putting images onto lithographic transfer paper and transferring that onto dampened watercolor paper.”

She continues, “Many of my students are design majors and are used to working in all the graphics applications. In my advanced printmaking class, I have a student who created an image using woodcut, etching, and lithography; scanned it; and manipulated it. The digital output was a four-foot-tall beetle. She feels that she has to start with traditional media to get the energy and speed of line, and then work digitally from there.”

Jacobson and Cornell are regarded as two of Boston’s most esteemed and innovative printmakers. In the past, Jacobson created her scientific, cellular-like images by using a scanner as a camera and creating collage-based work using translucent materials. “Right now, I am drawing with a glue gun on acetate and scanning to create microscopic worlds, either for inkjet output or for contact positives to expose onto solar plates,” she explains.

“I find certain digital prints quite wonderful and fascinating as objects,” says Cornell, whose curious and fearless embrace of technology allows her to oscillate between traditional and digital formats with apparent ease, alone and in combination with etching, woodcut, and lithography. “She’s an amazing person because she really does have a sense of both worlds,” says Acton.



Clare Leighton, *The Cotton Pickers*, 1941, wood engraving on cream Japan paper, 13/150, 9 x 7 1/4". Boston Public Library, Merrill Gift Fund.

Cornell explains, “I sometimes use traditional methods, and sometimes photolithography and photo-etching. I also cycle back and forth, perhaps making a photo-etching, which I print in a certain way and then scan and reuse within a digital image. I do this because I find ‘the incomparable qualities of hand printing can add unique passages in a digital image. I may then print the digital layer with another hand layer. This creates an entirely different surface than either [hand or digital process] can create alone.’”

Digital printmaking offers new possibilities and new paradigms, but printmakers using more traditional techniques still find ways to challenge convention. Somerville artist Debra Olin explores cultural identity through oversized prints using monoprint, drypoint, stencil,

and collage that she then places in installations. Pursuant to his folksy graphic style, David Curcio of Ningyo Editions uses embroidery and sewing as a drawing device, along with etching, drypoint, and wood block. Marc Cote made a woodcut series of heads that he laminated to wooden forms, creating a hefty sculptural print that’s a powerful fusion of image, method, and material. Then, there’s Providence’s Andrew Raftery. For his *Open House* series, Raftery revived painstaking, seventeenth-century engraving techniques that use burin lines, undulating contour lines that are heavier for darker areas and thinner for light. The bright line and soft light of his copper plate engravings superbly applies old methods to an arresting narrative of modern American mores. It’s a perfect union of seductive technique and sharp content—one is nothing without the other and when it’s done this well, the results sing.

It’s premature to declare the end to traditional printmaking. Plates will continue to pass through presses, just

as digital images will be downloaded off of hard-drives. “Very few people have begun to use the technology in a way that is seamless,” says Acton. “Quality is what we’re always looking for, quality in the sense that an artist is really involved with the conception and, at the very least, a sort of legitimization of a print by the artist’s signature. From my point of view, I’m happy to look at anything and happy to accept anything that I find moving or visually interesting. I don’t care what the medium is so long as it’s a wonderful, beautiful, provocative thing.” ■

André van der Wende is an artist, printmaker, and writer who lives on Cape Cod. He has been writing about art and popular culture for the past ten years and is the art critic for the Cape Cod Times.