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Art on Paper Discussion Group 2023

What Is a Print?

INTRODUCTION

Printmaking as an art form and the prints that result are oftentimes some of the most complex types of art that paper conservators grapple with. The various methods of creating a “print” range from the traditional matrix printed onto paper to multilayered, composite objects that move between sculpture, drawing, and painting. Printmaking also has the capacity to utilize and integrate the latest technologies during the creation and display of prints. Throughout history, printmaking has been a democratic art form of the people, offering the ability to respond to current events in an immediate, ephemeral way. In short, prints can be everything all at once, making the subject increasingly tricky to discern and define. This year’s discussion was a hybrid model with two speakers in person and one virtual. Speakers each spoke for 15 minutes, followed by 45 minutes of questions and comments from the audience. The presenters covered a range of topics. Sarah Bertalan discussed French color lithography in the 19th century and the roles of artist versus commercial printer. Kyla Ubbink provided an introduction to Canadian Inuit prints and printmaking, as well as the treatment challenges such prints present. The third speaker was virtual; Christina Taylor prerecorded her talk on the prints of Louis Delsarte, deconstructing his printmaking techniques in creating color offset lithography. She also discussed and shared her instructional videos demonstrating a variety of printmaking methods.

PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

SARAH BERTALAN
CONSERVATOR AND CONSULTANT FOR WORKS ON PAPER

Sarah Bertalan shared part of her research on French color prints, printing manuals, and various art publications of the

Summaries of discussion groups at the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC’s 51st Annual Meeting, May 16–20, 2023

1890s. This time period marked the shift from the mass production of prints on poor-quality paper by large commercial shops to smaller runs of prints on higher-quality paper gathered in such publications as *L’Estampe originale*.

The artisans in commercial printing shops in the 19th century were known for their ability to skillfully produce large numbers of prints. Very few were designed by an artist. When artists did provide the initial design, they were not integrated into the production process. Artists were shown proofs to approve, whereas master printers and technicians produced the final prints. For lithographs, this back and forth was facilitated by the use of transfer papers to convey edits to designs without moving heavy lithographic stones. The artisans at print houses, trained at trade schools or through apprenticeships, had very different skill sets than artists trained at the Académie. Most print professionals had backgrounds in engineering or chemistry, and this is reflected in the technical manuals of the time, which detailed process, materials, and techniques meant for commercial technicians. One manual written specifically for artists focused on instructions for using media, such as lithographic ink and crayon—not on process.

Color printing was the avant garde artistic medium in Paris in the 1890s. This arose from a mania for color posters earlier in the century, with celebrated artists designing color posters that captured the attention of the public. During most of the 1890s, color prints were considered too popular and too commercial to be fine art. It was only in 1899 that the Académie admitted color prints to its annual salon. Generally, color printing was done on cheap, poor-quality papers. This is well documented, with the chemical additives, cheap gypsum fillers, and rapid deterioration of these papers lamented in the literature. Papers were also heavily manipulated during the printing process, including running them through paper-stretching machines, which led to physical damage of the support. So, as publishers competed to secure a slice of the color printing market, they began to offer limited edition chromolithographs from the most popular poster artists on good-quality paper as a marketing tool.

French handmade papers of the time were renowned for their quality and many mills were fabricating traditional handmade laid papers, but the texture and tone of most of these papers was unsuitable for color lithography. Good-quality Chinese paper had been used in the commercial shops in the intermediary steps of the printing process to achieve the print proof. Bertalan illustrated several telltale signs of Chinese papers. One is the red and blue ink along the edges of the sheet, stamped to the sides of paper stacks prior to export. Another is the textured brush marks that are visible on the sheets' surface from the drying process during manufacture. The last is due to the presence of clay as an additive. Conservators have often identified this additive as starch, but it is indeed clay that is responsible for the absorbency of the sheet as well as the complications that arise due to local treatments. The Chinese papers were technically superior to any other paper in their affinity for even the lightest trace of printing ink. However, this benefit was weighed down by the high cost of the sheets and the impurities in the papers. Desiring the benefits of the Chinese papers for lithography without the drawbacks, French papermakers like Maison Kléber (now Rives BFK) introduced lightly sized or unsized wove papers of a high quality called *chine français*.

This type of paper was used for the first volume of André Marty's publication, *L'Estampe originale*, a subscription based, limited edition collection of original prints from contemporary artists of the day. The first volume was printed in 1893, and by the end of production he had issued a total of 95 prints in nine albums over three years. The color lithographs in the first volume were printed on handmade wove paper, although the papermaker is unknown due to lack of watermarks. Each print in *L'Estampe originale* bears an embossed stamp designed by the sculptor Alexandre Charpentier. Interestingly, the edition was not credited to any professional shop and the prints were not consistently signed or numbered. There is no uniformity in paper quality or size, even within a volume. As the work of diverse artists would have had great appeal to sell and collect individually, a complete set is extremely rare. Bertalan ended by noting her observations of two prints in the volume that were printed planographically by two artists known to work in intaglio and relief processes, further highlighting the implementation of transfer processes in the print production.

Printmaking in Paris circa 1890 and L'Estampe originale

KYLA UBBINK

PRINCIPAL CONSERVATOR, UBBINK BOOK AND PAPER
CONSERVATION

Ubbink spoke on the topic of Inuit printmaking. Her presentation covered a brief history of the artistic practice, common materials used to create these types of prints, and some conservation techniques used to treat them. As a

private conservator based in Canada, Ubbink has examined and treated many Inuit prints in the course of her practice over the years.

The art of printmaking was introduced to the Inuit community in the mid-20th century by artist James Houston. While on a hunting trip on Baffin Island, his Native friend Osuitok was curious about the method of reproducing graphic designs on cigarette tins. Houston quickly demonstrated the process by rubbing soot into the incised lines of Osuitok's latest tusk carving and rolling it along a length of toilet paper. They both instantly realized that printmaking could be a new industry for struggling Inuit communities. The middle of the 20th century was a hard time for Northern Native Canadian populations. The decline of the traditional whaling and fur industries, the ravages of tuberculosis, and the loss of traditional spirituality through government implemented assimilation programs led to great strife. The federal government was just beginning to fund programs intended to stimulate the economy in these regions through the Arts and Crafts movement. For several years, James Archibald Houston had brought Inuit soapstone and ivory carvings to galleries in Montreal, where their popularity was growing. In 1949, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs took advantage of his relationships and knowledge, appointing him "Roving Crafts Officer." Through this role, he and Osuitok gathered the first group of print artists and established a cooperative at Cape Dorset (present-day Kinngait).

Being above the tree line, the Inuit artists looked to their well-honed skills of stone carving to produce printing blocks in soapstone. They also developed their own stencil printing techniques using seal skin cutouts and shaving brushes as ink applicators. The seal skin was rapidly replaced by wax paper and oiled cardboard, as the skins were too valuable as furs and also would not lie flat; however, these stencil prints still bear the inscription of being 'seal skin prints.' The group launched their first exhibit in 1959 at the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario. From its success, Houston was able to secure funding to study woodblock printing in Japan under master Un'ichi Hiratsuka. He brought his refined knowledge back to the Inuit community in Cape Dorset, who quickly developed it to reproduce their own works of art on Japanese papers. Other print cooperatives soon followed: the Povungnituk printing cooperative, the Holman print cooperative, and the Sanavik cooperative were all established in the early 1960s. Each print cooperative had their own style and chop marks to denote their works. For example, the Povungnituk cooperative did not highly polish their stones, which resulted in grains and cracks in the printed images. They also did not carve away the exterior of the stone. Both attributes allow the stone to speak in the final image. Self-sufficiency was an important aspect of the Inuit print cooperatives, and once established, government assistance was only accepted in the form of surplus buildings for

work space and support for marketing and promotion. In 1961, James Houston established the Canadian Eskimo Arts Committee (CEAC). Their goal was to prevent the market from being flooded by fakes, ensure the quality of the art to protect the artist's reputations, and avoid exploitation by art dealers. A group of 12 appointed artists, curators, and art experts reviewed and approved sketches and drawings for printing. Print runs were limited to 50, and the committee facilitated distribution and exhibition of the works. These prints are all denoted by the blind-stamped Inuktitut syllabic spelling of *Namatuk*, meaning "Genuine," within a circle.

The movement continued to grow with cooperatives appearing in Pangnirtung, Clyde River, and a second at Cape Dorset in the 1970s. Copper plate engraving and lithography on high-quality Canadian-made papers had been rapidly incorporated into the repertoire of techniques. By the 1990s, more than 8000 images had been produced by more than 400 Inuit artists. The CEAC was replaced by the Inuit Art Foundation in 1989, and by 1994 most of its members were Inuit artists. As time passed, more and more artists adopted westernized techniques and began to work independently. Presently, most of the print cooperatives have vanished, leaving the original one in Kinngait (Cape Dorset) as the only regularly active shop.

Ubbink states that from the beginning, the style of the Inuit prints reflected the culture and perspectives of the people making them. Their images encompass heritage, values, history, spirituality, aspirations, and lived experiences. Some print cooperatives produced work that was descriptive in nature, whereas others depicted historical and mythical narrative. Early critics deemed the work primitive and accused it of commercializing a romanticized version of the culture; however, in reality, the artists were doing what every artist does: expressing and interpreting their childhood, family stories, and worldview. Ubbink makes the point that "primitivity" lies within the interpretation of the work through a western European spatial conceptual lens. She shows examples where Inuit artists purposefully use two dimensionality to create clear, concise descriptions that create narrative. Size and negative areas are used to connote distance, whereas the flow and juxtaposition of the figures create the story. She notes that the use of color gradation and multiplicity are employed to create movement. Creases and wrinkles in the paper created prior to printing reflect the rough tundra landscape, and the use of clean untouched expanses of white represent the vastness of the snow-covered land. Understanding these intentions of the artist and the materials they are working with, Ubbink says, is vitally important to designing a thoughtful and successful conservation treatment.

In Ubbink's experience treating these types of prints, she has noticed several trends. Many have voids and cracks in the printing ink that are artifacts of stone printing, not to be mistaken for damage or loss. The Japanese papers used for

stone cut printing are prone to foxing due to impurities in the papermaking process, as well as creasing and wrinkling. Many of the prints were framed with acidic materials and without UV-filtering glazing, resulting in discoloration, both local and overall. From Ubbink's perspective, the decision of how far to take the conservation treatment involves the original intent of the artwork in the context of being art and not a historical object. To best reduce creases and wrinkles, she has found that aqueous treatment and flattening is most effective as opposed to humidification and flattening. Ubbink finds that bathing with calcium hydroxide or calcium bicarbonate is often necessary to neutralize acidic products of deterioration introduced by framing and housing materials. Careful attention to the blind stamps and print chops during this process is required. Removing the appearance of foxing and light damage is imperative to restoring and preserving the artist's original aesthetic and intent. Ubbink finds that bleaching treatments are the only successful option. She often opts for sodium or calcium hypochlorite for this step with thorough neutralization and rinsing being paramount to the success of this treatment. The use of chlorine test strips informs the treatment progress, ensuring the removal of the oxidizing chemical. She finds that sodium borohydride treatments are too risky in terms of blistering the paper and that sun bleaching is not viable due to the length of time needed for treatment to be successful in achieving the level of restoration required. In her experience, foxing is tenacious and not always receptive to hydrogen peroxide, citric acids, or ammonium acetate. The thin nature of the Japanese paper and its excellent strength facilitates the success of hypochlorite treatment. Her goal for all treatments is always to strike a balance between aesthetically reversing the foxing and light damage while introducing as little damage to the paper fibers as possible. She concludes her talk by underlining that the reversal of the damage on these prints is essential to restoring the original intent of the artists. By doing so, she maintains that we best respect the vision and artistic practice of the peoples who made these pieces.

Past the Tree Line and Into the Snow: Inuit Print Making and Conservation

CHRISTINA TAYLOR

ASSOCIATE PAPER CONSERVATOR AT THE STRAUS
CENTER FOR CONSERVATION AND TECHNICAL STUDIES
AT THE HARVARD ART MUSEUMS

Taylor spoke about two distinct topics concerning printmaking during her presentation. First, she explains and describes the creation of a Louis Delsarte color offset photolithograph: *Unity*. Following that, she presents the process behind a series of videos she created to demonstrate various printmaking techniques.

Harvard Art Museums acquired more than 80 works by various artists (*Unity* included) in 2018 from Brandywine

Workshop and Archives as part of a larger initiative to place satellite collections in university art museums around the United States. The works span the history of the workshop from the early 1970s to today and also includes working proofs by some of the artists for future study. Brandywine Workshop and Archives was founded in Philadelphia in 1972 by Allan Edmunds. Its intent was to provide a creative environment for artists from diverse backgrounds to create cutting-edge prints. There is a heavy focus on collaboration and experimentation between master printers and artists with the goal of pushing the technical boundaries of printmaking. Louis Delsarte was a Brooklyn born painter and muralist who grew up in New York City. His influences include jazz, opera, musicals, and the blues, and he was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, African American history, and world cultures. *Unity* is the first print that Delsarte ever made, and he did so by working with master printers at Brandywine to help facilitate his vision into a finished product. It is a color offset photolithograph that was printed in 1995. Taylor had the opportunity to visit Brandywine and interview Edmunds in 2018 as part of the Straus Center's artist interview program. These interviews focus on the materials and processes used to make specific works of art, and Edmunds was able to relay incredible information about many of the artists and their artworks through recollections of working with them. In 2022, Edmunds visited the Straus on the occasion of an exhibition celebrating the recently acquired Brandywine prints. At that point, Taylor had the opportunity to speak to Edmunds more specifically about Delsarte and his working methods.

In addition to the *Unity* print, the Straus also acquired 12 related color separations. Color separations are drawings made on plastic sheets used to create the final print. Typically, artists do not retain color separations after a print is complete, as they are often seen as a means to an end. However, for a conservator interested in the process, they are an excellent opportunity to learn about Delsarte's technique. Like almost all forms of color printmaking, the need to separate individual colors before printing is paramount. Each layer of color is printed individually on top of each other to build up the final image. Taylor explained that because the color separations are photographically exposed to the printing plates, it is the opacity (or the light blocking/transmitting ability) of the drawing material on the plastic sheets that translates to the tonal quality of the final image. The denser the media on the color separation is, the darker the printed passage will be. If less dense media like an ink wash or gradated pattern is used in the color separation, that will translate to a lighter passage in the final print. Taylor showed examples of this in detailed areas of the color separations. She also pointed out the different ways that Delsarte achieved this in his process: layering graphite in areas, pressing firmly and working quickly, using a fine point pen to use hatching, cross hatching, and stippling techniques, and the addition of collaged elements like bright

orange PVC strips. She showed examples of where Delsarte uses reductive techniques like selectively wiping ink away with a cloth or paper towels and areas where he uses a fine blade or tool to scrape thin frenetic lines. She highlighted the fact that above all, Louis Delsarte loved to draw. Each color separation is a drawing in itself, full of varied technique that results in expression.

Taylor then showed the audience a mock-up that she made when the Harvard Art Museums acquired the print to illustrate and clarify how the color separations really work. She explained how the drawing on the color separation was exposed to a photolithographic plate and developed to create a replication of the drawing onto the print plate. Then, this plate was inked and printed to produce the final print. She noted that while most printing plates need to be drawn in reverse, these photolithographs are offset printed, so they get reversed twice, meaning the orientation of the drawing and the print are the same. Taylor pointed out that while color separations are often photographic in nature, they do not need to be, as shown by these very separations. The "photo" portion of the label photolithographic process comes from the plate exposure process, not the creation of the image itself. And while photolithographs are often printed offset, especially in a commercial setting, this is not mandatory. The plate exposed from the color separations could also be printed directly on a more traditional lithographic press.

Once Delsarte exposed his color separations, they were printed in 12 individual colors to build up the final print. Taylor approximated the colors of each layer based on the printing notations seen on each color separation and comparing them to the final print. Taylor showed details of the color separation and how they relate to the final print. In doing this, she drew attention to a discrepancy between what was a purple color separation layer and the final printed image. There are elements that do not correspond between the color separation and the final image, indicating that this color separation was not used to create *Unity*. Although it will never be known why or how this occurred, it is one more example of what one can learn by looking closely at the process.

Similar to how Taylor created a mock-up to illustrate Delsarte's process, she also created a series of four videos demonstrating printmaking techniques seen in other prints in the Harvard Art Museums' collection. This was a project that began during the pandemic, blossoming out of a study of relief aquatint prints by Dan Flavin. During the lockdown, the museum was reaching out for digital content, and as Taylor had access to a home printmaking studio, she took the opportunity to film her recreation of the relief aquatint process that she was carrying out to aid her own research. The demonstration video was a success, so she made a second video describing the color woodcut process using Ernst Ludwig Kirchner as an example. This was eventually

linked to a free downloadable coloring book developed by the Museums. The final two videos were used as related programming for exhibitions and featured prints by Edvard Munch and Pablo Picasso. Taylor was surprised that these videos were as successful as they were and wanted to share some takeaways from the project. First, the setup was “low-tech.” Taylor used a phone on a tripod and used the iMovie software that is included on Apple products to edit her videos. In consultation with the Harvard Art Museums’ digital content manager, they decided that “low-tech” might be more approachable to the public than highly edited and produced videos. Her second takeaway was that making these videos is extremely time intensive. Between planning, shooting, and editing, she estimates that each video took about two to three weeks to produce. She advises to have a clear and concise message, which resonated with her viewers. Taylor is pleased with how the videos turned out and is very excited that they are reaching a wider audience than she anticipated, including teachers as well as professionals in both the museum and printmaking worlds. She ended by sharing that they were also successful because she enjoys teaching and printmaking, and sharing what you love makes the process worthwhile.

Louis Delsarte's Color Separation Mylars: Drawings for a Print and Printmaking Demonstration Videos

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The discussion portion of the session consisted of several audience members offering comments, asking follow-up questions, and sharing their own experiences with the subjects the speakers presented.

For questions directed toward Bertalan, the topics covered mostly the quality of the papers and the relationship between artist and printer in the studio. Bertalan spoke a little about the trend in Europe to domestically produce papers to eliminate the need to import papers. The rise in popularity of lithography catalyzed this trend, as traditional handmade papers did not suit the printing process. As European papermakers were trying to match the quality of the Chinese papers, there was variation in quality of the products, with some being downright terrible. She was asked how the poor quality of these papers informs her decisions about conservation treatment, to which she responded that in most scenarios, the best thing to do is to not touch them due to their inherent vices. Proper housing is a more effective intervention. Following that discussion, an audience member asked who had the last say between artist and printer in the 19th-century French system, to which Bertalan replied that often it was the printer who had the last say, especially the master printer. She also noted that in the technical manuals, the printers refer to artists who have nothing to do with who we would refer to as an artist, but rather an in-house technician who we would probably classify as a printer.

The questions for Ubbink spanned the topics of conservation treatment techniques and artist methods. An audience member asked about her use of sodium hypochlorite for bleaching and whether she had seen any reversion in color. Ubbink noted that she has been using the technique for many years and is familiar with the reversion issue in general, but has never seen anything she has treated come back with reversion. She attributes this to her thorough rinsing steps that are corroborated with the use of chlorine test strips to make sure all the chlorine is gone from the wash water. She stated that often several rinse baths are needed to effectively eliminate the presence of chlorine. Another conservator asked if she has ever seen any damage to the paper as a result of printing with stone and whether she has had to line any prints as a result of that type of damage. Ubbink shared that she has not observed that particular type of damage, as the paper is laid upon the stone to print and is a gentle process. She has very rarely lined an Inuit print: only when the tears were so extensive that lining was deemed necessary. When queried about the source of the printing ink, Ubbink mentioned that while they were using commercially produced ink to make the prints, she did not have information on where it was imported from. Ubbink was also asked whether she knew how the Inuit printers achieved the variation in tone seen in many of the stone prints. She answered that the Inuit printers applied the ink directly to the stone using stippling brushes, originally shaving brushes. If observed closely, each print is slightly different, which is a result of this technique, almost a monotype. She also shared that the artists seemed to give the printers a lot of leeway when printing the image, a reflection of the cooperative attitude of the shops.

In response to Taylor’s topic, conservators wanted to know where to find her videos and whether she will continue to produce them. Taylor answered by saying that while the return to the office and the fact that her presses are no longer in her home studio has definitely slowed her momentum, she does plan on creating more videos. The demand for the videos is there, and she looks forward to making more in the future. The videos can be found on YouTube by searching within the general search bar or finding the Harvard Art Museums’ channel.

In addition to specific questions for the speakers, there were two topics in particular that generated internal discussion. The first was contact sharing among the audience regarding specific museums and collections that have Inuit prints and people who are working on their research. The other was a discussion between all attendees on various flattening and drying techniques. Conservators stood up and offered suggestions for effective drying of thin papers, including in a sandwich between felts and Gore-Tex membrane, the use of Pellon, *karibari* boards (and gatorboard as an alternative for *karibari* boards), and the use of a vacuum suction table. Other

audience members offered helpful reminders about the presence of optical brighteners in new materials and encouraged the use of UV to check for them, whereas another pointed to the recent conservation literature about the presence of optical brighteners in TekWipe.

The discussion session closed out with a question to each participant regarding how they found their presentation topics. Bertalan and Ubbink mentioned that the exposure to their subject areas came through their private practices, whereas Taylor mentioned that hers comes from a background in printmaking. All three speakers shared an obvious passion for their topic, which came across during their thoughtful presentations and their enthusiastic engagement with the audience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Art on Paper Discussion Group co-chairs would like to thank the presenters for volunteering to share their topic with

the attendees, and they would like to thank the attendees for such a successful and engaging discussion session. Heartfelt thanks also go out to BPG Program Chair Morgan Browning and Assistant Program Chair Amy Hughes for their assistance in organizing the session.

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