

Mezzotint and the Art of Darkness

Mezzotint is an elaborate form of Engraving on copper that produces a tonal print. It is unique in that a completely black ground is engraved first, then the image is worked dark to light. It was developed in Germany in the middle of the 17th century. The technique was brought to Britain by Prince Rupert of the Rhine, who was a great exponent of the art (when not fighting Cromwell's Roundheads.) In the 18th & 19th century it was known as the English style, as only an Englishman would have the patience to practice such painstaking work. It almost disappeared with the advent of photography, was revived in America at the beginning of the 20th century as a purely fine art technique. There are now only about 30 artists in Europe working in Mezzotints.

A curved serrated tool, called a rocker, is used to engrave a ground into a copper plate. A fine line of dots is engraved into the plate, as well as a burr of copper being thrown up proud of the plate. The whole plate is covered, so an even, uniform texture is created. It is the depth of the dots and the height of the burrs that will hold ink, producing a beautiful deep velvet dark tone. A 30x40cm plate will take up to 12 hours. Using a variety of sharp blades, scrapers & burnishers, the image is selectively scraped and burnished back working from dark to light so that a tonal design is produced. The deeper the indented areas remain, the darker it will print. Where the plate is polished smooth, no ink will adhere and so will appear as highlights. This is months, not weeks, of fine work. Because of the fragility of the fine copper burrs very few prints can be produced. An edition of 20 is doing well!

General reflections on the argument between Original Print and reproductions

I become so frustrated when I hear the words "It's only a print!" and then see Reproductions masquerading as original. How can a print, by its nature a multiple, be an original? First, the work must be conceived as a print, using any one or combinations of the many print mediums, using the inherent character of the medium. Secondly the artist should work the block, plate, stone, screen etc, from which the print is taken. Third the final print (which is the artwork that ends up hanging on the wall) is taken from the said block, plate, stone, screen, etc. Each print taken individually by hand. Although every effort is used to make every print in the edition as uniform as possible there will be small variations. The number of prints in the edition is dictated by the limitations of the process, for example a Mezzotint, which can take up to two months plus to engrave and prepare the plate. Then over forty minutes to ink, wipe and print.

In contrast a reproduction, often referred to as “limited edition print” or “giclee” (primarily to make the buyer think they are purchasing some thing of more value), is a work in any other medium, whether it’s an oil painting, watercolour, pastel drawing etc. Then, using photo mechanical means, the same as to print greeting cards, glossy books etc., the industrial print press will produce as many or few as the operator commands. Often a limited print run is required to artificially inflate the sale price.

I am not against the use of modern technology to produced works of art. Computer added design and digital manipulation can, and is producing exciting and dynamic work. The point is it must be used creatively not merely as a reproductive process.

Ultimately a work of art transcends the ink and paper from which it is made. Do you want a work of art on your wall or a picture of a work of art?