

A Few Brief Words on the Art of the Monotype

I think that I had heard of the technique of making monotypes when I was a student at the West of England College of Art in Bristol, probably through some casual comment of George Sweet, who was much the most knowledgeable of my teachers. At that time I never saw anyone making a monotype, nor did I see an actual print until many years later. The first reproductions I saw were the aquatints made by Maurice Potin after monotypes by Degas, which Ambroise Vollard had published in 1939 as illustrations to an addition of Maupassant's *La Maison Tellier*. Such reproductions of reproductions gave little idea of the astonishing spontaneity and skill of the originals.

In 1949 I went to teach in the Falmouth School of Art and found there a fine old cast iron intaglio press. Through this good fortune, in the period from 1950 to 1957, I started to make a number of etchings and began to experiment with making monotypes. As well as greatly enjoying the versatility of the technique, I found it to be a very useful pedagogical tool, for my students, like myself, had never seen a monotype; therefore they escaped from the overburdening archetypes which so intimidated them when they were drawing in more traditional ways. I have continued to make monotypes from time to time ever since.

I came to Canada in 1957. My mother was inclined to believe that those who made such a journey were likely to fall off the edge of the world. To reassure her that this hadn't happened I went back to Ireland to visit my parents in the Spring of 1958, stopping for a few days in London on the way. There I saw at the Reid and Lefèvre Gallery a wonderful exhibition of Degas' monotypes. I have never been so affected by any exhibition of prints before or since. I was astonished by the number of prints shown, by the irony and wit of Degas' treatment of the subject matter, but above all by the very daring compositions of these small images and the technical skill and dexterity they displayed. They seemed to me, as they have ever since, to be by far the most wonderful and vivid images produced by that skilful and remarkable man.

Degas seems to have thought of himself as the inventor of the method, or of some aspects of the technique of monotyping and to have been unaware of the work of the 17th century Genoese painter and etcher, Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione.

Monotype is a technique which has been very little used until the present century and must always have seemed a rather eccentric method of printmaking, for it produces one or at most two impressions, whereas the aim of all other printmaking techniques has always been to produce as large a number of impressions from a plate or wood block as could be sold. A "good plate" was one that provided the largest number of impressions and in that context the making of a monotype must have seemed to be a ridiculously dilettante undertaking. The average printer, who would be willing to pull an edition of an artist's etched plate, would have been very unwilling to allow him time on his press for such an apparently uneconomic undertaking. As Castiglione was himself an etcher, he will have used the thin copper of that time and will have had some experience of the wooden intaglio presses. He may even have owned one. The surviving monotype

impressions made by him are figure compositions with the rapid draughtsmanship that might be found in a study intended to generate a composition; it is this freedom which is the chief source of their charm. These prints seem to have been made by dabbing printing ink over the polished surface of the plate and then drawing into this thin layer of ink with the blunt end of a paint brush handle or a similar object which could be used to scrape white lines into the darkened surface.

Intaglio plates such as etchings or engravings are printed on soft absorbent papers that have been dampened to make them more pliable so that in passing through the press they will easily be pressed down into the ink filled lines in the plate. Castiglione, with his knowledge of etching would presumably have chosen such absorbent papers and dampened them in this way. Degas, two hundred years later, would have had a rather similar experience and seems to have made a similar choice, though by that time he had also a considerable number of oriental papers to choose from, some of which he frequently used. Once the paper covered plate had rolled through the press the paper would have a reversed image of the drawing printed on it. A small residue of the printing ink would be left on the plate from which a very pale impression might be taken, or this ghostly image could be worked into again to give a somewhat similar print. If the artist is without a press he can achieve a less sharply defined impression by burnishing the back of the paper with a wooden spoon or similar object.

Casiglione's technique where the image is created by scraping and rubbing the ink from the surface of the plate is a subtractive one, often called the "dark field manner". There is an alternative technique, the "light field manner", where the image is made by drawing on the clean surface of the plate with a brush dipped in printer's ink. Both of these techniques were used by Degas, and as the two methods are not mutually exclusive, he also at times combined both on the same plate. While many monotypes are monochrome in colour, there is no reason why they should not be many-coloured.

Since Degas first made monotypes in the mid 1870's the commercial environment for which artists made prints has changed out of all recognition. In the middle of the 19th century prints were still thought of as inexpensive minor works of art intended for a large public. By the 1890's prints were being produced in artificially limited editions, which had never previously been the case. They were now being offered as expensive rarities to a much more limited and wealthy clientele. Given this rather hot-house commercial environment the uniqueness of the monotype seemed less odd, becoming an added marketing attraction. Increasingly painters have made monotypes and that small section of the public that is interested in art is now perhaps better informed about the distinctive qualities of these prints. In particular, since the publication of Eugenia Janis' *Degas Monotypes* in 1968, there has been an increased interest in the technique among artists and art students, which has resulted in many innovations in its use. The variety of these innovations is well illustrated in Colta Feller Ives' *The Painterly Print*.

It may be useful if I comment a little on the techniques used to make my monotype prints and on the subject matter which they present. They have all been made on eighteen gauge galvanized steel plates. The ink is oil paint, usually Ivory Black to which has been added a little Alizarin Crimson to give the colour some warmth. This mixture has been diluted with lamp oil, because turpentine tends to evaporate too quickly and therefore

reduces the time during which the image can be worked on. This diluted oil paint is applied to the plate with a hog hair brush and detail is sometimes added with a fine sable. The painted plate is then worked over using small cardboard scrapers about 1 1/2" long by 1/4" wide. This allows the dark lines to be sharpened to greater definition and creates the white lines which model the surfaces. The plates are all printed on an intaglio press using various Japanese papers, none of which has been dampened. While each of these papers has its own distinctive characteristics of colour and texture, I find the most effective to be Hodomura – sometimes called Japanese etching paper. It comes in two colours, white and a pale cream. Both have a delightfully silky printing surface which gives a wonderfully sharp and rich impression.

Where a number of plates have been printed on one sheet of paper, they have each been printed separately, usually from right to left. (The exception is *Dorian G. Fast Rewind* which was printed as Dorian lived, from glorious youth to degenerate old age. If the joke in this print works, it does so because we read pictures as we read type – from left to right. When you have worked all that out you may mutter to yourself “Hasn't he got it wrong?” – until you remember that the print on paper is the reverse of that on the plate!)

Almost all the prints here are “mug-shots”. It used to be that criminals and lunatics were the only people that the authorities bothered to photograph in this way, but now school children, university students, those who drive cars or work in factories, government offices or airports all carry “mug-shots”. Ironically we hardly ever think that these images capture our appearance, much less the complexity of our being. The odd creatures that stare out from these small pieces of plastic do not identify us, rather they are ourselves made into strangers. Flotsam in a floating world. Perhaps because of this, they convey the nostalgia that shrouds almost all photographs with a particular poignancy; and also because of this, these floating heads may become a medium for ironic or comical comment.

You can think of a few of these prints as a tribute to the publishing empire of the Globe and Mail. I now live in Victoria, far from the centre of the world and the national edition, which reassuringly thumps onto my porch six days a week, is a very attenuated version of the true gospel which can only be read in or near Toronto. However, the Report on Business in our modest edition still contains prototypes not unlike “mug-shots”. They come singly or in groups. Like a bird-watcher, I am delighted from time to time by an unpredictably large flock. There they are, the newly appointed directors, three men, one woman, all serious and experienced, gazing unsmiling and reassuringly out at me. Thank God my money or my future are at last in good hands! The lesser beings who have been promoted smile complacently at me and I am told their nicknames so that I may phone up Rick or Vera, Ted or Al to congratulate or place an order. These are small, almost passport sized photographs. Passports to where, you ask? To fame of course. They are smiling because they are all enjoying the fifteen seconds of fame that Andy Warhol told them they all deserve.

When these small set-piece portrait photographs are placed together, they convey an odd impression of self-involvement and alienation. They are placed side by side, but are not together. They are putting their best face forward for the sake of their careers and, as it is really a little piece of advertising, for the good of the company. These little images have

none of the intimacy nor any of the gaucheries of snap shots taken at a family gathering or holiday outing.

By contrast, photographs of actors whether they are alone or in groups almost always show them reacting like anything! Secure behind their masks of grease paint or their carefully manicured self esteem, they can be anyone but themselves. Unlike them, the blind have escaped from the tyranny of the camera and the mirror. A portrait for them is the memory of a series of gentle touchings. Their self image is inconceivable to us for their mirror does not show them the confusions of their hair or the strangeness of their sightless eyes.