

ESSAY FOR JUNE ISSUE OF ART MARKET REPORT - PJPA'S POSITION

DEFINING AN ORIGINAL PRINT

The current confusion about what is, and what isn't, an original print suggests, if nothing else, that the Australian print market is still in its infancy. The rest of the world, it seems, has no problem with this issue, for example : the William Weston Gallery, one of the oldest print dealers in London, publishes the European standard definition on the inside front cover of each of its catalogues :

“An original print is an image produced from a block, plate, stone or such like on which the artist who conceived that image has himself worked. Every impression of an original print is an original work of art in its own right. The artist's ideas are only expressed in the printed image which results from this work on the block. The choice made by the artist to produce this image in “print” does not differ from the choice to work in oil, or any other medium; the only difference in “print” lies in the possibility of producing a number of identical images, **each one an original work by the artist.**”

This definition is consistent with that used by the International Fine Print Dealers Association, New York, (IFPDA) of which the William Weston Gallery is a member. IFPDA lists over 180 members mostly in Europe and the U.S.A.

The London Original Print Fair in its 20th year published a more concise definition :

“An original print is an image produced from a surface on which the artist has worked, such as a stone or wood block or a copper plate. This surface is intended by the artist to be a stage in the creation of the artwork. Thus the original work of art in this case is the print itself rather than the block or plate from which it is printed”.

The practice of the United States Customs identifies an original artist's print as a hand-made image, available in multiples, where the initial printing surface and successive colour separations are made by hand and not by a mechanical process - conversely, with a reproduction the colour separations are made mechanically, as in the case of photogravure.

Such reasoning has its foundation in authoritative texts such as *Prints and Printmaking* by Anthony Griffiths, Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, who in discussing the term “original print” refers to the revolution caused by the invention of photography in the 1820s, and the difference between reproductive and non-reproductive processes. Griffiths cites the invention of photography and the spread of photomechanical images as originally causing confusion in the public's mind regarding the status of artist's prints. Perhaps it is history repeating itself with the recent introduction of new technologies in printmaking again blurring of the boundaries between original prints and reproductions. Giclee prints for example, are digital ink jet

prints of a digital image file on a computer or CD. Technically, if one just takes a snap of an existing art work, downloads it onto the computer and clicks “print” without any manipulation, they are reproductions. If the artist signs it, as thousands of artists have done, then it is a signed reproduction, and not an original artist’s print. Where the problem arises is when they are sold to an unsuspecting public as an “original print hand signed by the artist” at an original price.

Such things as signed reproductions, in the fine art, High-Art/Low-Art stakes belong on a similar plane to facsimile prints, or memorabilia. And this should (and usually is) reflected in the price – just above a reproduction (you pay for the signature) but considerably less than an original print.

But where the computer is used as an extension of the artist’s hand and, even better, combined with hand made images by an artist such as Milan Milojevic the original intention and meaning of the appropriated images is metamorphosed or montaged to create something totally different. Artistically this process is not unlike the use of photo-stencils in silk screen printing in the 1960s during the POP ART period in London, where found text, photographs from magazines and newspapers were appropriated from a mass media context and reassembled into a new meaning in a different medium.

Milojevic’s recent work is a good example of just how rich a graphic dialogue can be when combining traditional woodcut with appropriated digitally manipulated images. Such experimentation with a new technology by a contemporary artist is not dissimilar to the way 19th century artists very quickly subsumed photography into their studio practice – the computer, like the camera before it, is merely a tool, it’s what is visualised through it that determines whether it is a reproduction, non-reproduction, original or copy, art or artifice.

With etchings where an artist like John Olsen draws directly through a hard or soft acid resist bituminous ground to expose the copper plate, then bites it in the acid, inks it up and prints it, there can be no confusion. These prints, like those of Fred Williams, are “pure etchings”.

At a practical level, the key to whether a print is original or not therefore lies in the degree of hand manipulation by the artist. There are levels of originality. The accepted practice in major print workshops around the world, and certainly at Port Jackson Press, is that the creation of the plate, stone, block or stencil must be 100% the artist’s effort. During the proofing stages there may be discussion between artist and printer but it is the artist’s responsibility to get the image up to a *bon a tier* (French for good to pull) stage. The BAT is the full expression of the artist’s idea, and the end of the creative process. The editioning by comparison is repetitive work where each impression is printed as close as possible to the BAT and is carried out by the artist, or master printer working with or under the artist’s instruction. If the artist is satisfied with each individual impression, he signs and numbers it, following which the plate, stone or stencil is usually destroyed thus guaranteeing the “limited” number and thus the rarity of the print. This latter practice was introduced by 19th century printmakers (Whistler was thought to have

been the first to do so) to further distinguish artist's prints from photomechanical reproductions. Prior to this, artist's prints were usually signed in the plate, and were unnumbered. Hence the print market began to be driven by rarity : all other criteria being satisfied (that it is a good impression and the best image from the best period of an artist's *oeuvre*) the number in the edition became a factor determining price; the fewer the better, with the unique one-of, in-state (prior to reaching a BAT stage and outside the edition) proof becoming the most sought after, and the most expensive, second only to the BAT, which of course is the exemplar print, and rarely if ever comes on the market.

There are many fallacies regarding the quality of an impression, such as buying low numbers in an edition of etchings because they are the best. This is only true where drypoint has been used : this process produces a burr along one side of an incision made into copper with an engraving tool, and as it runs through the press it sometimes breaks, or wears off. Such a criteria is meaningless with most other etching techniques particularly when the plates are chrome faced (as is the practice at PJP) to prevent wear from successive runs through the press, and of course with lithographs, relief prints, and silk screen prints.

Many painters who are also printmakers often work an idea from a painting to an etching, and from an etching back to a painting as a way of reaching a better synthesis of an idea : Olsen's *Seaport of Desire* suite of etchings (printed and published by PJP three years ago) refers back to earlier paintings of the same name ; Jason Benjamin's landscapes; Robert Jacks *James Joyce : House of the Dead* ; Christine Johnson's burnished aquatint roses; Luke Sciberras, Mark Schaller and David Larwill's etchings; or Williams's forest ponds, You Yangs and Lysterfield etchings - all were worked at the conceptual stage from ideas that may have been seen at a different stage of development in a painting or earlier print. Hence the idea that a print is a reproduction because it resembles an image in another medium is also a fallacy - it is a variation on a theme. And it doesn't even have to be your own theme : look what Picasso did with Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, and Leon Kossoff with Poussin's *Rape of the Sabines*. Such interpretations are in essence no different from Pavarotti singing Puccini – it can work brilliantly if the artist is in good voice.

But the very best way to learn about prints is to look at them. Printmaking by its very nature is a visual language, not a verbal one. There are many qualities, originality being one of them, that only become apparent from continual looking, and by looking, comparing and learning, the outcome of which is appreciation, and ultimately, connoisseurship. And if that doesn't work for you ask a printmaker, because they are truly the experts in the field.

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