Treasure Maps
Author Ursula K. Le Guin drew striking visuals of her fictional worlds. A PNCA lab is making limited-edition prints of these rare, beloved works.

FIVE YEARS AFTER her death, Ursula K. Le Guin remains one of the most acclaimed writers of science fiction and fantasy, with a tally of twenty-three novels, numerous other works, and many prizes, including a 1973 National Book Award. She also drew maps of her fictional worlds. Willamette’s Pacific Northwest College of Art, through its Watershed Center for Fine Arts Publishing and Research, is collaborating with Le Guin’s son and literary executor, Theo Downes-Le Guin, to create limited-edition lithographs of her maps of Earthsea, which is one of those worlds. “My mother always looked to her own community first when considering collaborations,” says Downes-Le Guin. He envisioned this printing project as a way to offer alternatives to images sold online without permission. “More importantly,” says Downes-Le Guin, “maps are very present in my mother’s work. All of her writing starts with and is situated in specific, if imaginary, places. All her best-known books start with a map.”

By EMILY GOLD BOUTILIER / Photographs by CELESTE NOCHE

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“It’s a water-versus-oil interaction,” says Professor Matthew Letzelter, Watershed’s director, of the process he’s demonstrating here. “The water rejects the ink on the plate and the image rejects the water, which allows the ink to settle on the image area. Much like earlier stone lithography, photo plates allow us to print layers,” with each holding one color.

Watershed is the research and education arm of the PNCA printmaking lab, staffed by students in the MFA in print media program, which Letzelter directs. Clients come from the Portland arts community, of which Downes-Le Guin is a champion.

This is a Mailander offset proofing press. “It allows us to drop layers of ink on a sheet of paper and control registration down to the slimmest of margins,” Letzelter says. It dates to the middle of the twentieth century.

The goal is to make prints that look as close to the original as possible. “We are digitally separating out each color in the drawing from a high-resolution image,” Letzelter says. “We are trying to avoid the usual CMYK process that leaves distinct color dots in lines that you would see in most commercial printed matter.”

Color-matching is one of many skills that “cannot be taught through a textbook or lectures. It’s an atelier experience,” Letzelter says. In the print lab, students also learn to think on their feet. Ink reacts differently each day, for example, depending on factors such as temperature and humidity.

“A color image of Earthsea in the lab. “To have Theo come in and talk about his experience and how he saw these drawings done when he was a child was amazing,” Letzelter says. “It’s a connection to history.”

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