

The Printmaking Workshop Continuum at UNL

Karen Kunc

Printmaking is an art form with a story that is a mix of art and service. Built in to the process are stages of doing — make-ready work, repetitive actions, time between artistic impulse and the execution of the print. This built-in situation of time, in shared spaces, is the place I want to examine, briefly and selectively, to help us see printmakers in a workshop continuum. Here cooperation, collaborative projects, ambition and insight into one's art can be developed over the press. One needs the practical to make the edifying, as printmakers work together, in this somewhat romantic notion that I try to perpetuate for my students at UNL.

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Printmaking workshops throughout the centuries were annexes to homes, as cottage industries of artisan families — brothers, sons, husbands and wives — and widows — were printers. Traditional training was done by master to apprentice, as a valuable investment. Workshops were in neighborhoods of related craft trades out of which printmaking had evolved — from armorers, smiths, jewelers, and cabinetmakers.

With the availability of paper in the late Middle Ages, massive production of printed images became possible. Then the first information revolution was begun by Gutenberg in the 1450's with his innovations with movable type and steel matrixes to caste letters in durable lead alloy. We have no record of the times, but I can imagine the throngs of anonymous artisans, guilds of formcutters and printers working in a factory-like atmosphere, in dark and dangerous conditions with great physical labor. I learned long ago that the inkmakers were banned from some wooden medieval towns, as they caused too many accidental fires making burnt plate oil.

Fashionable artists realized the necessity of making their reputations by the distribution of prints of their paintings, so they readily worked with printers, or even had their own children trained to print; often the artist himself learned the art of printmaking so as to control the quality and distribution of their images, and to reap the financial income. Yet successful artist's like Rubens hastened "the commercial exploitation of engraving and its decay as a free creative medium by the ever increasing demand of reproductions of his paintings."

As reproductive printmaking became a "proto-capitalist enterprise" in the 1600's cheap labor was required, which came from displaced farmers, or in the 1850's from "ladies of reduced circumstance", such as those at the Ladies Printing Press. Throughout the ages a division



Senior art major Ann Frieson
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2000
photo by Karen Kunc

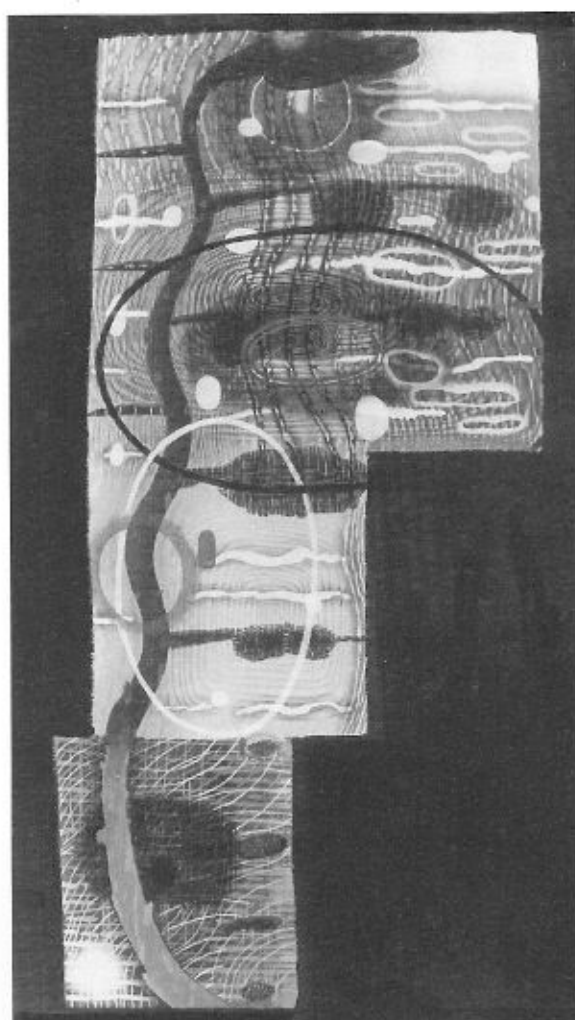
of labor was naturally a part of printmaking, such as the traveling artisan who specializing in etching "skies". And in Asia, this collaborative production of prints remained the tradition until modern times and the "creative printmaking" movement.

Now technologies from all past information revolutions have been adopted into print practice, along with the very latest in computer generated images and output, confronting us with a multifaceted definition of the print. Also connections to a rich and varied "egalitarian" history of our medium — from useful encyclopedia images, to comic books, to politically motivated powerful images — have widened the impact of the "service" role of the print.

The social and educational environment of the workshop surely gave rise to the "amateur" printmaking movement in the 19th century, with the forming of "print societies", and even monoprint circles. For instance, Plein-air painter Corot was not a very good etcher of his own plates, so his friend Bracquemond, who was a "tireless" organizer of print societies, etched Corot's plates for him. Fine art printmaking was introduced and demonstrated to the public with the press and printer in the gallery itself. Bolton Brown relates how he even talked a shop girl through all the stages of a litho on her lunch hour. And in 1939, the energetic Dwight Kirsch, chairman of the UN Department of Art, featured a step by step chart of the etching process, the "highlight" of his presentation at a country fair.

Printmaking was a research topic undertaken by the Federal Arts Project during the depression, with the goal to "preserve artists' skills and abilities by employ(ment)." Lithography workshops were set up around the country to train artists and silkscreen was developed as an art form and as a political action tool. As a result, screen printing was the modern method taught here at UNL in the 1940's.

The Prairie Printmakers, from 1930-65, is an exemplar of the many societies formed for the missionary-like purposes to promote the print



Karen Kunc
Willow Bend
42" x 21"
Woodcut on shaped paper
1999

with shows and collecting — for a \$5.00 annual fee one could receive a Gift Print by an artist member. With large numbers of artists, from around the country, these societies carried on the European print tradition of genre subjects — such as the picturesque "souvenir" landscapes of the American West, so many of which are represented in our Center for Great Plains Art Collection. And today, here in Nebraska, we have a new effort launched with the formation of the Under Pressure Print Club, echoing the goals of the past, to contribute to the education about and sponsorship of prints.

Modern creative printmaking marks its beginning with the influential and non-academic approach of Stanley William Hayter at his Atelier 17 workshop in Paris, established in the early 1930's, with a brief time in NY during WWII. Hayter championed learning by experience and action, allowing for "possibility of discovery", with equality between teachers and newcomers to the medium, where "direction, interdictioncommands are..... avoided." Thousands of independent artists passed through this workshop over the years, spreading this creative attitude.

With the establishment by Mauricio Lasansky of one of the first university print workshop in the US, in 1943 at the University of Iowa, the 19th Century notions of the print were effectively "killed off". Lasansky's legacy is the exploration of the process and the print for its own sake, with an "Iowa aesthetic" of deeply

bitten lines, extensively reworked plates, using multiple techniques, and evidence of disciplined hard work — which has become a badge of courage as well as a burden of expectations in the print world.

In mapping our UNL workshop "family tree", I take great pride in acknowledging my predecessors, and see that we are part of a sequence that includes the woodblock prints made in the design classes around Christmas time, of Louise Mundy in the 1920s — between the assignments on "birds" and "advertising". I have learned of: Dwight Kirsch and Kady Faulkner, in the 30's and 40's. And then various "spin offs" from the University of Iowa, as students, or students of students: Rudy Pozzatti, here from 1950-53; LeRoy Burkett, from '53-'57; Jean Richards, here from 1957-62; Thomas Coleman, professor from 1963-71; and Mike Nushawg, here from 1972- 83. And I arrive in



UNL grad students (left) Jenni Freidman (right) Deb Oden-Meza printing edition for visiting artist Bob Nugent, Oct, 2000
photo by Judy Stone Nunneley

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UNL print shop hosting the members of the Under Pressure Print Club during week long residency of visiting artist Bob Nugent
photo by Judy Stone Nunneley



International Collaborative Portfolio
The Entwined Vine
 Intaglio prints by 50 artists from 5 workshops
 printed and published by UNL printmaking students in 2000

Artists on page shown:
 Fabio Mirri - from Italy
 Tony Holmquist - from USA
 Gina Ropiha - from New Zealand
 Caroline Bradbury - from England
 Mahmudul Haque - from Bangladesh