

Jon Goodman's photogravure workshop

Last August, I spent a rewarding week in Florence, Massachusetts at Jon Goodman's studio immersed in learning the intricacies of the Talbot-Klic method of photogravure. Jon is widely considered one of the modern masters of this classic method of photogravure. Following his muse in the mid 1970's, he methodically researched the photogravure process as it was practiced in the late 1800's and early 1900's, with his search culminating in an apprenticeship in Switzerland at one of the few remaining ateliers in the world equipped to allow him to re-discover this process that was dangerously close to being forgotten. In the years since that apprenticeship, he has refined his working methods to accommodate available modern materials, and his mastery of this process has given him the enviable position of being one of only a very few 'go-to' printers when photographic artists need their work editioned in photogravure.

The workshop Jon teaches is involved and very thorough. He devotes the entire week to the class, in order to ensure that the workshop attendees leave with a complete acquaintance with every aspect of the process. During the five-day workshop, there were a few nights that we did not leave the studio until nearly 11:00 in the evening. That fact is an indication both of his seriousness of purpose and the time requirements of the process itself.

The approach Jon uses to teaching and practicing photogravure stems from his recognition that a successful photogravure print is the culmination of a series of interlocked and interdependent steps. Working backwards, a beautiful photogravure can only come from a properly etched plate. The properly etched plate can only come about by carefully controlled etching of the copperplate and its gelatin resist. The etching time of the plate cannot be too short or too long, or the plate will either be over or under etched. The control of the etching time is determined by the gelatin thickness of the tissue that creates the image on the plate. The thickness of the tissue is determined by its exposure in contact with the film positive. The exposure time of the tissue is determined by the density range of the film positive. And the density range of the film positive is determined by the printing and developing techniques under the enlarger in the darkroom. The process that Jon teaches is tied to the concept that the linchpin of the process is the carefully controlled and predictable etching time of the plate. The workshop is focused on arriving at the etching tray with a copper plate in contact with a tissue resist of the image that will etch properly.

The steps covered in the class start at the stage of creating the film positive with a specific density range. Jon demonstrates and teaches students about developers, film and techniques to add some creative control to the way the film positive will etch the plate. He shows how to use a densitometer to get a film positive with the correct density range.

Once the film positive has been created, Jon shows how to sensitize and expose the Autotype gravure (gelatin) tissue that will be used as a resist during the etching step. The temperature of the dichromate sensitizer and the drying time of the sensitized tissue are all factors that he covers. While the tissue is drying, Jon shows the students how mask the film positive and insert a film step wedge into the masked area that will be used to judge the progress of the etching. The sensitized tissue is then put in contact with the film positive and mask and exposed under his UV exposure lamp for a specified time.

Next, Jon shows how prepare and very thoroughly clean the copper plate before the tissue resist is applied. Having a completely clean and un-oxidized copper plate is essential to getting good contact between the exposed tissue and the copper plate. He shows two methods of 'laying down' the exposed tissue on the plate. One is the 'wet' laydown technique and the other is the 'dry' laydown technique. After the tissue is applied to the copper plate, it is developed in warm water, and the softer unexposed parts of the gelatin tissue are washed away, leaving an image of varying thicknesses of orange gelatin as a negative image on the copper plate. The highlight areas of the image contain the thickest amounts of gelatin, and the shadow values contain very little gelatin. This variable gelatin thickness is what allows the etching solution to etch the shadow areas more deeply than the highlight areas on the plate.

The next step is applying the aquatint or 'ground' to the plate. Jon uses a unique approach to this step. Jon has built a 'dusting box' that contains very finely ground rosin that is stirred into a cloud, and the plate is put into the box and allowed to collect the fine particles as they slowly fall to the bottom of the box. This rosin is then baked into the surface of the plate using the specially made oven that Jon has made. After the plate has cooled, asphaltum is used to mask off the areas of the plate that are to remain un-etched.

All of this is to arrive at the final step in the platemaking process where the plate is etched in a series of ferric chloride baths. Again, Jon has a unique approach to etching that I have not seen in any of the instructional literature on this process. But the results speak for themselves as the student pulls a very nicely etched plate from the tray after the gelatin resist is washed away.

Once the plate is dried, it is time to pull a proof print from it. This part was the real eye-opener for me. Being a complete novice to the technique of intaglio printing, I had the idea that the printing step was, well, sort of automatic and mechanical. I inked my plate, put it on the press bed and laid a sheet of damp paper over it. I pulled the press handle and excitedly pulled back the blanket to look at what I was sure would be a beautiful first photogravure. I was shocked when it looked absolutely horrible. I did not know what had happened.

Then Jon said, 'Let me try'. So he took the same plate, went through the same steps, and voila - a perfect print! The lightbulb was beginning to go on in my head that there was a whole aspect of photogravure printing that I did not realize was critical: the inking and printing of the plate. And this is where Jon's workshop really shines. He learned to print

in the classic European tradition and he shows you how to ink and print a plate the way that Steichen and Coburn probably did. There is a considerable amount of hand coordination and 'feel' involved in inking and more importantly, wiping a plate prior to printing. And Jon gives in-depth instruction, coaching and feedback to allow you to develop this technique. I think this is one of the more remarkable aspects of photogravure as compared with most photographic processes: there is a high degree of tactile hands-on skill needed as opposed to the more mechanical procedures in other photographic printing disciplines.

Finally, Jon covers all the small things that make the difference in a professional looking photogravure. He shows how to trim and bevel the edges of a plate, how to get rid of small ink smudges on the finished print, and how to use an etching needle to fix small imperfections in the plate.

And this is only a sampling of what is offered in this workshop. For instance, Jon is so concerned with print quality that he makes his own ink. So he talks about making ink and the factors involved. He talks about how to make and apply varnish to a finished print. And the final treat on the last day is flipping through his huge collection of gravures that he has printed over the years. His own work is quite stunning, and it is very interesting to see the difference between some modern examples of photogravure and some vintage prints from the Paul Strand Mexican Portfolio for instance.

In summary, Jon's workshop is well worth the time and expense. The sheer amount of technique and procedures that are covered in five days is amazing. We have an expression heard often here in Texas about 'sipping water from a firehose'. That is what this workshop is like. It is both immensely practical, while at the same time very deep. We did not walk away with just a superficial knowledge of the process. It was one of the most satisfying technical workshops I have ever attended.