

KIACZ Essay

Serigraphy in The History of Art

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Fine Art Serigraphy connects back to the first 'hand-rendered stenciling' in and on geologic features more than 35,000 years ago. Innovations and changes mark the various forms of hand-rendered printing across the ages.

Stenciling in East Asia dates back to 2,010 BPE with non-toxic inks made from pure pigments in water and rice. Japanese artists developed the wood frame with a grid of woven hair and adhered reverse position paper stencils as a system for creating multiple originals. Marco Polo returned to Europe with the frame grid and ink to introduce the practice of stencil printing to Europe for decorative textiles. During the 1800s Industrial Era, manufacturers of Europe and the USA sent their mass-manufactured machine presses and oil-solvent-based inks into Asia for their rapidly growing business of product labeling. The first to adopt the automated screen-printing presses was the empire of Japan for their silk product labels.

Decorative Arts in Western Europe advanced stencil printing in the 18th and 19th centuries for wallpaper. The petroleum oil base for printing processes of that time was toxic, and its high toxicity hazardous waste. During that time, Simon of Manchester of England received the first patent for the silkscreen process in 1907. Following was the first 'squeegee blade' in the 1920s for the hand-pulled ink passes in screen printing. Mechanical auto-rotating drum presses followed.

1930s NYC artists experimented with industrial screen-printing tools and materials. Screen-printer Anthony Velonis of NYC led the federal Works Progress Administration [WPA] artisans. NYC and the WPA informed the nation of screen printing for Art, posters, and signs. Screen Printing was a significant part of the WPA Art stimulated economy. Velonis coined 'serigraph' from Seri [silk] and Graphos [to write or draw] from Greek. After the congressional closure of the WPA, more trades-trained printers worked their way from commercial arts into Fine Arts.

Galleries and Museums began to recognize serigraphs as Fine Art based on their experimental nature, moving forward, and new images. The Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art was the first to formally recognize the 'Serigraph' as an Art Form with an exhibit in April 1940.

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Germany led the way in 1960 to ban Xylene as a cleaning solvent in screen printing based on the toxicity and higher numbers of deaths in that industry [life expectancy recorded to be at 40 years of age]. In doing so, Germany's actions contributed to the nascent USA Earth Day movement and the congressional forming of the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA]. The USA EPA removed all Xylene from workplaces. A diluted version of the chemical continued in K – higher education studio classrooms for a long time. Hunt-Speedball and Golden Artist Colors led the product innovations toward non-toxic and water-based art products, including products for Screen Print in the 1990s.

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A proposal and request from Carolynne Whitefeather, a professional artist, to return to higher education and work with masters of print to develop a fine art quality of water-based acrylic inks from fluid acrylic paints and mediums began at The University of Oklahoma College of Fine Arts. That matured in her 1995 -1999 research studio. It changed many ways of working in academic classrooms and private artist studios and was taught at the university and shared through workshops in other programs. [Professors Daniel Kiacz, Karen Thumann, and Director Andrew Phelan served on the committee, with additional support from Eddie Carroll Smith, Dean of Graduate College. Hunt Speedball and Golden Artist Colors. Provided product and professional chemists support during the program. Additional support came from Neo-Sign and Screen in Oklahoma City and Carpenter-Wild Associated in Fort Worth]

The unique method of producing elaborate screen prints was developed by controlling viscosity, rheology, tensions, layered color controls, transparency, and perceived and literal surface qualities. On-table clean-up processes were easy, fast, and always retained perfect registration. There was minimal to no loss of prints in the sequencing of multiple screens and layers. Some prints in the editions lost no folios in the process. Cross-directional colour blending as analogous or complementary meant clarity and smooth graduations. Strength in registrations and no removal of screens from their hinge clamps for cleaning during the printing prevented loss of folios in the exacting multiple originals. Sequential printing became viable. The newly developed printing medium and fluid paints became micro-thin layers, absorbing one into the others before it while interacting with the tactile qualities of the choice of paper. The Southeast Collection is the first known Fine Art Serigraph collection created with innovative water-based, non-toxic serigraphic processes.

The system was taught to undergraduate printmakers at the university for two years, in workshops at two other university programs and professional artisan workshops. The process and formulas by Whitefeather remain a single artist method to produce a limited number of editions of fine art prints. This individual artist system was the first of studio processes to be allowed into and actively taught on the trade show floors at the College Art Association Conference [1999] as part of the Golden Artist Colors presentation. After that year, other art product manufacturers provided demo-teaching at the conferences.