

KEITH SMITH'S REMARKS ON PHOTO-ETCHING

I started photo-silkscreening in 1964 and photo-etching in 1965. Vera Verdich, a pioneer in working with mixed media in printmaking, was my etching teacher in the Art Institute school and she encouraged my interest in making prints by photo-etching.

This is done by coating the ~~plate~~ copper etching plate with a sensitizer and then exposing a half-tone film positive on the plate. First we used a photo-flood bulb for a long exposure, but later the school purchased an arc lamp for this purpose and the exposure was cut down considerably. After exposure the plate is developed, then rinsed in water which leaves a stencil on the plate. All the white areas have this stencil, the blacks are the bare areas of the plate. The plate is then bitten in acid (the blacks bite because there is no stencil protecting those areas of the plate from the acid). The photographic picture appears negative on the copper plate and then prints positive.

These etchings are not hand colored. All the color is applied to the plate with tiny pieces of cotton and then printed. I ink the plate only once. Some workers with this medium ink the plate separately for each color and then print several times for one print.

A STATEMENT BY KEITH SMITH ON HIS CLICHES-VERRE

Cliché-verre, as I use it, is printing on photographic paper, but instead of using negatives, I contact a sheet or sheets of glass which I have previously drawn upon, using opaque or semi-opaque liquids. In my color clichés-verre I use color inks, food dye, tempera, etc. on the sheets of glass to determine the colors printed. As with a color photographic negative, red gives green; blue, orange; and yellow, purple. So, if I want ~~green~~ blue-green on the print, I must paint red-orange on the sheet of glass. Where I paint green, I get red on the print, etc. All the color clichés-verre get their color photographically, through the printing process. Some of the black and white clichés-verre have color added to the prints by hand after the prints are mounted. This is dye, so the color will not sink into the print or remain and be above the surface of the print. Almost all the clichés-verre go through elaborate multiple or partial printing to achieve varieties of color (in the color prints) or tones (in the black and white). Almost all of my clichés-verre have parts of photographs printed in areas on them.

CLICHÉ-VERRE (a French term meaning, literally, glass negative) is described by Helmut Gernsheim as follows: "Photography and painting are totally different media. The only legitimate combination of the two is cliché-verre, in which pictures drawn or painted on glass are copied on to photographic paper. It is a simple, accurate, and cheap method of multiplying in monochrome designs painted with semi-transparent varnish or oil paint, or scratched with an etching needle on an opaque coating such as sensitized collodion darkened by exposure to light".

Cliché-verre is closely connected with the discovery of the use of collodion for photographic purposes. Collodion is soluble guncotton dissolved in alcohol and ether resulting in an adhesive and was originally used as a dressing for wounds. It was introduced in the 1840s and - in 1851 - Frederick Scott Archer published his discovery that glass coated with collodion could be made the base for photographic negatives. After this, the production of cliché-verre was simple. The collodion-coated glass plate was employed, not for photographic purposes, but as a drawing surface, the artist using a sharp point to trace his composition. The collodion, scratched away, left the lines of the drawing revealed on the bare glass. When the plate was placed over light-sensitive paper and exposed to light, the light penetrated the bared lines on the surface and the image was registered on the paper, as in printing from a photographic negative. The paper was then removed, developed, and fixed, so that the composition would not disappear when further exposed to light.

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The only disadvantage of this was that dry collodion was extremely brittle; it broke, crumbled, and flaked under the action of the needle. A remedy was found by coating the glass with printer's ink and covering it with powdered white lead, producing a pliable medium for drawing. Corot and the other artists who worked with cliché-verre produced many refinements. They painted the plates with oil paints, used wire brushes to achieve dotted effects, or drew with stumped pieces of wood, goose quills, and stiffened brushes. They printed for softer results by placing the ^{plate} which was drawn upon next the light, or interposed an extra plate of transparent glass between the original plate and the paper.

Cliché-verre enjoyed a brief popularity during the nineteenth century, then fell into disuse. Recently it has been revived.

Keith Smith's use of this medium and his innovations are described by him on an accompanying label.