



# ***Colour and Autolithography in the 20th Century***



Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University

An exhibition at  
Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections  
Monday 14th November 2005 – Friday 24th March 2006

The revival of lithography as a vibrant method of colour reproduction was an important trend in British book illustration between 1930 and 1960. Lithography provided a vivid and colourful respite from war economy book production before the full flowering of colour offset printing in the 1960s. Autolithography in particular was especially suited to colour book illustration and large-scale work for posters and prints.

## **Technique**

Lithography is a printing technique based on the principle that oil and water do not mix. The design is drawn on a flat surface (usually limestone or zinc) using a brush, pen or crayon to apply a greasy medium called *tusche*. The ink is then applied by rolling or 'rubbing up' with a rag. The ink adheres to the greasy area but is washed away from the rest of the plate. Paper is then applied to take up the design from the inked up area. Unfortunately for the artist the design has to be drawn in reverse as the printing process produces a mirror image of whatever is drawn.

Autolithography is a particular application of lithographic printing where the artist draws directly on to the lithographic stone or plate. No other hand or photographic technique is involved. The advantages of autolithography are many: the artist has control over the work and the spontaneity of the original drawing is not diminished by an intermediary copier; the artist benefits from a greater delicacy of tone, due to the planographic nature of the process, and great clarity of tone due to the unprinted background; printers save costs by not having to employ copiers or re-touchers.

A shortage of metals during the Second World War led to the invention of the Plasticowell (or Plastocowell) by the printing firm W.S. Cowell of Ipswich. This was a thin plastic sheet on which the artist would draw with pen, crayon or chalk. The sheets were cheap and portable and the artist could work the 'right' way round as the image would be transferred onto sensitised zinc in reverse, and then be printed the 'right' way round again. For colour work, separate sheets of drawings for each colour were successively superimposed.

## **Printers and Publishers**

A number of printers and publishers were important to the development of both the technique and popularity of autolithography in the twentieth century. A primary figure was Noel Carrington, Editor at *Country Life*. Carrington was introduced to autolithography by the artist Pearl Binder, who had a collection of autolithographed Russian picture books. Carrington used autolithography at his own publishing firm, Transatlantic Arts, and for *Country Life*. Most influential, and indeed most memorable, were Carrington's *Puffin Picture Books* published by Penguin and covering a range of informative and educational topics for children in a cheerful and inexpensive sixteen page format. These publications featured illustrations by artists such as Edward Bawden, S. R. Badmin, Kathleen Hale, James Holland, Arnrid Johnston and Alexander & Margaret Potter.

Autolithography was especially suited to large picture books for children. Allen and Unwin published the famous *Pere Castor* books, first produced in Paris in 1932, with lithographic illustrations. Other publishers included Frederick Muller (whose *Excursions into English Poetry* series used autolithography

extensively), Chatto and Windus, The Folio Society, Oxford University Press and Country Life.

Under the leadership of Harold Curwen and book designer Oliver Simon, the Curwen Press, London, did a great deal to promote the use of colour lithography in commercial and book illustration. Both Curwen and Simon were influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement and had strong associations with the London Art Schools. Also of great significance was the output of the Baynard Press, London. The company employed a number of remarkably skilled craftsmen such as Thomas Griffiths, lithography expert and author of some of the definitive works on the technique, including *The Rudiments of Lithography* (1946), and *The Technique of Colour Printing by Lithography* (1948).

Other important printers included W.S. Cowell who, in addition to printing many of the Picture Puffin books, also printed the innovative folded plates for Cassell's *Pantoscope* and *Panorama* series of natural history books, some being illustrated by the Manchester trained artist Paxton Chadwick. Chromoworks, London, printed a substantial number of artists' lithographs for display in Lyon's teashops. About half of these were autolithographed and the remainder were drawn on stone from the artists' original drawings by skilled trade lithographers. Jesse Broad and Co. of Manchester produced fine colour lithographic printing including works by the Manchester trained artist Leslie Wood.

## **The Art Schools**

The dissemination of autolithography as a technique to new generations of artists was an important factor in the growth of this method of reproduction in post World War II Britain. The method was explored by many students of illustration and printmaking, as seen in the Royal College of Art's 1950s journal *Ark*.

The Royal College of Art, Camberwell, Chelsea and the Central School were all extremely influential in the training of illustrators. Edwin La Dell as Head of Printmaking at the Royal College commented:

*In some quarters autolithography is fast becoming the new faith. There is a very strong belief in the superior quality of the autographic print as though the smell of ink from the artist's brush gives a flavour of the real thing.<sup>1</sup>*

At Manchester School of Art, Paul Keen, having trained at the Royal College, taught illustration from 1925–1959 and became Head of Department of Pictorial Design in 1940. Manchester students included Pearl Binder, Paxton Chadwick, Kathleen Hale and Leslie Wood.

## **Artists**

Harold Curwen, the Managing Director of the Curwen Press and a skilled artist himself, promoted the use of autolithography by talented young artists such as Edward Ardizzone, Barnett Freedman, Kathleen Hale, Clarke Hutton and Barbara Jones. Well known artists such as Henry Moore, John and Paul Nash and John Piper also worked with Curwen.

Barnett Freedman, the acknowledged master of the technique, created innovative and influential autolithographic works for many classic texts including *Lavengro*, *War and Peace*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Oliver Twist*, *Anna Karenina* and *Henry IV Part I*. Additionally, Freedman was engaged with the method of production in a more technical mode, supervising the printing of Chromowork's lithographs for the Lyon's teashops series.

Some of Freedman's most important works came out of his relationship with both the Baynard Press and the Curwen Press, particularly from Freedman's relationship with Thomas Griffiths, who taught him the techniques of

---

<sup>1</sup> La Dell, Edwin. 'Autolithography at the Royal College of Art', *The Penrose Annual*, vol 46 (1952), pp46 – 48.

autolithography at the beginning of his career. Baynard's printing of Freedman's illustrations for Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is considered one of the high points of book production of the period.

Kathleen Hale, famous for her Orlando the Marmalade Cat books, found colour lithography an excellent medium. When her publisher threatened to reduce the details in her books for reasons of cost, Hale, insisting that children enjoyed such detail, went to the printers W. S. Cowell to learn autolithography on Plasticowell sheets. Her *Orlando* work is a distinctive expression of the freedom an artist can find through the technique of autolithography.

Lynton Lamb was a prolific illustrator, working in a variety of media, but with a preference for autolithography, which he used, for example, in illustrating Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* As Head of Lithography at the Slade, and in undertaking additional teaching at the Royal College of Art, he was a significant force in introducing his preferred technique to new students.

## **Commercial Posters & School Prints**

The relative simplicity and cost effectiveness of lithography lent itself to the needs of commercial printing and in particular advertising. It was especially suited to the aspirational advertising of the 1930s and 1940s which sought not to aggressively promote a product but to sell a lifestyle. This was achieved through the employment of established artists to produce posters which were more like paintings than commercial hoardings. These posters are well illustrated by the promotional material produced for the Empire Marketing Board and Shell-Mex in the 1930s, and by the London Underground and Lyons teashops through the 1940s and 1950s. The ability to reproduce artworks inexpensively was successfully exploited by Brenda Rawnsley in the 1940s in her enterprise to commission original designs from artists, including Pablo Picasso and L.S. Lowry, to make reproductions for the edification of school children in the School Prints series.

**The method of lithography, particularly autolithography, bequeaths a distinctive aesthetic that has become synonymous with mid-twentieth century book illustration and advertising. Work executed in this manner differs greatly in the hands of the many artists who mastered the technique but the qualities of great clarity, complex tone and joyous colour, partnered with the important factor of the artist's direct authorship, are prominent in each work. It would seem that the boundaries of the technique provide the artist with constraints that, conversely, provide great freedom and 'truth' in image reproduction.**

---

Text by Gaye Smith © 2005 • Exhibition curated by Gaye Smith

### *Acknowledgements*

Our thanks go to Ruth Artmonsky, Eleanor Breuning, Peter Chadwick, Michael J. Chandler, Paul Clarke-Hutton, Vincent Freedman, Brian Johnson, Barbara Kane, Simon Lawrence, Griselda Lewis, John Miles, Connie Robertson, Ian Rogerson, Tanya Schmoller, Peyton Skipwith, Stephen Wikner, Elsie Wood, Penguin Books & Oxford University Press.



**Special Collections, Manchester Metropolitan University**  
Sir Kenneth Green Library, All Saints, Manchester M15 6BH

Telephone 0161 247 6107

E-mail [lib-spec-coll@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:lib-spec-coll@mmu.ac.uk)

[www.specialcollections.mmu.ac.uk](http://www.specialcollections.mmu.ac.uk)

Opening Hours: Monday to Friday, 10am – 4pm.