

The Mezzotint Process

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Etchings, Mezzotints & Illustrations



Coelacanth - Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2007

The history and preparation of the Mezzotint plate

Ludwig von Siegen, an amateur printmaker in the 17th Century, first invented mezzotint, or 'half tone process'. This was found to be especially useful for the reproduction of paintings; due to its ability to capture the subtlest gradations of tone from rich, velvety blacks to glowing highlights. The technique was perfected by Prince Rupert of the Palatinate, an accomplished artist and son of Frederick V of Bohemia and nephew of Charles I of England. He was able to travel freely throughout the European courts, thus meeting many continental artists. His many contacts with the royal court in England undoubtedly accelerated the reception of the mezzotint process enjoyed there. The mezzotint became popular, and was often referred to as 'The English Manner'.

Preparation of the Plate

Mezzotints are produced on copper plates. The entire surface of the plate is roughed with a tool, shaped like a wide chisel with a curved and serrated edge - the Mezzotint Rocker. By rocking the toothed edge backwards and forwards over the plate, a rough burr is cast up which holds the ink. Once this is completed, a drawing can be transferred onto the plate, using carbon paper. When printed, the textured ground reads as a uniform dark; the areas to be lightened are scraped and burnished - therefore, working from dark to light - a reverse technique to etching and engraving. Little can compare the Mezzotint in the richness of its blacks; it is unique among the intaglio printmaking processes. The preparation of the plate can take 15 hours or more before the artist can start work on the design, but the beautiful, soft velvety finish is so unique to the mezzotint process that it more than justifies the skill and patience involved. In the 18th Century, small boys were employed to 'rock' the plates up and the extreme tediousness of the work, combined with the poor pay and working conditions, sent many of the poor things into mental decline, hence the term "off one's rocker".



Winter Hare - Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2009



Armadillo - Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2011

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