

On Zinc

CIA and CMA collaborate on a printmaking project for the fall Gauguin exhibition



Artist Rebekah Wilhelm at work.

Photos by Rob Muller of the Cleveland Institute of Art except where noted.

Never heard of zincography? You are not alone. Coined in France in the 19th century, the term applies to a lithographic printmaking process that uses a zinc plate rather than the traditional stone slab or the now more common aluminum plate. Although zinc-plate lithography never gained the popularity in the United States that it enjoyed in Europe, the medium affords rich texture, subtlety of tone, and unique effects related to the way zinc oxidizes during the drawing process.

These qualities were deftly exploited by the French Post-Impressionist master Paul Gauguin. Printed on vivid canary yellow paper, the artist's stunning suite of 11 zincographs forms the focal point of the Cleveland Museum of Art's fall exhibition *Paul Gauguin: Paris, 1889*. This ambitious gathering of works explores penetrating themes and motifs in Gauguin's paintings, prints, and ceramic work from 1889 to the 1890s. As its centerpiece, the exhibition recreates an avant-garde show Gauguin organized at Monsieur Volpini's Café des Arts on the grounds of the 1889 Paris Exposition. This "off-Broadway" show featured Gauguin's zincographs, now dubbed his *Volpini Suite*.

An innovative Art Exploration Gallery at the conclusion of the Gauguin exhibition will explore the zincography process further and give visitors the chance to see an original zinc plate and corresponding print, as well as a short film documenting the step-by-step creation of a zinc-plate lithograph. Because Gauguin's zinc plates no longer survive and making a lithograph requires specialized tools, materials, and technical expertise, the CMA combined efforts with the Cleveland Institute of Art to realize this project.

Inspired by the prospect of rediscovering the zincographic process, Cleveland Institute of Art printmaking faculty Maggie Denk-Leigh and Karen Beckwith immediately recognized a tremendous learning opportunity for their students. Since the inception of this CMA-CIA partnership, Denk-Leigh, Beckwith, and eight printmaking majors have immersed themselves in the study of zincography to understand the zinc printing surface: the nuances of drawing on grained zinc, the tricky etching process whereby the image is set on the surface of the zinc, and the characteristic visual effects that result in the final printed zincograph. Their technical study, hands-on experimentation, and engagement with the imagery in Gauguin's *Volpini Suite* led the students to create their own zinc-plate lithographs inspired by Gauguin's prints. They are particularly fascinated by his images of peasant life, each responding differently to the artist's nostalgia for simpler times.



Wilhelm applies a wash to her drawing. Photo: Moyna Stanton



Karen Beckwith etches the plate.



Beckwith lines up the plate in the press. Photo: Moyna Stanton

TALK BY MOYNA STANTON
Technical Aspects of the "Volpini Suite"
Wednesday, November 18, 6:30. Moyna Stanton goes into detail about the zincographic process, paper making, and Gauguin's working methods. Free.

Last May, Rebekah Wilhelm, a 2009 graduate of the CIA, made her zinc-plate lithograph under the scrutiny of spectators in an atmosphere animated with the drama of lights and cameras; her print, plate, and the film documenting her process will be featured in the Art Exploration Gallery. Developing her composition in response to Gauguin's *Volpini* lithographs and old photographs of a peasant village recreated at the 1889 Paris Exposition, Wilhelm copied her original pencil drawing to the zinc plate via an interleaving paper dusted with powdery red chalk. This traditional technique transfers the drawing to the plate in the form of an easily visible red chalk outline, with the composition reversed so that the final print will show it in the original orientation.

Following the transferred red outline, Wilhelm drew her composition in a fluid line of tusche—the black-pigmented, grease-based liquid medium unique to lithography—and followed with three more tusche mixtures of varying grease content to lay in the washes. Playing with layering wet over partially dry and differing concentrations, she manipulated the tusche medium to increase the range of texture and tone.

Once dry, the plate was passed on to expert lithographer Karen Beckwith for etching, washing out, rolling up, and proofing the plate. In this technically critical stage the experience of a master printer is needed to process the image correctly and work up the surface to produce a good impression with the full range of tone and texture inherent in the image.

Gauguin's *Volpini Suite* has been a remarkable resource for the printmaking students, and their enthusiasm for making zinc-plate lithographs portends an exciting outcome for this CMA-CIA collaboration. As artists, they offer the museum their hands-on experience and creativity in understanding the art of zincography. In turn, in the Art Exploration Gallery, two hands-on activities will encourage visitors of all ages to connect with their own creativity: the first, a printmaking project, uses stamped images on bright yellow paper; the second inspires visitors to translate imagery from two to three dimensions in the same way that Gauguin used figures like the bather in paintings, prints, and ceramic sculpture. Visitors can take their work home or leave it on display in the gallery to extend the spirit of discovery and collaboration. 🍷



Maggie Denk-Leigh and Beckwith pull a proof.