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Made in the Shade

MEZZOTINTS TEMPT ARTISTS AND PRINT COLLECTORS TO THE DARK SIDE. BY SHEILA GIBSON STOODLEY

MEZZOTINT ALLOWS ARTISTS to portray the world in all its many shades of gray. The printmaking technique, invented in 1642, renders the infinite subtleties of the tones that lie between black and white in a manner ideal for reproducing oil paintings. "Most reproductive techniques until then relied on line," says Sheila O'Connell, assistant keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum. "Mezzotint allows smoother transitions between line and shade."

Mezzotint captured the chiaroscuro in Joseph Wright of Derby's Enlightenment-era masterwork, *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, as well as the shimmer of the gown that Anne, duchess of Cumberland, wore in a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds. "Mezzotint is not just tonal, it's textural," says Carol Wax, an American artist, lecturer, teacher and author of the 1990 book *The Mezzotint: History and Technique.* "You actually got an idea of how the paint was handled. It can replicate brush strokes—a good mezzotint will show you that."

The word "velvety" is not typically applied to prints, but mezzotints aren't typical prints; unlike engravings, etchings or woodcuts, they start out black and emerge into the light with each stroke of the printmaker's tools. Going from dark to light allows for rich, deep blacks that call to mind the sheen of the luxurious fabric. "A piece of silk velvet is composed of myriad upstanding fibers. When laid on a surface and seen from an angle, the surface glows. It's like a light phenomenon unto itself," says dealer Alan Stone of Hill-Stone in New York. "These same characteristics are on a mezzotint surface."

This velvety quality, which mezzotint collectors covet, is the scarce fruit of tedious labor. "To qualify for that description, the mezzotint has got to be a very early impression, before there's wear on the plate, and it must be in immaculate condition," says Christopher Mendez, a print dealer in London. "It's a very difficult thing to find." Copper is preferred for mezzotint plates because the soft metal yields nicely to the rocker, a chisel-like tool with precisely spaced teeth that the engraver literally "rocks" on the plate to raise burrs—a pattern of countless microscopic mountain ranges—over its entire surface. The peaks help give the print its rich appearance, and the valleys hold large amounts of ink. The engraver thoroughly works the plate with the rocker and stops when he reaches the point at which the plate would print completely black. Once prepared, the engraver scrapes and burnishes the surface to shape the image, bringing it forth from the darkness of its background.

The strength and the weakness of the mezzotint technique are one and the same: A plate's crispness lasts for a finite number of pressings. Even a supremely skilled 18th-century printer would have been lucky to pull more than 100 prints from a plate before its thousands of little peaks began to flatten, blunting its luster. The prints themselves

CRAIG MCPHERSON

Contemporary mezzotints, top: Craig McPherson, *Yankee Stadium at Night*, 1983

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are delicate and demand careful handling. "Mezzotint surfaces are far more fragile than other types of surfaces," says Stone. "Because almost the entire surface is worked, any kind of mishandling can leave a mezzotint in less than optimal condition. If you pass the back of a fingernail across the surface, you could leave a mark that could be seen in raking light, and even straight on."

The technique of mezzotint was invented by Ludwig von Siegen, a Dutchman who served as a *kammerjunker*, a sort of armed personal aide to nobles of the Holy Roman Empire, but two other men nurtured it in its infancy: Wallerant Vaillant and Prince Rupert of the Rhine. Vaillant, a French-born artist who assisted the prince in his printmaking before striking out on his own in the early 1660s, popularized mezzotint. He was also the first to heavily employ a device resembling a rocker. Though rocker patterns have been detected in areas of Von Siegen's first mezzotint—a 1642 portrait of his high-born patron, Amelia Elizabeth of Hesse—both he and the prince relied on roulettes, implements that look like tiny pizza cutters, to roughen their plates. There is no proof that Von Siegen and Prince Rupert ever met in person, but the intellectually curious half-English, half-Bohemian royal had access to Von Siegen's prints, one of which portrayed the prince's mother, Elizabeth of Bohemia. Prince Rupert created his own mezzotints and experimented with tools for laying backgrounds on copper plates, but his big contribution was introducing the technique to England. This happened when a print collector, John Evelyn, included a mezzotint of his in the 1662 book *Sculptura*.

Never mind that mezzotint came from the Netherlands and somehow acquired an Italian name along the way (which literally translates as "half-dye"); England embraced it so intensely that the French dubbed it *la manière anglaise*. Mezzotint's golden age stretched from the mid-18th century into the early 19th century, and it took place on Eng-

Valentine Green, after Sir Joshua Reynolds, ***Lady Jane Halliday*.**

HILL-STONE, INC

lish soil. "A big part of it was economic," says Gillian Forrester, curator of prints and drawings at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Conn. "Line engravings were very labor-intensive and expensive to produce, but mezzotint was faster and less expensive. It also coincided with the rise of the bourgeoisie, which wanted to collect art on a smaller budget than that of the aristocrats, who bought paintings."

Wax adds that at the time mezzotint arrived in the country, "there was no rich tradition of line engraving in England to resist mezzotint. Also, there was no tradition of history painting in England. They didn't have a Royal Academy or a painting school," she says. "Art really was not quite as advanced in England as it was on the continent. Who would pay for history paintings? No one. It was market-driven."

Original mezzotints are not unheard of—Thomas Frye engraved two influential series in the early 1760s based on his own sketches of models and theatergoers—but demand for them was low. "That's not what the market was after," says Wax. "They wanted works by famous painters." No famous painter grasped the power of the mezzotint more keenly than Sir Joshua Reynolds, but his interest went beyond aesthetics. "He was pretty good at self-promotion, in a subtle way," says Christopher Lennox-Boyd, a British collector and occasional dealer who has amassed more than 25,000 mezzotints since the late 1960s. "I think he was aware of what the medium could do for him."

The surest means for an 18th-century artist to promote himself was to permit an engraver to reproduce his latest painting, as Reynolds was well aware. Of James McArdell, a brilliant mezzotinter who translated his portrait of Lady Charlotte Fitzwilliam in 1754, he said, "By this man I shall be immortalized." This proved only partly true, however, for Reynolds cultivated relationships with several leading engravers. "He was very savvy about who he affiliated with," Wax says, adding that Reynolds painted portrait sitters with engravers' needs in mind: "He would alter clothing and hairstyle so they would reproduce better as a mezzotint."

Other artists were less cunning, but virtually none handed their paintings over to an engraver and stayed away until the mezzotint was nearly finished. "It was a collaboration. It was never done at arm's length," says Stone. "It would be death to an artist's reputation to allow a mezzotint to be issued under his name that was not of the highest quality. I would be thunderstruck if Joseph Wright of Derby didn't oversee the production of his images where possible."

These collaborations sometimes provide a window on how great artists worked. Progress proofs reveal how a mezzotint image evolved to its final form with the guidance of the original artist, who would review them and make suggestions to the engraver. "You can see the artist's mind at work, working on the composition, and working on light and shade. Normally, that's invisible to us. We see the finished oil painting or watercolor, and we can't

From top: Charles Turner, after J.M.W. Turner, *A Shipwreck*, 1806, mezzotint with graphite and watercolor; a reproduction by James McArdell of Anthony van Dyck's *Time Clipping the Wings of Love*, circa 1750.

reconstruct the steps," says Forrester of the Yale Center, which possesses a few progress proofs from David Lucas' 1832 mezzotint of John Constable's *Hadleigh Castle* as well as the original 1829 painting. "With progress proofs, we get a sense of how their creative process worked." Progress proofs from J.M.W. Turner's *Liber Studiorum* series of landscape mezzotints, which he produced with a string of engravers from 1807 to 1819, are especially informative. "Turner, in particular, didn't want to divulge how he worked," Forrester says. "He had no apprentices, no studio assistants and he was quite private. But with a run of progress proofs from *Liber Studiorum*, with instructions to the engraver, you can see what he was trying to achieve."

Progress proofs are, naturally, less abundant than other mezzotints, but they are available. Stone currently has two from Lucas' mezzotint of Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral* that he found separately and intends to offer together for around $25,000 at the International Fine Print Dealers Association fair in New York this month (see page 32). "They're so instructive in terms of the working method," says Stone. "At a moment's glance you can see substantial differences. That's what makes them so interesting."

The 19th century welcomed photography, lithography and other innovations that eventually displaced mezzotint as the medium of choice for art reproduction, but it brought another change worth mentioning: steel plates, which mezzotint engravers began experimenting with around 1819. Steel plates lasted longer than copper but did not yield as well to the rocker, producing a shallower background that could not deliver the characteristic blacks. Many dealers of fine antique prints carry few mezzotints produced after Lucas teamed with Constable in the late 1820s and '30s on the series *English Landscape Scenery*, inspired by *Liber Studiorum*. Today's mezzotints benefit from the best of both worlds; artists engrave on copper, and upon finalizing their images, the plates are faced in steel in a process similar to electroplating.

Even after the mezzotint ceded its reproductive role, collectors continued to pursue the prints. In 1970 Paul Mellon purchased Pierpont Morgan's collection of mezzotints and ultimately gave it to the Yale Center. Lennox-Boyd sold 118 mezzotints from his extensive holdings to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 2001, offered more at Christie's in London in 2008 and earlier this year, and is currently negotiating the sale of 7,500 mezzotints to the British Museum for £1.25 million ($2 million).

After the heyday of the mezzotint, a different breed of artists took up the rocker to make original works. Inevitably, some were English, such as Sir Frank Short, who was active in the latter half of the 19th century, but the medium escaped the bounds of Britain for good. In the 1950s and '60s, Mario Avati, a Parisian of Italian descent, and Yozo Hamaguchi of Japan explored mezzotint to great effect with still-life subjects. Chuck Close tried his hand with the 1972 mezzotint portrait *Keith*. New York artist Craig McPherson gained fame with his technically complex 1983 mezzotint, *Yankee Stadium at Night*, in which the ballpark glows like a beacon in a landscape of black. Even M.C. Escher did a few.

Contemporary mezzotint artists have

Counterclockwise from top: Translating John Constable's 1829 oil painting *Hadleigh Castle* into mezzotint took time; progress proofs from 1830 and 1832 reveal that Constable asked David Lucas to lighten the landscape and render the sky more subtly.

Auspicious beginnings: The first mezzotint, from 1642, Ludwig von Siegen's portrait of Amelia Elizabeth, Landgravine of Hesse.

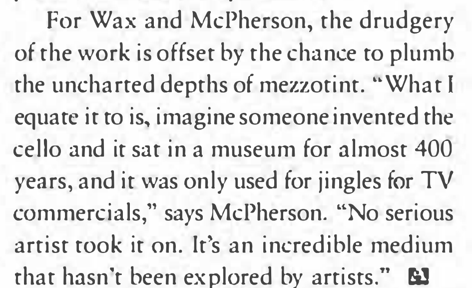
CHRISTOPHER MENDEZ, LONDON, UK

certain personality traits in common, according to Sam Davidson of Davidson Galleries in Seattle, which carries antique and contemporary mezzotints. "They're fairly meticulous and detail-driven," he says, adding that the appeal of mezzotint to artists has to do with the fact that "you're nursing the image out of shadow. You have the possibility of any value, from deep black to almost full white. It allows someone who likes to be totally in control to develop the image values to explore that fully."

Wax learned about mezzotint in the late 1970s and liked it so much that she taught herself the technique. "It appealed to me because my way of drawing was to sculpt lighter tones out of darkness," she says. "I took to it immediately, like a duck to water." Davidson, who carries prints by Wax, says that she and McPherson are unusual among their peers for not working solely in mezzotint. In fact, they follow the tradition of earlier artists such as George Stubbs and John Martin in translating their works in other media into mezzotint. McPherson, a self-taught mezzotint engraver who also draws, paints and works in pastels, says he renders his images in at least two other formats first. "In a way, the mezzotint is a distillation," he says.

Interestingly, neither Wax nor McPherson has engraved straightforward portraits, a favorite subject of collectors and artists in mezzotint's golden age. Human figures appear in some of McPherson's urban and industrial nightscapes, but they never claim center stage. Wax's mezzotints tend to focus on typewriters, sewing machines, fans and other metallic objects; she did make two small figurative plates that she liked but never found the time to print. "When I did lithography, I concentrated on portrait work," she says. "I just don't do that kind of work now." Davidson observes that most mezzotint artists he knows aren't interested in Reynolds-style portraiture. "I think the need was different then. With photography, there was less need for portrait painting," he says, adding, "The figurative work in contemporary mezzotint is not portraiture at all."

Both Wax and McPherson rock their own plates by hand. McPherson, who has been readying plates for several upcoming mezzotints, cannot sustain his rocking style for more than three hours a day. "It's incredibly hard on my shoulder and elbow," he says. "I've spent almost 18 months just rocking." Wax deems herself "pretty efficient," covering an 18- by 24-inch piece of copper in 50 to 80 hours, and stresses the importance of proper form in her mezzotint classes: "If you have the right technique, you should not hurt yourself."



For Wax and McPherson, the drudgery of the work is offset by the chance to plumb the uncharted depths of mezzotint. "What I equate it to is, imagine someone invented the cello and it sat in a museum for almost 400 years, and it was only used for jingles for TV commercials," says McPherson. "No serious artist took it on. It's an incredible medium that hasn't been explored by artists." A&A

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