

Hanging out in a castle: A print residency at Two Cents Press in Serrazano, Italy

By Shealagh Pope

I often have wondered what it would be like to spend time printmaking away from the day-to-day press of errands, house maintenance, and family obligations. Even with my own print studio, I sometimes find it hard to focus or to carve out long-enough blocks of time to really settle into a project. And I am always keen to learn new techniques and see how others approach the practice of printmaking.

In early May, my husband, Colin Smith, and I ran the experiment for a glorious week at [Two Cents Press](#) in Tuscany in Italy. I had learned about Two Cents from a posting by [Res Artis](#), a network of arts residencies. Two Cents Press was print heaven.

[Franco Marinai](#) runs Two Cents. He is a man of many talents and interests who has focused, of late, on photogravure on copper plates. He is fully set up for intaglio and also has a separate letterpress studio with several large presses and a huge collection of typefaces. And, if you want to bring your own tools, you are free to explore other processes. A print residency at Two Cents can support both self-directed work and also [hands-on teaching](#) by Franco.

Colin is a photographer, so learning copperplate photogravure seemed a possibility for combining our two practices. Photogravure, we learned as we started to do our research on the process, is not for the faint of heart. Apparently, Ansel Adams, the renowned landscape photographer, once said that photogravure was a beautiful technique, but he would not recommend that anyone do it. (See below for more details on the process.)

We signed up for five days of printmaking, including three days of dedicated photogravure instruction by Franco. The [print studios](#) and the [accommodation](#) are all located in the former castle of the original landholders of the small hill-top town of Serrazano. All are spacious and beautifully appointed. There were prints everywhere – by Franco, former residents, and artists Franco has collected. And so many books on printmaking. I could have spent the week just reading! The accommodation and studio rates were extremely reasonable – especially for Tuscany in peak tourism season. We were joined by one more artist, a young woman from Shanghai who wanted to learn printmaking as she developed her photography practice. Nishi and Franco ended up also collaborating on a small book project as part of Franco's ongoing series of letterpress books called "[Mah!](#)" (Mah! is a Italian expression with multiple meanings, but principally it is used to express skepticism or doubt. Colin and I think further study abroad will be required to fully master the use of this phrase!)



Colin on the Two Cents patio



Franco etching a copper photogravure plate

Colin and I had brought 2-3 photos each that we thought might work for photogravure. France created positives by digitally printing them onto transparencies – after some tuning to increase their suitability for photogravure. Then we worked with Franco to transfer the photos, using UV light, onto a photosensitive gel medium that we had applied to the copper plates. Dusted with rosin, each plate then went into the etching sequence. It took about 30-40 minutes to etch each image. And we learned that even with a calibration guide to track how the etching is going, it is as much experience as science to know when to shift between the different acid levels to optimize the desired balance between the deep blacks, the grays, and the highlights. In the end, Franco was not that pleased with the plates, and so we also made photopolymer plates of the same images. Photopolymer gravure is a much simpler process that, to the purists, does not give as refined an image as copperplate photogravure. However, it is a process that Colin and I could see doing back in Ottawa, whereas the set

up for copperplate photogravure is beyond us. So, we were grateful to Franco for showing us this second process.

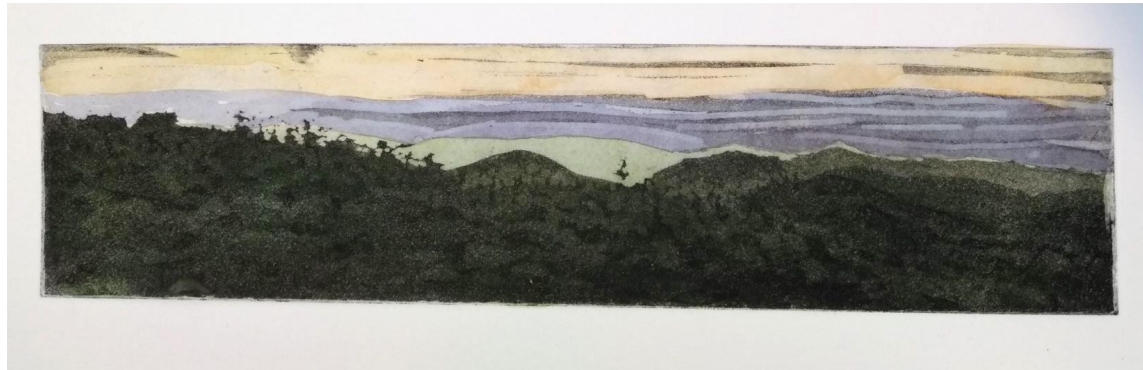
Inking and printing the plates involved a lot of new learning for me – setting the press less than I was used to, getting the thickness of the ink just right (thinner than I thought), warming the plate after the ink was applied (but letting it cool before wiping with the tarlatan), wiping the inked plate with the pad of your hand to really pull out the highlights, using magnets to register the paper on the press bed so that the paper is in position before you deal with the inky plate. Printing photogravures to actually realize all the lovely continuous tone is no easy feat. I can see lots of practice ahead (once our plates, which we mailed home from Italy, arrive). And one of the books I stumbled across, of the hundreds in Franco's collection, was "The Magical Secrets about Chine Collé" from Crown Point Press which highlights gampi as the ideal paper for capturing the fine detail of photogravure plates. (I foresee a purchase from the Japanese Paper Place in my future.)



Colin and I setting up to print on one of the etching presses

Since there are wait times for photogravure (in between innumerable heart-stopping steps), I also aquatinted a little off-cut strip of copper to make a long landscape view of the Tuscan hills

as seen from the patio just outside the yellow studio door using a purple Sharpie marker as the resist. (Did anyone else watch Harold and his Purple Crayon as a child? That purple.) Then I added some tints with watercolours.



It was an intense five days full of learning, laughter, frustration, and excitement. I highly recommend the experience. Franco and his wife Anna were so welcoming. We felt right at home as soon as we arrived. Learning how to use the moka to make coffee in the morning and our regular walk down the hill to get groceries were added bonuses. (Zucchini flowers are so not available in the grocery stores in small towns in Ontario.) For more information, check out the Two Cents Press [website](#) or [Instagram account](#). And feel free to reach out if you have any questions (kipiwa@gmail.com).



Photogravure

Photogravure was one of the first processes invented to print photographs, but was abandoned commercially as being too complicated once faster and simpler processes came along. However, in the late 20th century, there was a resurgence of interest in photogravure among fine art printers and photographers for its capacity to produce deep, velvety blacks and continuous graytones. This continuous tonality distinguishes photogravure from most other printing processes for photography that rely on half tone screens that, viewed closely, result in a pattern of dots that simulate gray tones. Lothar Osterburg gives an [overview](#) of the process (and turns out to have been the person who taught Franco at Two Cents!).

A gel emulsion is applied to a cleaned copper plate. A positive of the image digitally printed on a transparency is used to transfer the image to the gel emulsion. It is made light sensitive by being placed in a bath of potassium dichromate. A sandwich is made of the plate, with the adhered

and sensitized gel emulsion, and the transparency which is then exposed to UV light. The light sensitive gelatin hardens under the influence of ultraviolet light gradually, in proportion of the amount of the light it receives. The gel emulsion is then washed in water to harden it and also wash away the less-exposed sections. The remaining gelatin leaves a negative relief of the image on the plate which acts as the etching resist.

After time to harden, the plate is dusted with very fine rosin powder which is then melted - carefully! – on a hot plate. (This was the first time I had used rosin powder to produce the tonality on an etching plate. (At the Ottawa School of Art, spray paint is used.) It is an challenging process to get the rosin coverage just right and then melt it just so to adhere to the copper plate.) The tonality and range from the deepest shadows to the brightest highlights is achieved by gradually etching the copper plate in a sequence of progressively lower acidity solutions of ferric chloride – upwards of 7-8 different solutions. The lower acidity solutions have more water which dissolve the gel emulsion gradually exposing more of the copper to the etching solution. A calibration scale (the Stouffer scale) is used to assess when to move the plate between the different acid solutions. The timing and sequencing depend on the



Franco rinsing the final etch off a photogravure plate

original photo and what the printmaker wants to emphasize in the image. Plus lots of experience and some luck. At the beginning, when the darkest tones are being etched, the calibration scale works fairly well for signally when to change solutions. For the mid to lighter tones, experience comes increasingly into play.

Once the etch is completed, the plate is washed in water to take off any last gel emulsion, the rosin is removed, and the plate is cleaned and trimmed in preparation for inking and printing.



My first photogravure plate. Photo by Franco Marinai