Printmaking- New Definitions

(first published on printmaker.co.uk - 1995)

Printmaking as an art form is difficult to define because there has always been a point of contention with the recurring argument over what constitutes an original print and what does not . This controversy has been further exacerbated with the introduction of digital printing processes - which now have become, for many , fundamental components of the printing process. The introduction of new technology is for some, a point of convergence and - for those who hang on to only traditional printmaking methods - a dividing line.
For me, the definitions supplied up until now are all starting to wear thin. How can we clearly differentiate between a reproduction and an original print? How can we stipulate the importance of the printing process used or how much the artist was physically involved in the rendering of a print? We cannot. However, we can be moved by what an image can provide and then, by discovering how it was produced, enjoy it that much more.
Apart from the economical advantages of producing a print as a multiple, why should an artist wish to use printing as a medium? Maybe it is the desire to communicate ideas and the enthralling nature of the mechanics of different processes and the manipulation of imagery that provides the impetus. I think this has always been the crux of the matter for deciding whether a print is a an "original artist's print" or merely a reproduction.

I think we will find there will be much 'cross referencing' between the digital artist and the printmaker in the very near future because there are so many similarities in the way they work. The printmaking fraternity will have to accept the 'virtual print' . Many of the virtual tools used in computer graphics programs are very similar to the real tools used by printmakers to make the most out of a given printing process. There are limitations in computer drawing packages that require inventiveness on the part of the artist if certain mark making effects are to be achieved just like the limitations to be found in various printing processes. Perhaps it could be said that the computer artist has finished their work at the pre-press stage whereas the printmaker does all the work at the press but even this argument falls down. One only has to look at the brilliant works that have been created on copiers and computer printing machines being used in an unorthadox way. I think however that the 'Virtual Image' is already here and if we want it to 'see the light of day' or capture it, printing processes will be used.