

GRAPHIC ART OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649320202

Graphic Art of Czechoslovakia by Henry J. John & Ladislav Urban

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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HENRY J. JOHN & LADISLAV URBAN

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EXHIBITION OF PRINTS FROM THE PRIVATE
COLLECTION

OF

HENRY J. JOHN, M. D.

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART
CLEVELAND, OHIO, U. S. A.

1922

INTRODUCTION
and
BIOGRAPHICAL DATA
by
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Perhaps many lovers of graphic art, who have had no opportunity closely to study this subject, wonder what the various terms, common to print-collectors and graphic artists, mean, such as *etching*, *dry-point*, *aquatint*, *line-engraving*, *stipple-engraving*, *mezzotint-engraving*, *woodcut*, *lithography* and *colour-print*. The following is a brief attempt to explain these various terms.

The word *etch* is of Teutonic origin and it means *to eat* or *to bite*. Hence comes the word *etching*, the process of which is as follows: The etcher takes a copper-plate, polished on one side and covered with a thin coating of the so called *etching-ground*, a compound of asphaltum, resin, and wax. The etching-ground is then blackened with smoke and the artist draws his subject by means of a special needle, cutting lines through the film of the etching-ground to the surface of the copper-plate. Having his design completed he immerses the plate in a bath of acid which immediately attacks the naked metal. The heavier and darker lines need, of course, a longer exposure to the acid biting than lines of finer and more delicate character. The copper-plate, with the picture "eaten in", is then thoroughly cleaned and goes to the printing press. The printing of etchings is an art in itself requiring a considerable skill and is generally done by the etchers themselves.

The technique of *stipple-engraving* is very much like that of an etching, only that here the artist produces the various effects of light and shade by grouping the dots, eliminating from his picture entirely the drawing of lines.

When the artist with a needle scratches his design directly into the copper-plate without first laying the etching-ground and without using the acid we call this the *dry-point* technique, which is closely related to the *line-engraving*.

In *mezzotint* the well polished surface of the copper-plate is roughened by means of a toothed tool called a *rock*, which makes small hollows or dents in the metal. The imprint from such a grounded plate would be perfectly black. The artist has to scrape the ground to smooth out the rough places in the form of his subject and thus produce a mezzotint.

The *aquatint* is a process in which finely-powdered resin is dispersed over the copper-plate. By heating the plate to a certain degree the resin is melted and baked upon the metal, forming grains finer or coarser according to the finess or coarseness of the powder used. Thus acid may etch only between the grains of resin producing that peculiar effect which this method suggests in its name.

In the technique of *soft ground* (*vernis mou*) one uses a soft, greasy ground, the principle part of which is a fat that does not harden. On a plate which is covered by this ground, the etcher places tissue or other paper of a distinctive texture or a piece of silk which, by means of a roller, he presses down lightly. With soft or hard pencils he draws upon this paper or silk, which, in the places where he makes his marks, adheres more or less firmly to the plate. In removing this paper or silk covering, the etching-

ground is lifted with it in those places where lines have been drawn, baring the plate correspondingly while the rest of the etching-ground remains. The lines of a soft-ground show the texture of the superimposed material and have uneven edges.

A *colour-etching* is produced by the imprint from several plates, usually three in number, each plate being made just for a single color, or else from a single plate on which the different colored areas are inked in with brushes or stamps.

The art of *wood-engraving* or *woodcutting* consists in transferring the design to a woodblock and then employing the knife and gravers to cut and dig away the wood between the lines. The wood that is left untouched, prints. Thus wood-cutting and wood-engraving is the opposite of etching; in the former the lines rise from the ground (surface printing), while in the latter the lines are incised, etched into the plate, sunk below its surface (intaglio printing).

Lithography, or writing on stone, is a method of reproduction by which a drawing is printed from a slab of limestone. The printing surface is neither in relief nor sunk, as the process rests solely upon the mutually repelling reaction of grease and water. The drawing is done with a special ink or crayon, the greasy substance of which is readily absorbed by the porous stone, and all such places will repulse water while the rest of the surface will take it freely. The drawing will take the oily printers ink, but the moistened parts of the stone will repel it. Lithography was invented in 1796 by a Bohemian, *Alois Senefelder*, who was born in Prague on November 6, 1771.

ALEX, Adolf, J., (1890 —) is the pseudonym of Adolf Jelínek, born in Strmilov, Czechoslovakia. He was a pupil of Max Švabinský and, at one time, was a student at the Munich Academy of Arts. For subject matters he is concerned chiefly with the dramatic representations of characters. His prints, depicting life in the Army and Gypsy camps, are full of vitality and atmosphere.

BÍLEK, František, (1872 —) born in Chýnov, Czechoslovakia, is one of the foremost sculptors and woodcarvers of that country. After having completed his studies at the Prague Academy of Arts he went to Paris where he drew inspiration from the vast treasures of art. His subjects are of religious, mystic, and symbolic character, and are quite often drawn from the glorious epoch of the Bohemian Reformation. Not finding time enough to create all his dreams in stone and wood he produced the following sets of prints: *The Prayers — Our Father — Building the Temple of the Future* — and *The Path*. We have also his wonderful interpretation of *Calvary* in woodcuts, originally a monumental series of woodcarvings. Of the book illustrations we name merely those which he prepared for the special editions of the poems of his friends, Julius Zeyer and Otokar Březina.

BOETTINGER, Hugo, (1880 —) born in Plzeň, Czechoslovakia, studied at the Prague Academy of Arts. Besides the oil paintings of allegorical subjects he devotes himself to caricature-drawings of prominent personalities.

BRAUNEROVA, Zdenka, (1862—) born in Prague, studied under Chittusi and later under Curtois in Paris. The artist is one of the first Czechoslovak etchers to treat her subjects in a modern style. Her prints depicting the picturesque corners of ancient Prague reveal the charms of a true etcher's method and vision.

ENGELMUELLER, Ferdinand, (1867—) who was born in Prague makes the centre of his interest the beauties of the plains along the river Labe. At times he wanders off to the Italian orchards or to the sombre City of Venice. A moody romanticism and a picturesqueness one can always find in all his plates.

KOBLIHA, František, (1877—) born in Prague where he studied at the Academy of Arts. To name the most important works of his we would mention the following: *Vision - Prague - Toward Morning - The Revengeful Melody - The Woman - Tristan - May - Moonlight Nights - Don Quixote* - and *Bookplates*.

KONŮPEK, Jan, (1883—) was born in Mladá Boleslav, Czechoslovakia. An artistic education was given to him at the Prague Academy of Arts. At present he is a professor of drawing at the State School of Crafts in Plzeň. The two volumes of *Western Bohemia's Barocco*, *The Hymns of the Night*, Etchings for Shakespeare's Hamlet, for Zorilla's Don Juan, for Erben's Boquet, and for Dante's Inferno deserve special attention. He illustrated also a number of books.

KUPKA, František, (1871—) born in Dobruška, Czechoslovakia, resides in Paris where he won fame as a painter and

artist of a high culture. One of the first graphic plates of his is the composition known under the name "*Les Fous*", in which he satirized the historical and social movements. Further he illustrated "L'Homme et la Terre" of Elysée Reclus, "Érinnyes" of Leconte de Lisle, and "Lysistrata" of Aristophanes. A French publication came out in Paris by L. Arnould Grémilly entitled "Frank Kupka" with illustrations by the artist himself.

LAUDA, Richard, (1873—) born in Jistebnice, Czechoslovakia. Southern Bohemia's landscapes depicted in his set of prints called "From Southern Bohemia" deserve attention.

LOLEK, Stanislav, (1873—) born in Palonín, Czechoslovakia, has shown special interest in woodland scenery and animal life. He was a pupil of Julius Mařák in Prague.

MAJER, Antonín, (1882—) born in Prague, lived later in the northeastern part of Bohemia, where he devoted himself to depicting the scenic beauties of the country, especially those which can be found along the banks of the Jizera River. The artist is active in the realm of etching and woodcut.

MYSLBEK, Karel, (1874—1915) born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, was a son of the famous Czech sculptor Joseph Václav Myslbek. For his oil paintings and for his etchings he chose melancholy themes from the lives of the emigrants, the blind, the proletariat, and so forth. An untimely death during the World War prevented the fulfilment of his artistic intentions.