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Coloured copper-plate engraving – a very appealing collecting topic

[Der farbige kupferstich – ein reizvolles sammelgebiet]

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{This also includes a translation of the text under the bookplate illustrated within the article, although the bookplate is not related to the article}

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COLOURED COPPER-PLATE ENGRAVING –
A VERY APPEALING COLLECTING TOPIC

Unlike the graphic engraving techniques we have discussed in previous issues, the chromotype is not a special printing style, but merely a printing procedure that attempts to produce colour effects out of the graphics. Almost all chromotypes originated in the 18th Century, although their development started much earlier than that.

In the 15th Century, painters of miniatures made books that included copper-plate or woodcut engravings printed onto the page with heavy colours because the copper plates of that time were not suitable for chromotypes. At the time, the copper plates were only sparsely covered with lines. As a consequence, only coloured lines could be printed instead of coloured surfaces. In contrast, the colour woodcut, a relief printing method that could create surfaces, was already known at the beginning of the 16th Century.

By the 17th Century, etching had been combined with the woodcut to reveal a lightly-coloured effect. From the etched plate containing an outline drawing, a print was first made, on which one or two woodcut prints were added. The added woodcuts allowed the print to have various shades or tones.

The works of Hercules Seghers (17th Century) are regarded as precursors of the chromotype. He printed not only on paper, but also on canvas. The introduction of chromotypes with multiple plates is attributable to Jacob Christoph Leblon, born in 1667. On each page, he used three mezzotint (engraved) copper plates, each one containing blue, yellow or red, and which, when printed on top of each other, produced black.

Before we arrive at the unique particulars of the French and English colour print process, something should be said about the quality of a chromograph. A colour print that exactly reproduces the original must not be overloaded with colours. Above all the English, but also

the French, graphic artists and painters of the 18th Century, gave their pictures a special charm by using a swollen style – that is to say, a style of thickly-applied colours. Reproductions using copper-plates now made it possible to attain the softness of the colours in the original. For this reason, plates especially made for colour impressions would initially be used to make only single-colour prints (for example, in red, brown, black, purple and also in blue). The light wearing of the printing plate achieved thereby allowed the printer to better approximate the softness and the harmonic transitions of colour found in the original.

After a production run of about forty such colour prints, the copper plate was often re-used to print single-colour pages, since it was no longer usable for the production of high-value impressions. Through wear, the lines at times became so thin that no colour at all could stick in them anymore. The result was that the colours in a print made from such a worn plate no longer corresponded to those of the original.

However, in order to stretch profits further by making yet another edition of chromographs, the printer switched to darker colours instead of the original ones, thereby bringing out the finer details that had earlier been softened out. An observer possessing little knowledge of the subject will often take such a darker-toned example for a print of quality, because there is no other print at his disposal against which he may compare. Here, collectors have a duty to exchange experiences in order to help one another. With such solidarity in mind, please be aware that from many collectors' perspectives, only printed, not hand-coloured, chromographs are worthy of collection. At the very least, such a collection is controversial because a collection built up of these pieces must, for example, do without the English stencil art prints, since they are almost without exception partially [hand] coloured.

The French chromograph of the 18th Century has earned a special place among other prints in its genre by virtue of its selection of subjects such as scenes of courtliness and gallantry as well as its production technique, whose method employed multiple plates. The French painters availed themselves most often of their own techniques in producing chromographs: that is, they used the aquatint and chalk techniques. The aquatint worked within the print like a light, fluid Gouache. The colours have a wonderful luminosity. Colouring by hand is not required in these flawless prints. It was also not essential to put on yet another colour after printing, since the printer used a special copper plate for each colour. The French aquatint print as well as the chalk print, which likewise were created using multiple plates, are therefore pure chromographs. In order for the aquatint to achieve the previously-described matt colour effect that is found in the original, the colours had to contain more wax than oil. For light and burnished tones, the printer took up simple water colours to which were added a small amount of egg white, honey, or rubber for better colour-fastness.

The printing process, and above all, the repetitive passes of the pages onto the various colour plates, demanded great skill and practice. The printer also had to understand the properties of paper above all else. For example, the elasticity of humid paper especially had to be taken into account. Unlike the French aquatint chromograph, the English chromograph - in spite of its pastel-like character - has starker colours and is not composed in as charming a manner.

The French artists chose more gallant and courtly subjects for their prints than did the English. Where the French depicted nature scenes and scenes of people, they represented them in refined, unreal form. The English masters, on the other hand, created scenes of all the social classes, in a far more realistic conception. The English painters also differentiated themselves in their choice of presentation from the French, who favoured pastels, gouache,

chalk drawings and aquarelles. Oil paintings and miniatures of contemporary country folk served as the archetype in English chromographs. In order for the oil painting to represent colours as faithfully as possible, a large amount of oil was added to the colours, on the one hand, so that a strong impression was achieved. On the other hand, the English printers used the mezzotint process developed with such high mastery by the English graphic artists. This process was especially appropriate for conveying the velvety effect of oil paint in paintings.

A notable aspect of the English chromograph technique is that it used only a single plate. For the English copper-printer, therefore, the task of producing chromographs was significantly more difficult than for his French counterparts and their aquatint technique. He had to apply all the colours on one plate, which he then used as a presentation sketch-map. Using swabs, sponges and paint brushes, the printer swabbed and painted the colours anew on the plate after every impression. Only when the impression was made could the printer get an overall view of the cumulative colour effect of his work.

After the print was made, the colourist took over the further elaboration of the print. His task was to correct details that could not be executed - or that had been overlooked - by the printer.

In contrast to the large number of outstanding graphic artists that England and France produced in the 18th Century, only a few representatives of the chromographic art are known from among the German painters of the same period. At the time, Germany was going through the period of small-state absolutism that had such a hindering and corrosive effect on the development of art, as it did in all other areas of life.

Chromographs on stencilled copper plates would probably have developed further had they not been pushed aside by the arrival of another technique. This new technique was lithography, which was exceptionally well-suited for representing colours in print.

Exlibris – Frans Van Der Wee

In 1960, Issue 2, page 40, we created a New Year card with the Chess theme, in connection with the prospectus for the Chess Exposition held at that time, incorrectly describing it as a bookplate. Today we want to show our readers a true Chess bookplate. It is a woodcut from the Dutch graphic artist **Frans Van Der Wee**.

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