

The Colour Dry-points of David Milne

Dry-points are printed from metal plates on which lines have been scratched with a needle. The needle makes a very slight cut but throws up a frill or burr of metal as it moves along: a dry point line might be compared to a very narrow ditch with a high brush fence along it. It isn't the ditch, it's the fence that is important. When the plates are inked and the surplus buffed off with a rag or the hand, colour gathers along the burr as snow drifts along a fence, leaving a flat, polished surface of the plates clear. When they are printed on paper, one after another, you get a coloured dry point, with the characteristic dry point line and tint, both in colour. No matter how clear the unmarked surface of the plates may seem to be, there is always a slight film of colour, enough to print.

David B. Milne ¹

Copper or mild steel are two metals most suitable for dry-point production. One notable aspect of this method of image creation is that it will only serve to produce a limited number of consistent prints (fifteen to thirty) before the pressure of the press flattens the metal "burr" to a state where it will not properly hold the ink for printing. Longer print runs can be achieved by steel-facing the plate. However, the Milne print titled *The Painting Place* (1930-1931) (included in this exhibition) which the artist undertook as a commissioned project for the periodical *The Colophon: a book collector's quarterly* not only required steel-facing but the production of several plates to complete its 3000 plus print run. The artist normally would produce dry-point images with multiple colours, however for this work the number of colours was limited to two.

David Milne's inspiration to explore other mediums to support his painting helped to foster new considerations in his approach to his art-making. In his 1947 article about his production of images using the dry-point medium which was published in *Canadian Art* magazine, the artist states that he did not recall:

... what gave me the idea of experimenting with colour dry-points. I had never seen any or heard of any...All I know is that I had a plan worked out a year or two before I did anything about it. Then, one winter, when painting wasn't going well, anyway, I tried out my process...

...What I had in mind was exploration. Each print-making or painting process has possibilities of its own, not to be found in any other. Since the colour part of this process was a new one, I felt that I was starting out in unmapped country...

Milne adds that the resulting dry-point efforts provided *...blazes along the trail* by establishing a direction for working in this medium. From his initial production, the artist determined that a multiple plate process was the most suitable for his purpose. His experiments allowed him to arrive at his preferred selection of print paper, the use of Winsor and Newton oil colours as a substitute for printing ink and also helped determine the most suitable degree of dampening for his print paper which provided the best print impressions. Many of his dry-points were produced in different states as the artist worked towards realizing the most suitable solution with respect to achieving satisfactory results with the images he created.

In the final state, the prints may also include two hand-written numbers which appear below the image. The first indicates the sequence within the edition and the second indicates the edition size. Milne indicated that he experimented extensively. He preferred to produce prints in various states with no consistent edition. With the exception of the print commission for *The Colophon* which involved a large print run, his editioned prints were usually limited to only a few impressions.

¹ David B. Milne, *Canadian Art*, vol. IV, no. 4 [Summer 1947], p. 144-147