

Boundless Printmaking

The Schweizerische Graphische Gesellschaft

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Around 1900, a growing number of artists turned to printmaking as an autonomous form of expression independent of painting. The works that emerged from this development were referred to as original prints. Art collectors and museums began to see the need to actively support the graphic arts.

The Schweizerische Graphische Gesellschaft (SGG) [Swiss Graphic Arts Society] was founded in 1918 to promote printmaking as an art form and support the artists who practice it. To that end, it annually commissions artists to produce limited editions of an original print. Each of the 125 members of the SGG receives a print* as a gift, accompanied by a sheet explaining the technique and subject matter. At least two editions are distributed each year.

Paul Ganz (1872–1954), then the director of the Kunstmuseum, was the first president of the SGG. To this day, the Kunstmuseum continues to receive the first print of every annual edition. Other members include Swiss and international museums and private collectors.

A general assembly of the members of the SGG decides through a democratic process who will be awarded the annual commission in any given year. Any member can propose a candidate. The 278 editions produced since the founding of the SGG have continually pushed the technical, material, and thematic boundaries of printmaking.

Cabinet on the left:

The first annual editions were produced in 1918: a lithograph by Otto Baumberger (1889–1961) and an etching by Edouard Vallet (1876–1929). This choice illustrates two approaches

the SGG still takes to its patronage: For one, the society seeks to strike a balance between emerging and established artists—as exemplified by awarding the commission simultaneously to both the young Baumberger and the renowned Vallet.

For another, the SGG promotes a variety of aesthetic perspectives. While Valet's sheet is still reminiscent of the Art Nouveau style from around 1900, Baumberger moves toward Expressionism with his reduced, geometric formal vocabulary that foregrounds subjective expression.

With the selection of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) and Paul Klee (1879–1940), in 1926 and 1928 respectively, the SGG already began to commission artists who were not Swiss nationals. Both artists, however, had a connection to Switzerland: Paul Klee grew up in Bern and Kirchner spent many years in Davos. It was not until 1957 that the language of the SGG's statutes was changed from promoting "Swiss" to "predominantly Swiss" original prints. International artists without any connection to Switzerland who would later receive commissions include Sam Francis (1923–1994) and Eduardo Chillida (1924–2002).

In 1923, Alice Bailly (1872–1938) became the first female artist to produce a print for the SGG. However, female artists remained the exception among annual commissions until the 1990s. Bailly's print also long remained the only one to be printed in color.

The first purely abstract print appeared in 1942 in the edition by Walter Bodmer (1903–1973). By the 1950s, abstraction had become the dominant form of artistic expression. Color

also began to play an increasingly prominent role during this period. The annual editions were becoming more experimental and conceptual, and tended to explore new printmaking techniques.

Such innovation is evident, for instance, in the 1950 annual edition in which Léo Maillet (1901–1990) combines linocut and iris print processes. Or in 1969, when Jean Edouard Augsburger (1925–2008) produced a relief etching, this makes the print three-dimensional. A relief effect also appears in the woodcut by Chillida in the 1980 edition.

In 1988, the annual editions find their way back to a renewed sense of figuration with a work by Klaudia Schifferle (* 1955), although the print remains partly abstract: it is only upon close inspection that a fragmented body can be discerned on the sheet.

Cabinet on the right:

The experiments that began in the second half of the 20th century continued into the 2000s. The annual editions of the past 30 years have been characterized by figuration and engagement with new techniques, as well as with political and socially critical themes.

In 1997, Hervé Graumann (* 1963) explored new digital media. He printed identical grids designed on a computer using an inkjet printer. Only when the individual prints are then treated with water does each sheet become a one-of-a-kind piece. The work straddles the line between a mass-produced item and a unique original.

Christiane Baumgartner (* 1967) transforms in her series *Illumination* film sequences into woodcuts. She used a raster grid to introduce a blurry effect into the work. This effect nearly obscures the source image, which shows bombs being dropped in World War II (1939–1945). Petrit Halilaj (* 1986), too, takes up the theme of culture of remembrance by

combining doodles made by children during the Kosovo War (1998–1999) with an innocuous image of Central Park in New York City.

Ulla von Brandenburg (* 1974), Shirana Shahbazi (* 1974) and Laure Marville (* 1990) place women at the center of their works. In Marville's linocut, the figure "Nora" is placed at a crossroads in Geneva near the site where they used to execute witches. Turning this public space to her own purposes, Nora embodies the liberated woman of today, who sees witchcraft as a form of empowerment.

Certain annual editions encourage interactive engagement. Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985) created an endless calendar that is meant to be turned over every day. Daniel Gustav Cramer (* 1975) made a book.

Some artists have experimented with the supports as well—for instance, printing on (Plexi-)glas (Ugo Rondinone, * 1962, DAS INSTITUT, founded 2007) or leather (Manon Wertenbroek, * 1991). For *Black Sun*, Sandrine Pelletier (* 1976) used a brass and copper plate with traces of etching acid and printing ink, which allude to the printmaking process. These works skillfully push the boundaries of "graphic arts" as a concept. The artistic process is likewise a theme for Didier Rittener (* 1969), whose work addresses the notion of failure (French, *rater*). The large-format edition by the artist Omar Ba (* 1977) depicts a child floating in a life preserver on a river of flowers and the blue of the flag of the United Nations (UN)—a reminder of the responsibility under international human rights law to protect children.

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the SGG's founding in 2018, a catalog containing all the annual editions to that point and with essays on the history of the society was published. The publication can be purchased in the museum giftshop.

*Explanations of the technical terms used in the graphic arts are available in German in Karin Althaus's book *Druckgrafik*, which can be viewed in the exhibition.