

Printmaking: an artistic medium blending the old and the new

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Printmaking is one of the most exciting arenas of worldwide artistic advances, as breakthroughs in technology and ancient traditions are combined to create a harmonious artistic medium that blends the old and new. Printmakers are known not just for their unique artistic focus, but also for the way that they push the boundaries of the medium, using new techniques and tools to create increasingly powerful images. Born at the beginning of the 20th century, Prentiss Taylor was one such artist who was able to create works spanning the full breadth of printmaking's evolution.

His emotionally charged and technically powerful works are inspirational to viewers and artists even today. Prentiss Taylor was one of many artists to come out of the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural awakening in the United States that saw African American visual art to gain in prominence. Taylor became famous as an illustrator, creating lithographs that were used to illustrate the works of Langston Hughes, the most famous African American author of his generation.

Taylor considered himself a surrealist, creating compositions that blended the natural with the synthetic in order to create improbably dreamscapes. His most popular compositions were of the American South, using his regional knowledge as well as his penchant for expressiveness to create eerily familiar lithographs that still seemed alien and otherworldly. Following in a tradition of self-exploration by photographers and printmakers, Taylor used the latter half of his career to create a series of autobiographical lithographs which kept the surreal narrative style of his earlier works.

He also began to turn his lens onto aspects of the American culture that he believed needed his attention, especially as his frustration with the slow progress of African American civil rights began to draw his attention to more political lithographs. The following two works are typical of Taylor's catalogue, although the breadth of his work is so large that it is nearly impossible to completely sum up his artistic works with only a few analyses. "Towards Santa Fe" is one of the most interesting of Taylor's many explorations of the Southern landscape. (Henning, 1942) The lithograph is roughly bifurcated into light and dark zones across the horizon of the print, with the foreground of the picture being more realistic and natural, and the background of the print dark, surreal, and stormy. The print was made in the latter half of Taylor's career, and it shows his willingness to experiment with lithotint. The sky is formed with the realistic clouds but also dark lateral and diagonal tinted shading that add darkness to the image while also producing a sensation of movement deep within the print.

The print appears to have been hand tinted after having been set and the editioning of the prints was controlled by a publisher rather than directly by the artist. In a completely different style, "Morelia Aqueduct" is one of the most surreal of all the lithographs that Taylor created. (Lee, 1980) According to notation included with the print, the editioning was limited to only 35 prints, of which all were hand signed in pencil by the artist. The lithograph was created on wove paper, and it used a much darker ink than the previous lithograph discussed.

The subject was a famous aqueduct from Mexico, although the inclusion of living figures in the foreground throws the sense of scale out of balance, making it appear as though the aqueduct is much larger than realistic. The printmaking technique of Prentiss Taylor evolved a great deal throughout his career, as his printmaking spanned nearly half of a century. The impressions that Taylor made were created by using the transferring of ink through a matrix made out of aluminum, typical of lithographers of the time.

After Taylor would draw an image, he would use gum Arabic to create a chemical reaction on an image that he drew on limestone. Next, Taylor used turpentine to remove the excess of the drawing material, and he printed with an ink (drying ink) made primarily of linseed oil and varnish with a small amount of pigment. Prentiss Taylor rarely used multicolor lithographs, but he experimented a great deal with the use of chromolithography by using different stones for each color, effectively using multiple presses in order to create his compositions in layers.

This would explain why the color lithographs that Taylor attempted typically had flat appearances and very broad areas of color rather than fine detail. Prentiss Taylor represents an entire generation of lithographers in the United States both through his variation of subjects and through his technological experimentation throughout his career. Taylor used some chromolithography but he mostly stayed with black and white imagery, using hand tinting in some cases to make the prints more surreal.

Hand tinting also provided a method that Taylor could use to add fine shading to illustrations which did not otherwise lend themselves well to

lithography. While Taylor started as a relatively reserved artist who focused on landscapes and subtle images, he turned into a much more aggressive critic as he aged. “ His more recent work in black and white has been generated by the same compulsion to strike out at a cruel and obdurate society that has brought attention and recognition to his paintings in the last couple years. ” (Ward, 1939)