

The History and Hype of Giclee: From Gutenberg to Graham Nash

by Cathy Carey

Giclee (zhee-clay) - Fine art and technology, hand in hand from the beginning. One of the first uses of commercial printing in 1455 was to create an affordable Bible (a mere 3 years pay) and reduce the time it took to create them by hand, a task that took about 20 years. Fast forward to 1989, and the roots of the giclee printing process were begun by applying a commercial printing process to fine art photography. Graham Nash - yes that Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young - is a well known and well regarded photographer, and some of his famous photos that were due in an exhibit in Japan were lost, negs and all. He still had contact sheets and through the grapevine of friends someone came up with using a commercial IRIS printer to make posters of the lost photos from the printed contact sheets. The IRIS printer is a large format ink jet printer used as a pre press proofing device before the finals are run on an offset lithographic printer. Lithographic prints are expensive to make - requiring a run of at least 500 - the color quality and detail can be poor depending on the original, and the paper that can be used is not optimum. Upon seeing the great quality of the IRIS proofs, inks were developed to further enhance the color quality and longevity of the prints so they could be used as fine art reproductions. Graham Nash and others called these first prints "digigraphs" to establish a relationship between serigraph (a printing form also called silk screen) and photographs that were produced digitally.

In 1991 in Los Angeles, California, Jack Duganne coined the term "giclee" by looking up the French word for "to spray or squirt" which is gicler. The process of applying ink to the surface on an IRIS printer uses nozzles that squirt the ink in a fine spray like an airbrush. Giclee is the feminine noun version meaning "that which is sprayed or squirted" and a new printing term was invented. Giclee has become a generic term like Kleenex that includes any high quality fine art print digitally produced with archival inks on acid free paper like Arches watercolor paper or canvas. The prints that are created are a collaboration between printer and artist ensuring that the final print is as close to the original as possible. The resolution on a giclee is much better than a lithograph because there are no screens involved, it's all done digitally. The ink is sprayed on the canvas or paper at four million drops per second while the paper is attached to a rotating drum. The final layer is a fine spray of a UV protective coating that enriches the longevity of the print.

Giclees are so close to the original they are hard to spot. If you look at the side of the canvas sometimes you can tell because there is no height to the brushstrokes, but on a smooth painting the giclee surface will look the same. So does that mean giclees will replace the need for originals? Definitely not! Did movies replace live theatre? Never! In fact it made the event of a live performance more profound in comparison to a recording. But even though having the original painting is like owning a piece of the artists' energy, not everyone can afford a piece of Picasso! Giclees are a win-win for everyone, artist and collector. They make good quality artwork affordable for everyone, and the artist can have multiple affordable giclee images to sell of popular paintings, which in turn escalates the price of the original. Most artists run small limited editions of anywhere from 25 - 200 of their giclees to keep the image fresh and retain the value of a short supply. The prints can be made as ordered so the expense of a garage full of printed lithographs moldering away is a thing of the past.

The Rancho Santa Fe Art Gallery is a great place to hunt for beautiful giclees and original art. Start your collection by visiting the new show of Animals in Art exhibit from July 11 - September 3, 2006.

The public is invited to the Art Reception for Animals in Art show on Thursday July 13, 2006, from 6 to 8PM.

6004 Paseo Delicias Rancho Santa Fe, CA 92067

(858) 759-3545 www.ranchosantafeartguild.org

Cathy Carey is a member of the Rancho Santa Fe Art Guild and full time artist.