



DECORATIVE DELIGHTS

Printmaker Jean Bardon explains the inspiration for her art



My first encounter with printmaking took place in Amsterdam where I lived and worked for a period in the 1970s. Recently graduated from Dun Laoghaire School of Art, with a particular interest in graphic art, I enrolled in an etching class at De Werkschuit, at that time based on one of Amsterdam's many houseboats, moored beside Amstel Bridge. I instantly found myself fascinated by the process of etching images drawn on copper plates in acid, thereby creating a plate from which an image could be printed. I realised that I had found my métier, although it would be many years before I would have the opportunity to return to printmaking, at the Graphic Studio Dublin.

My involvement as an artist, and as a member of the Graphic Studio Dublin's organising committee for the exhibition *Gardens of Earthly Delight*, which took place in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin in 2005, started me thinking about the concept of paradise as a garden. Of course, the idea is deeply rooted in all of us, going back to the Old Testament and the Garden of Eden, and crosses many cultural and religious barriers.

Our neighbours in rented hospital accommodation in Norfolk, during the late 1970s, probably would have appreciated my coming to that particular realisation at an earlier stage of my life. They very kindly mowed our grass (very early) on Sunday mornings as we



TOP From the Night Garden
for Patricia

PREVIOUS PAGE
Annunciation Lillies

slept, in order to preserve the (hitherto impeccable) neighbourhood against our burgeoning weeds. Nevertheless, it was during that period – three years – spent in England, that gardens first entered my consciousness. North Norfolk was not, at the time, the fashionable place it has since become. It was a quiet place for a young, newly married couple. But it did have wonderful houses and gardens to visit, frequently courtesy of the National Trust, and these were to leave a lasting impression on me. They fuelled my love of gardens and interest in matters botanical, which have, in turn, led to the etchings I am producing today.

We are extremely fortunate in Ireland to have several fine art printmaking studios. Graphic Studio Dublin, of which I have been a member since 1990, is the longest established of these, now approaching its 50th year. It started life in a basement on Mount Street, graduated to an old warehouse, previously the Raleigh bicycle factory, in the South Docklands of Dublin in the 1980s, but eventually fell victim to the encroaching development of the surrounding areas. Now the studio workshops have found a permanent home, on the North Circular Road, close to the city centre.

The studio is a stimulating and supportive environment to work in. All the very specialised

RIGHT Hydrangea with Gold Leaf

BELOW Working with
22 carat gold leaf



equipment needed to produce etchings (and, indeed, lithographs and woodblock prints) is there - acid baths to “bite” the initial image on to the copper plate; an aquatint box to apply powdered resin to the plate to create tonal areas; guillotines for cutting copper to the size required and, most importantly, a variety of printing presses for the final proofing and printing stage.

Etching is a long and painstaking business. The processes involved are virtually unchanged since medieval times. In this age of digital prints, it is important to stress that all my etchings, from start to finish, are produced entirely by (my!) hand.

All of this is done in the age-old fashion, from the initial drawing on an acid-resistant wax ground, which is applied to the copper, to the biting of the lines in nitric acid, to applying powdered resin (the aquatint process) to the plate in order to create tones, to biting it further in ferric acid and, finally, to colour proofing and printing the finished image. An edition number is decided on – I normally print editions of 30 – and then, each time I pull a print, it is inked up entirely by hand, before rolling it through the printing press. All this takes time and patience. Only the most dedicated persist.

Graphic Studio Dublin, in addition to supplying us with a workplace, works hard to promote the prints







ABOVE Jean Bardon at work

produced by its artists. We have a city-centre gallery – Graphic Studio Gallery – that for 20 years now has been providing exhibition space for print artists and an outlet for selling limited edition prints. My most recent exhibition – a two-person show with woodblock printer Gerard Cox – was last November. In addition to this, many innovative and exciting projects, in association with some of our better-known cultural institutions, have taken place over the years. I will soon be starting work for a group exhibition of selected studio artists to take place in the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris in 2009. This will then travel to the National Museum at Collins Barracks in Dublin.

The form and subject matter of my etchings have evolved slowly over the years. There have been, and continue to be, many influences on my work, which gradually infiltrate the subconscious until they finally make an appearance on the plate. The formality, decorative qualities and boldness of botanical art have strongly informed my development in recent years. My love of decorative detail has been a feature of my work from the beginning and shows no sign of abating. The more recent introduction of gold leaf, used on some of my etchings, is another element that I had been contemplating for quite some time. I resisted it for as long as possible, knowing that I would make life even more difficult for myself if I started down that

particular road. However, the lure proved too great. Visits to the gilded city of Venice, exposure to early Renaissance paintings in Siena, coupled with a long-time love affair with Asian and Islamic art, with their extensive use of gold leaf and patterns, eventually had to find an outlet. I feel the gold transforms the etchings into something very precious. It adds another dimension to my work.

And so the journey continues. Recent trips to Egypt and Istanbul have filled my mind with images. Hopefully the esteem in which the purely decorative is held in the eastern world, and the sheer beauty of the intensive patterning on some of the mosques and palaces of Istanbul, will filter through my mind, and result in some exciting images in future years. ■

Jean Bardon's fine art prints are available at
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OPPOSITE

1. Dark Irises with Gold Leaf
2. Flag Irises
3. Sunflowers
4. Paeonies with Gold Leaf
5. Paeony Rose with Gold Leaf
6. Crown Imperial