Let’s Get Physical: Reconstructing the genesis of the Vollard Series by Bonnard, Denis, Roussel, Vuillard & ... Clot

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Clot at the core of creation

2 When Claude Roger-Marx wrote about the Nabis, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was still a direct connection to their time and circle. Because of this, the critic still grasped and acknowledged the importance of the printer of the series. He wrote of Auguste Clot (1858–1936) in 1927:
Retenez le nom de ce maître-imprimeur : c'est bien plus qu'un collaborateur. Sans lui, quelques-uns des plus beaux livres édités depuis trente ans n'auraient peut-être pas vu le jour ; sans lui, le mouvement de renaissance de la lithographie qui se dessina vers la fin du siècle dernier et qui, après un temps d'interruption assez long, reprend aujourd'hui, eut été impossible. [...] Modeste, cet artisan d'élite, alors que tant d'imprimeurs ont reçu des distinctions officielles, n'a trouvé de récompense que dans son travail. Son nom reste lié glorieusement à l'histoire de la gravure originale qu'il enrichit chaque jour³.

On a careful reading of Roger-Marx's statement, it is interesting to note that he defines Clot as 'much more than a collaborator'. Indeed, like the Delâtres in etching, the master printer Auguste Clot was the driving and possibly defining force behind these lithographic series, and for that matter for almost every single highlight of the period, with the exception of the illustrated poster. Without Clot, we might question whether the colour revolution in lithography would have soared so high. Since Roger-Marx made his perceptive remarks, later scholars writing on the Nabis have mostly studied and discussed the final edition of the print series, admiring the colourful syntheses of the compositions. And when they did mention the creation of the series, their descriptions are often written solely from the perspective of the artist. The well-established tropes established during the Renaissance and enforced in the Romantic era of the artist as a lonely genius, individually expressing his or her original and divine thoughts or inspiration directly onto paper, remains very strong, reducing craftsmen and their techniques to soulless and mindless repetition, implicating that their silent work is carried out by strong but mechanical hands. The paradox of the notion of 'l'estampe originale' or 'lithographie d'artiste' has been that the artist is credited for the whole process, thereby necessarily downplaying or discrediting the essential role of the printer. Fortunately, in the last decades there has been a shift towards a more inclusive concept of collaborative creation. A crucial voice in this re-estimation of the actual process of lithography between artist and printer was that of professor Pat Gilmour (1932–2021), not entirely coincidentally a museum professional and therefore constantly reminded of the physical presence of artworks as objects. Gilmour was an outstanding example of a scholar who realized that to understand an artist's lithographs, one must delve into the collaborative nature of their creation, honouring both artist and printer with equal distinction. In her important essay 'Lithographic Collaboration: The Hand, the Head, the Heart', she wrote:

History confirms that lithographic printers have always been more than a pair of hands carrying out another person’s ideas and, in some cases, have contributed as creatively as the artist to the work. As the myth of the lonely artist has been eroded, a better appreciation of both sides of lithographic partnership has developed and grown⁴.
Physical methodologies

To come to new insights into the complex artistic processes that preceded the final edition of these masterpieces of printmaking, and to investigate the collaboration between artist, printer and publisher in order to define their subsequent, but also overlapping, roles, as art historians will have to establish certain methodologies. These should deal above all with the material traces that are left of the creative processes that took place: from the original thought in the artist’s mind, to the final edition printed by the master lithographer, but most importantly the lengthy process that lies in between. And it is this long, collaborative search that needs to be reconstructed, from proof to perfection. This demands a willingness of art historians to get physical, even if this means a departure from the realm of the theoretical that usually defines our scholarship. Like the artists who chose to create lithographs, and whose credits in terms of ‘original’ printmaking depended upon their willingness to enter the print shop, to immerse themselves in the materials and technique of lithography and get their hands dirty, we should dive head first into the artistic and technical practice of lithography to grasp the dynamics between artist and printer. In this article, some of the more physical strategies that are being pursued in the reconstruction of the genesis of the Vollard series will be explored.
The proofs are the message

At the core of the Van Gogh Museum’s project lies the corpus of preparatory drawings and trial proofs for each of the four series that have exceptionally survived until this day and can be found in museum and private collections worldwide. They were carefully kept, signed, sold and collected, thereby satisfying the hunger for unique objects that defines every print collector or curator, a phenomenon that I call the ‘cult of the belle épreuve’. They found their way into numerous private and public collections through Vollard and subsequently the dealer and collector Henri-Marie Petiet (1894–1980), who got his hands on Vollard’s stock during his lifetime and after his death in 1939. According to legend, Vollard and then Petiet had piles and piles of unique prints lying around in their interiors, evoking fantasies of mysterious caves filled with extremely rare prints that have been compared to Ali Baba or Treasure Island (Fig. 2).

This project as a whole originated from the group of unique working proofs that was collected at the Van Gogh Museum with this provenance of Vollard, consisting of more than fifty objects that can be related to the making of the four Vollard series. It is estimated there are at least a few hundred spread across the world and these are now being brought together in a catalogue and on a website. This is a necessary approach, since each proof is a piece of the puzzle and only by analyzing them as a group can the mysteries of their making be solved.

It is relevant that these working proofs were kept at all and important to realize that usually the printer destroyed these intermediate stages. After all, it was the myth of the multiplication of an original drawing or the idea of conception as an instant of divine inspiration that artists and theoreticians were after. At the same time the printer strived for the highest quality and ultimate perfection, so why share the messy search...
in between? In general, these traces and the evidence of a work in progress were therefore carefully erased by the printer. As Richard Sennett states in his crucial publication *The Craftsman*: ‘[The craftsman is usually] getting things in perfect shape. Once this evidence is eliminated, the object appears pristine. Perfection of this cleaned-up sort is a static condition; the object does not hint at the narrative of its making.’

That is, unless a mark or sign is deliberately left there to do exactly that, hint at the narrative of its making, such as the registration marks retained in the final edition of *A Game of Checkers* to aesthetically evoke the working process of the colour lithograph (Fig. 3). Besides the strong market for unique objects, this choice might also point to an emerging focus on the artistic search and process as the main interest of art, or at least that is how we look at them now. Douglas Druick’s statement that the lithograph of Paul Cézanne’s *Bathers* for Vollard intentionally records the ‘search for, rather than the duplication of the successful image’ could only be issued after he had carefully studied all the working proofs and maquettes.\(^9\) Probably it was Vollard who asked Clot to go against the erasure of process and hold on to them, stained, scribbled and sketched as they were, in order to market them, signed by the artists, and significantly not by Clot.

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\(^8\) The corpus of proofs is essential for understanding what happened between artist and printer in the workshop. If ‘the medium is the message’, to quote the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, the proofs are the most telling messengers of the medium. Since Clot worked almost completely alone for the artists and did everything with his own hands, without the usual division of labour and steam presses employed in the larger lithography workshops such as Lemercier, the master is present everywhere in these residues of the process.
Within the lithographic process and hierarchy, the term ‘essayeur’ was used for the most skilled lithographers, collaborating with artists on original lithographs and creating together an endless row of ‘épreuves d’essai’. These terms encapsulate the essence of the craftsman’s creativity: trial and error. As Sennett explains, the genius of the craftsman’s work does not lie in the original idea, provided in a glorious instant visit by the mysterious Muse, so in that sense it is entirely opposite to the myth of artistic creation, but in a long process of discovery through repetition, trial, error and adjustment, that he describes as ‘the experimental rhythm of problem solving and problem finding’, finally achieving the highest quality.

Clot was exceptional in that he involved the artist in this process as much as was desired, making room for him in the workshop and opening up the secrets of the technique through an intimate and intense dialogue. The road to perfection was paved with endless proofs and in these works everything hints at the narrative of their making and the collaborative process that shaped them. This distinguishes them from artist’s proofs that were made deliberately for the market and usually depict a direct and predictable road from design to end result. Here, three small examples taken from Vuillard’s *Paysages et intérieurs* will be discussed that demonstrate something of the richness of the material.

In 2019 the Van Gogh Museum acquired a proof for *Intérieur à la suspension*, from one of the smaller Parisian auction houses (Fig. 4). On its arrival at the museum’s strong room, it was a welcome reminder that prints – like any other artwork – cannot be grasped as flat images in a catalogue, or even online through zooming in. One has to hover above and even physically handle prints to get a feel for them; so again, it is necessary to get physical.

![Fig. 4. Édouard Vuillard, Trial proof for Intérieur à la suspension for the series Paysages et intérieurs, 1896-99, color lithograph and collage on chine, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam.](image-url)
First, Vuillard’s handwriting with instructions in the margins needs to be deciphered. Above the image we find the famous artist’s blessing that crowns the successful end of the long search for perfection: BON À TIRER. But before it can actually be printed in the final edition of about 100, a few adjustments still have to be made. The grey used in the central decoration of the tablecloth at the lower left has to be removed and the red needs to be brought to the edge of the opening in the chair. To judge the effect of these alterations, or more accurately, to allow the artist to judge the effect of these alterations by visualizing them, the shapes were cut out by the printer of earlier proofs and taped over this later version (Fig. 5a & 5b). This is – of course – how many proofs must have got lost, by actually being used in the process. It is interesting to note that in this single proof, three different prints are brought together, showing us how every scrap or surface of expensive China paper was used exhaustively.
And then there is the distinct personal touch in dramatic red ink: a fingerprint in the far right corner, the physical mark of the hand of the printer and a undeniable testimony to his role in the creation of this print. As Claude Roger-Marx stated earlier, the glory and the legacy of Clot as a master printer can be found only in the work itself, and his presence is quite literally and unmistakably there. Or could it be the red fingertip of the artist Vuillard? This is not really assumed, but the point is that there exists a polarity as well as a strong overlap between the hand of the artist versus the hand the craftsman, since it has been seen to signal both authorship and the instrument of creation as mindless manual labour. See for example Francis Seymour Haden’s depiction of his hands creating a print, or Edgar Degas’s monotype in black with a bathtub filled to the brim with the artist’s fingerprints (Fig. 6 & 7). Again, both Pat Gilmour and Richard Sennett have written extensively on how the best printers use their ‘intelligent hands’ to create and how they engage the holy trinity of hands, head and heart.  

Fig. 5a & 5b. Details of Trial proof for Intérieur à la suspension for the series Paysages et intérieurs 1896-99, color lithograph and collage on chine.
Fig. 6. Francis Seymour Haden, *Hands Etching 1865*, etching and drypoint, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.
Two other examples from the series show that with Vuillard, at least, the creative conception and the material process of printing were closely intertwined. In The Avenue Vuillard already defined most of the composition in the preliminary sketch. With the composition and play of light and shade already planned, the collective search of artist and printer was largely directed towards finding the perfect combination of colours, by endlessly combining and adjusting the pigments in proofs. This is of course a creative process in itself, in which the lithographic printer was in charge and the absolute master (Fig. 8). It is known that Clot mixed all the shades of the inks himself and as a colour expert he could predict before applying them how they would mix with the other stones, creating countless subtle hues.
In *Wallpaper III*, it is significant that the artist was still adding crucial elements to the composition, while the wallpaper itself was already drawn and printed from the stone (Fig. 9). These proofs testify to an extremely organic process between conception, creation and execution. It leads us to question which identities resonate in these proofs. Would Clot deserve his name to be mentioned as creator, right next to that of Vuillard? What conditions have to be fulfilled before co-authorship can be awarded on the museum label?
Making sense of what we see

The proofs, therefore, tell an endless amount of things, but how can we – as art historians with limited technical knowledge – grasp exactly what is going on? There is an obvious way to tackle this, by ploughing through an endless row of contemporary treatises on lithography (that are now all digitally available): Senefelder (1819), Hullmandel (1824), Duchâtel (1893), Lemercier (c. 1900), and so on. However, the texts tend to be quite abstract and hermetic, especially when the technicians are writing for their own peers. And there lies another problem. Lemercier, the master printer himself, acknowledges the insufficiency of language and he admits that the only way to properly learn about the process and its complexities, is to become an apprentice at a workshop and study the process with one’s own eyes, head and hands. Moreover, it is important to realize that treatises were not neutral instructions, since they also served as promotion, downplaying the complexities to persuade artists to hand over their drawings to be magically multiplied.

Pat Gilmour understood that treatises and other written sources alone were inadequate and she developed some refreshingly practical ways to grasp the subtleties within this crucial dialogue, such as interviewing the craftsmen themselves. She spoke in depth to some of the world’s greatest lithographic printers, such as Pablo Picasso’s favoured printer Fernand Mourlot (1895–1988), and in these conversations she found more insight into ‘the way the ideas in the head of one person find resolution, partially through the hands of another’. In short, to grasp the collaboration between artist and printer a collaboration between art historian and printer is necessary.
So it was of critical importance during the exhibition on Vuillard’s *Paysages et intérieurs* at the Van Gogh Museum, that there was the possibility to study the proofs together with a current master printer. His knowledge provided the key to a better understanding of these works. To name just two examples of how we can misunderstand them: the proof with all the separate stones for *A Game of Checkers* printed on top of each other in black was interpreted by an art historian in an earlier catalogue very convincingly as a means to see if the white of the paper still played a harmonious role in the final composition, as André Mellerio requested in his famous text on colour lithography (Fig. 10). But actually this is a fairly standard procedure carried out by the printer to judge if the grease of the ink sticks sufficiently well to the stone, using *noir à monter*, since only by printing in black is one truly able to determine if this is indeed the case.

As another example, the many scribbles and notes by artists on proofs have been seen as evidence that they were not physically present in the workshop, instead giving instructions from the comfort of their own homes, but the printer stressed that that should not have to be the case at all (Fig. 11). They most likely served as *aide-mémoire* for the printer in a later stage, since it might take a while for them to carry out the required adjustments decided upon in the presence of the artist.
But even interviewing printers or looking at works together might prove insufficient. To delve even deeper into the collaborative process of lithographic creation, it is crucial to look at the locus of the print shop. When Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert were realizing their beyond-ambitious project in 1751 to compose the first *Encyclopédie*, in which – among many other subjects – they meticulously described all the different crafts, they were also confronted with the inadequacy of language when interviewing printers and typesetters about the nature of their work. Their solution:

*Mais il est des métiers si singuliers et des manœuvres si déliées, qu’à moins de travailler soi-même, de mouvoir une machine de ses propres mains, et de voir l’ouvrage se former sous ses propres yeux, il est difficile d’en parler avec précision. Il a donc fallu plusieurs fois se procurer les machines, les construire, mettre la main à l’œuvre ; se rendre, pour ainsi dire, apprenti, et faire soi-même de mauvais ouvrages pour apprendre aux autres comment on en fait de bons. C’est ainsi que nous nous sommes convaincus de l’ignorance dans laquelle on est sur la plupart des objets de la vie, et de la difficulté de sortir de cette ignorance. C’est ainsi que nous nous sommes mis en état de démontrer que l’homme de lettres qui sait le plus sa langue, ne connaît pas la vingtième partie des mots; que quoique chaque art ait la sienne, cette langue est encore bien imparfaite; que c’est par l’extrême habitude de converser les uns avec les autres, que les ouvriers s’entendent, et beaucoup plus par le retour des conjonctures que par l’usage des termes. Dans un atelier c’est le moment qui parle, et non l’artiste.*

In response to this approach, it can be countered that we are writing about history, not about contemporary art. Auguste Clot died long ago, as have the artists. Since we cannot visit the workshop, our entrance to the process is barred. Of course, Clot’s contribution to printmaking was unique, but other than with the artists, whose individual flames that burned so brightly have been extinguished by their deaths, Clot...
passed on his skills, knowledge and sensitivity to his carefully selected successors. In that sense, the lithographer can remain eternally alive in his craft and there is still an entrance point today, situated in the Marais. There, the practice of the current atelier of Clot, Bramsen & Georges is in many ways a direct continuation of the processes that took place in the fin de siècle (Fig. 12). A family tree could be drawn, showing the pedigree of the current master printer in a straight lineage back to Clot, and even reaching all the way to the origins of lithography with Alois Senefelder, each adding a little invention or adjustment of their own. They are in that sense, artisan aristocracy.

Fig. 12. The lithographic workshop of Clot, Bramsen & Georges Paris est. 1896.

The stones and presses of Clot’s personal invention and use are still in function, meaning that artists now are drawing on the very same matrices as Bonnard and Vuillard did. In addition, the less tangible aspects that are transferred from master to apprentice since the origins of lithography have remained. The ritual of the craftsman is still being performed and holds many answers to understanding the lithographic masterpieces of Bonnard, Denis, Roussel, Vuillard ... & Clot. Although we do need to remember that one of the crucial and undeniable facts is that Clot distinguished himself from his peers by his individual talents, skills and possibly genius.

Nevertheless, we as art historians could and maybe should place ourselves discreetly as a fly on the wall in the workshop, very discreetly indeed, since it is such an intimate affair that is taking place. Here, as flies, we should silently watch the dynamics and collaboration between artist and printer and the endless ways in which the printer helps the artist to facilitate the process: the drawing on the stone or on special paper, the reverse thinking, the colouring from separate stones, envisioning the end product. In short, making the artists at least slightly understand the essence of the technique the master printer knows so well they have become physically one with it: its textures, its consistencies, its smells, its look, its fluids and its weight.
Never close enough

And maybe, just maybe, observing closely still does not suffice. Perhaps we should enrol in the workshop ourselves, as apprentices, however short-lived. Like artist and printer, art historians should engage in a serious dialogue with the tools and materials. We can never become one with the medium, that is a bridge too far, but we should at least unite mental and manual labour in our practice by rolling up our sleeves and getting physical if we truly want to grasp the stunning colour lithographs we are thinking and writing about. And when we write down our discoveries, we will have to accept that language alone can never grasp the physical and mental process of creating a lithograph in all its rich nuances; but let us at least try to the best of our abilities.

Fig. 13. The stones of Auguste Clot still being used in the lithographic workshop of Clot, Bramsen & Georges Paris.

NOTES

2. The Van Gogh Museum research project From Proof to Perfection is generously supported by the Getty Paper Project, the Elise Wessels Foundation, the National Institute for Art History (INHA) and the IFPDA Foundation. As Curator of Prints, I will track down and research the many sketches, preliminary drawings and trial proofs for the print series of the four Nabis artists.
Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Maurice Denis (1870–1943), Ker-Xavier Roussel (1867–1944) and Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940), which will be published in a catalogue and online.

9. Douglas W. Druick, ‘Cézanne, Vollard, and Lithography: The Ottawa Maquette for the “Large Bathers” Colour Lithograph’, Bulletin 19 (1972), p. 16, https://www.gallery.ca/bulletin/num19/druck1.html : ‘[…] the lithograph is nevertheless remarkable in that it apparently reflects the bold decision to issue an edition which records the search for, rather than the duplication of the successful image. This degree of exposure of the working process marks an apparently singular event within the history of the medium in the nineteenth century.’
12. Alfred Lemercier, La lithographie française de 1796 à 1896 et les arts qui s’y rattachent: manuel pratique s’adressant aux artistes et aux imprimeurs, Paris, Lorilleux, c. 1900. Throughout the treatise Lemercier acknowledges the difficulty and delicacy of every step in the process of lithography and stresses the long years of apprenticeship that are necessary to become a good printer.

ABSTRACTS

The four lithographic suites by Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Maurice Denis (1870–1943), Ker-Xavier Roussel (1867–1944) and Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940) were conceived over a period of approximately four years from 1896 and published around 1900 by Ambroise Vollard (1866–1939). They are generally considered as absolute masterpieces of nineteenth-century colour lithography, since their generation of avant-garde artists considered the medium as ‘la production d’art spéciale de notre époque’ to quote the critic André Mellerio’s key text about colour lithography from 1898, these prints lie at the core of the four Nabis’ practice and output in the fin de siècle. Their lithographic practice also seems to have fed into their work in other media, for example in
the way they applied colour to their paintings and decorative panels. All this makes it worthwhile to study the series in more depth and that is why the Van Gogh Museum has instigated a research project to reconstruct the genesis of the Vollard series.²

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