

## The Mezzotint, “For Stella”

Recipient of the Cannon Prize, National Academy of Design, 1999

It is not my wish to translate visual expression into words. This is about the actual making of the work.

The intricacy of this image presented me with a persistent obstacle and an irresistible allure. Difficulties in bringing the drawing from paper to copper included physical and conceptual challenges. Even the composition’s density made it impossible to pencil much of the image on the plate: a sketch with this much detail would infuse too much lead into the roughened surface of the metal and obscure the progress of my burnishing.

Using a light touch I pencil-drew only the trunks and branches. Then, using a steel tool on the softer copper, I burnished, extemporaneously, the spaces I would imagine between each leaf, or leaf group, the leaves being where I did not work. Slowly I created the patterns of the spaces that in turn delineated the forms. To avoid errors my burnishing of each section began tentatively, until gradually a sureness of the image began to emerge.

The plate is nearly 400 square inches, but I could only work with the necessary control in sections of 8 to 10 square inches at a time. Keeping in mind my intent in the over-all effect, I tried to create a succession of details that were of expressive interest both by themselves and while contributing to the continuity of the entire image. This, I hoped, would sustain the motion of viewing from the parts to the whole, and back and forth, to hold the eye by keeping it in motion. When a section was finished I moved counter clock-wise to begin another. Unfortunately, the completion of an area did not attain harmony with the preceding section until I modified that previous work, sometimes extensively. A section might occupy three or four days, as would the next, then integrating them would take another day or two.

In all, I estimate the entire work consumed more than 840 hours. As it grew more and more complex and difficult it also became more and more absorbing and compelling. I realized the extent of my obsession when at night I began to dream of

swirling leaves, and then during the day, when I hourly closed my eyes for a few minutes, to rest my focus, that darkness, too, was filled with bright copper leaves.

For the final ten weeks' work I constructed an easel of two-by threes and plywood. This could hold the plate vertically, allowing me to work on the plate much as I would a painting: backing away to view how it would read from a distance, moving forward to make minor adjustments in the tonal gradations, and to refine the relationships of fragments that together would convey the impact of their collective statement.

Finally, as I thought about a title, no word or phrase seemed adequate. Any choice that described one aspect of this work seemed to limit expression, ignoring, perhaps even eliminating, the layering of simultaneous purposes. Since, sadly, at this time, my aged mother is dying, to honor her love and support I decided to call this image "For Stella."

Robert Kipniss

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