

Southern Graphics Council Newsletter

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GRAPHIC

IMPRESSIONS



Il Bisonte International School of Graphic Arts, Florence, Italy

by Lynn Sures, Corcoran School of Art

IN THE SUMMER OF 2000 I worked for a week as Visiting Professor at Il Bisonte International School of Graphic Arts in Florence, Italy. It's a unique school in the contemporary print world, in that in some senses it isn't a "contemporary" school at all, but an old-time traditional atelier. I was impressed with Il Bisonte as a fantastic place for a developing artist to spend time getting really expert at the making of prints.

Il Bisonte offers courses taught by Italian master printers. One really unusual offering at this school is the Conservation of Works on Paper course, not readily available in the US. Stone lithography, intaglio, woodcut, bookbinding, screenprinting, photography and art history complete the areas of study.

I first learned about Il Bisonte through Ovidio Guaita, an architectural journalist and writer who is the founder's nephew, on a visit he made to Washington, DC. He told me about the traveling exhibitions Il Bisonte has sent throughout the world, and filled me in on some history. That begins with Signora Maria Luigia Guaita, who on a wartime visit to Edinburgh, decided to bring the concept of multiple works of graphic art to her own city, where she had already co-founded a publishing company. Meeting her in 2000, in Florence in her 90th year, I picked up on how the name The Bison would be attached to her press. Signora Guaita is still a dynamic, determined person who works every day, and has engrossing tales to tell of the artists she has worked with for the past forty years.

Il Bisonte was founded in 1959 as a

printmaking workshop specializing in abstract imagery, where collaborators printed the work of international artists. Picasso, Henry Moore, Alexander Calder, Carlo Carra, Jacques Lipchitz, Giacomo Manzu, Matta, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Gino Severini, Rufino Tamayo and others created editions there. The press moved to Via San Niccolo, present location of the Gallery and Cultural Center, in 1964. The flood of 1966 nearly destroyed the press, the works and storage there; Signora Maria Luigia herself dramatically escaped the floodwaters.

On the Oltrarno, the south bank of the Arno River near the Pitti Palace and the Piazzale Michelangelo, you walk down a quaint road, Palazzo Serristori to the left. The present school location was originally the stables of the palazzo, an architecturally interesting, substantial stone building. The tower of the Church of San Niccolo commands the blue sky. Signora Guaita mentioned to me that in this tower Michelangelo hid during a siege of the city. At the entrance portal of Il Bisonte is a mounted litho stone with the design of the Bison. You walk through a gallery of antique, historic presses of wood and metal fabrication. Inside a glass door, there is a large studio with Bendini presses, spacious, light and clean. While I was there, I worked on an intaglio plate, one in a series of Tuscan landscape images—a good experience even as a teacher stealing a few minutes of studio time. The litho studio, across the courtyard, has a different feeling, wood paneling in a separate niche for each press, like a series of private antique studios.

Rodolfo Ceccotti is the school's director, a friendly and welcoming person who is a principal teacher and also a compelling artist. I saw a recent exhibition at the Marino Marini Museum in Florence which surveyed his prints and paintings. The works demonstrated his familiarity with, and love of the wild landscape of the Maremma section of southern Tuscany.

Students come to Il Bisonte from all over the world. There was an Egyptian student who had received the Rome Prize for that year and was studying etching at Il Bisonte for the summer. Working alongside were Japanese, English and American students. Italians from Bologna, Siena and

Florence complemented the foreign contingent. Italian and English-language conversations filtered through the sounds of work.

There was a camaraderie among the students that was evident as soon as I began my workshop on Paper. My introductory lecture was to be given to students who spoke Italian or English but not necessarily both. Rather than permitting me to struggle back and forth, one student volunteered to be my "simultaneous translator" in Italian, which made it a smooth experience. Thanks to Carolina Farsetti of Bologna who did a great job for her classmates.

Il Bisonte is a school to attend for a complete traditional education in printmaking. The focus is on hand work done technically correctly. Il Bisonte is a dream studies-abroad studio for the printmaker who has an undergraduate or graduate degree and is secure with imagery but feels lacking in mastery of technique. You experience the atelier system, a master who knows how and a student who wants to learn and does learn.

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