



Australian Summer Landscape

John C. Goodchild

*ETCHING IN
AUSTRALIA*

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Etching in Australia



UNDOUBTEDLY the most outstanding form of art manifestation of our time is that of Etching. Its history, dating from the days of the engravers on cannon, is marked by periods of great effort; yet greater activity and interest have been displayed during the past few years, as etching has been steadily growing in favour, and appreciation of the grace and beauty of this form of art has been more keenly felt. Its popularity is also due in no small degree to the quiet and subdued harmony it brings to the home, making a beautifying element in the restrained and simple schemes of modern decoration and furnishing. It is but natural, therefore, that many are desirous of knowing what a good etching is, what its essentials are, and who are the acknowledged masters of the craft.

Processes of Etching

ETCHING.

In the production of an etching polished copper plate is covered with an acid-resisting wax preparation. The drawing is made on this plate with a steel point, which cuts through the wax and exposes the copper, which, when the drawing is finished, is bitten with acid. Lighter and darker lines are made by shorter and longer immersion in the acid, and when

the biting is completed the wax coating is removed. After the plate is covered with ink, and the surface ink wiped off, leaving ink in the lines, it is placed face upwards on a press, covered with paper, and passed through under heavy pressure. This pressure causes the paper to be pressed into the lines, and the paper when removed brings with it all the ink from every line and scratch. The result is known as an original etching.

DRYPOINT.

In drypoint the lines of the drawing are made on the plain copper by a sharp instrument, which cuts into the metal, and at the same time raises a burr on the sides of the lines. This burr, as well as the line, holds ink, and when printed renders a beautifully delicate line of brilliant and velvety blackness. No acid is used in drypoint, a proof being recognized by a softness in printing caused by the burr.

AQUATINT.

For this process powdered resin is allowed to fall evenly on the metal, and when sufficiently coated the plate is heated, causing the resin to adhere to the plate. When cool, the plate is placed in acid, which attacks the copper between the particles of resin, and as varying periods of immersion produce various shades, each required shade is held by painting the area of the shade with acid-resisting varnish. A print will be found to possess qualities similar to those of a wash or tinted drawing, hence its appellation.

MEZZOTINT.

In this process the plate is pitted with tiny holes by a rocker. The rocker is a tool similar to a chisel, the long side being engraved with lines on an aver-

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age of seventy-five to the inch, and the other side bevelled like a chisel, producing on the sharpened edge a row of teeth according to the number of engraved lines. After rocking the tool over the plate in eighty different directions, the plate will print a dense black. Tones are obtained by scraping, more scraping producing lighter shades, and burnishing finally giving the high lights.

Features of a Good Etching

The basis of sound judgment of a good etching, as with other branches of art, demands an intelligent study of the work of accepted masters. General principles cannot convey adequately the subtleties and fine distinctions of the masterpiece, but acquaintance with the best work will lead to recognition of some general features. Among these will be the use of a free and virile line, a good suggestion of colour, tone, and texture, a nice regard for design by well-arranged masses of lights and darks, and the peculiarly rich and beautiful quality of the well-printed plate. Above all, one will sense the proper use of the medium for the artist's expression.

History of Etching in Australia

Etching in Australia is of comparatively recent birth. The first known etchings are those of Benjamin Duterrau, executed in the early forties of last century, and followed later by Conrad Martens, Oldham, Mather, and Coveny, but it was not until 1883 that Mr. Livingston Hopkins brought etching into prominence, and by his enthusiasm incited Julian Ashton, B. E. Minns, Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, and A. H. Fullwood to commence etching. Alfred Coffey and Victor Cobb also practised around this

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period, but it was John Shirlow, commencing etching in 1895, who first achieved any distinction in the craft. Since that time many artists have practised etching, and during this period many of the leading Art Galleries of the world have purchased their works. This is of great importance, and as time goes on these efforts, individually and collectively, slowly but surely, will give us a distinct School of Etching, a most valuable asset nationally. It is also of value to the picture lover, as he can possess an example of the best work at no greater expense than a framed reproduction of practically no art value, and, in addition, will feel secure in the knowledge that in all probability his choice has been the choice also of many of the Art Galleries of the world.

This outline of Etching will serve to guide one in a knowledge of an outstanding form of art in Australia, examples of which are finding a place in everyday life, influencing taste and advancing national refinement.

