



A Sixties Pressure Group: Fifty Years of the Printmakers Council.

The Printmaker's Council, largely the initiative of printmaker, painter and teacher Michael Rothenstein, had its origins in a series of informal meetings in the early 1960's, some of which were held at his London flat and others either at Bertorelli's restaurant or in the studio of printmaker Birgit Skiöld, both located in Charlotte Street. These meetings in turn led to the first general meeting of the Printmakers Council which took place at 7pm on 23rd June 1965 at the F.B.A. Gallery.

The primary aim was to form, in the words of one early member, a 'pressure group', while others describe it as a 'loose association', although neither description seems entirely adequate. What Rothenstein and those associated with him wanted was an organisation that would promote and encourage printmaking, especially an experimental and contemporary approach. Early members looking back point to the poor provision for printmaking both within art education and outside, and the poor status generally given to prints and printmakers. Moreover, print societies at the time were rather conservative in outlook. Stanley Jones, an early member and some time President of PmC points out in an unpublished interview that long-established traditional print groups

ensured that membership was effectively closed to printmakers who did not work in the specific discipline the society represented. It was against this background of poor status and poor provision that the Printmakers Council was formed.

The group was formally organised from the very start. At the inaugural meeting Rothenstein took the chair with Bernard Cheese as Vice Chairman. A committee was elected by secret ballot comprising Anthony Gross, Merlyn Evans, Julian Trevelyan, Birgit Skiöld, Stanley Jones, Alistair Grant and Gertrude Hermes. Subscriptions were set at seven guineas and a second meeting arranged for three weeks later on 14th July.

It is unclear why the name 'Printmakers Council' was chosen. There is a suggestion that the existence of a 'Print Council of America' - still flourishing - may have been an influence. Moreover, an annual subscription of seven guineas in 1965 was quite steep, ensuring, for example, that many postgraduate students would be excluded. The subscription level and the name together might therefore be expected to attract successful, established artists who already had some status in the wider art world. 'Council' carries with it at least some hint of authority and prestige, although it also implies 'conciliar' and 'collaborative' or 'co-operative', characteristics that continue to define the Printmakers Council. But the name has one disadvantage in that it does not slip easily off the tongue and so from the very beginning the abbreviation 'PmC' was widely used, even to the point of appearing on exhibition catalogue covers and to being used as a logo, both in the sans serif lower-case typefaces characteristic of 'sixties graphic design. From time to time proposals have been made to change the name, the first being recorded as early as 1971 and the most recent in 2013. None have been remotely successful; both 'Printmakers Council' and 'PmC' remain.

In addition to deciding to have a President as well as a Chairman the second meeting of the group identified a number of objectives, most of which are still pursued by PmC today. Among these was the intention to mount exhibitions, especially international exhibitions, to compile an index of printmakers, and to publish a quarterly newsletter. At the AGM of the society in 1967, Rothenstein summarised the objectives of PmC as 'firstly a service organisation providing information on materials, equipment, training, and galleries' and secondly 'as an exhibiting society'. Education was also identified as an important objective and it was decided that the third edition of the quarterly newsletter would be devoted to this topic. Issues one and two were to cover 'materials' and 'galleries and dealers' respectively. The meeting decided to lobby the Summerson Commission on the unsatisfactory role of printmaking in the new Diploma in Art and Design course which had replaced the old post-war National Diploma in Design. These then were to be the principal activities; to compile a database, to hold exhibitions, to publish a newsletter and to be a voice for printmaking in education.

By February 1966 the group had thirty-one paid up members which by October had grown to fifty-five. In time, different classes of membership were debated and subsequently introduced, in particular that of honorary membership. This allowed high profile artists to be invited to join who might not otherwise have done so. The archive evidence is incomplete but artists like David Hockney, Allen Jones, Graham Sutherland and John Piper have been either members or honorary members. Alternatively, some eminent artists would simply be invited to take part in selected exhibitions, further strengthening Printmakers Council's quest for increased status and prestige for printmaking. Membership was originally by peer election only, a principle that was eventually replaced with open membership sometime in the early 1980s. The change caused some difficulty for founding and early members, and it still divides opinion. Although new initiatives were started, such as the inauguration of a slide index of member's work

to ensure that they got something out of their membership, the reasons for the change seem to have been entirely financial; more members resulting in better financial health. However, it might also be argued that an open membership is more readily suited to an organisation devoted to encouraging printmaking as widely as possible.

In addition to creating a directory of PmC members in 1966, various other efforts have been made to place printmaking more firmly in the public eye, to increase the sale of members' work and to collect it into a permanent archive. The first was a scheme in 1969 to create a print club. Print clubs, rather like book clubs, offer a print or prints to subscribers on a regular basis. The club, with four different artists each year, ran from 1970 until 1974, and had an annual subscription of £25. At its height the club had forty-eight subscribers but it required eighty to be viable. Faced with other competing schemes it was clear that the programme could not be sustained.

In 1980 it was decided to produce a print portfolio. Published in 1980 the portfolio, organised by Joseph Winkleman, consisted of a title page and ten prints, each in a limited edition of seventy-five. Each portfolio was for sale at £300, with a discount being offered to PmC members, educational institutions, authorities or for multiple orders. The portfolio was financially successful but the exercise was not repeated.

PmC had initially been critical of the scope and content of the print collection at the V&A. One founding objective therefore was the creation of a more comprehensive national print archive. Two projects to create an archive of members' work have been attempted, the first at Exeter College of Art and Design in 1977 and the second at Scarborough Art Gallery in 1992. The Exeter project was very ambitious but funding cuts and a reluctance on Exeter's part to be legally responsible for the archive brought the project to an early close. Similarly, although some

works were donated and accessioned, the Scarborough print archive came to an end soon after it had started.

The history of the Printmakers Council may be traced through its many exhibitions. Exhibitions are an ideal way to raise awareness and to promote printmaking, and they have always been an important part of the work of Printmakers Council. The last fifty years have been filled with exhibitions not only throughout the United Kingdom but also abroad, fulfilling one of the group's primary objectives. At a meeting on 17th March 1966 it was decided to hold the first Annual PmC Exhibition at the Grabowski Gallery from December 1966 to January 1967, with a concurrent exhibition at the AAA Gallery in New York. Just to give a small selection here exhibitions have been held at Curwen Gallery, the Barbican, the Serpentine Gallery, and the Royal Festival Hall, and in Los Angeles, Portland, Oregon, and Freemantle, Western Australia. Many of the London venues have been used on more than one occasion.

The idea for a 'miniprint' exhibition was originally considered in 1969, but the first miniature print exhibition was not held until December 1980 at the Graffiti Gallery, Great Marlborough Street, London. Writing in the catalogue Rosemary Simmons praised PmC as an organisation run 'by artists, for artists', but went on to complain that too many artists had ignored the rules of the exhibition by sending in prints of the wrong size, or by crudely gluing fragments of prints onto a larger sheet. Nevertheless, this was not to be the end of the miniature print exhibition. One lasting achievement has been the British International Miniature Print Exhibition. Started in 1989 by Peter Ford and other PmC members in the south west of England, in conjunction with Bristol Museum and Art Gallery and the Off-Centre Gallery, it has now been held on eight successive occasions. The Off-Centre Gallery ran the exhibition with a UK-wide touring programme four times until 2002 when it was taken on by Gracefield Arts Centre, Dumfries. The Printmakers Council took over for the seventh exhibition in 2008 and

organised the eighth in 2012. The exhibition is open to all printmakers and to all print processes, and as the catalogue for the fifth exhibition notes it 'has helped to create a tradition in miniatures here in Britain that had previously been more prevalent abroad'. (Introduction, Catalogue of 5th British International Miniature Print Exhibition, Gracefield Arts Centre, 2003)

The debate as to what constitutes an original print has also from the very beginning engaged Printmakers Council; it was a contentious issue then as now, long before the age of digital printmaking or the advent of the giclée reproduction print. The catalogue for the tenth anniversary exhibition at Morley Gallery in October and November 1974 while noting 'four methods of printing, Lithography, Etching, Serigraphy and Relief', goes on to deplore perceived deceptions in printmaking where an image is duplicated using graphic means and the resulting 'print' passed off as an original. 'Imagery that was conceived in one media has been arbitrarily transposed to another and signing and dating as a mark of approval does not elevate it from a mere reproductive process'. The author, James Burr, rightly points out that PmC has been in the forefront of an attempt to educate a 'baffled public', a struggle that continues. In 2008 PmC were represented at a series of discussions at the Fine Arts Trade Guild to agree criteria for what constitutes an original print. Although a report was published the meetings appear to have been somewhat inconclusive. Artist printmakers know and agree what is meant by an original print; publishers and artists who make their living from producing printed reproductions often seem to have a different view.

Education too has been at the forefront of PmC activities throughout; many members have been and still are teachers as well as artists. Beginning with lobbying the Summerson Commission in 1966 the educational activities of the Printmakers Council have been varied, and in which the education of the gallery-going and print-collecting public

has perhaps been paramount. Exhibition catalogues for example have regularly carried glossaries of printmaking techniques and printmaking terminology while efforts to inform the public on the nature of an original artist's print have already been noted. Many exhibitions have frequently included talks, lectures and demonstrations and have offered access to small-scale, practical classes in printmaking techniques. More formal lectures by members have been arranged from time to time, for example at the British Museum in 1986 to coincide with the PmC exhibition 'Print 86' at the Barbican Centre.

Closely allied to education the dissemination of ideas through newssheets, bulletins and a magazine has also had a high priority. All organisations need to communicate with members and with the outside world, a relatively easy and inexpensive thing to do in a digital age. Fifty years ago the need was the same but the means were very different.

Two early objectives for Printmakers Council were the publication and distribution of a magazine and a news bulletin. In 1967 'Printmakers Council Magazine', began and ran for three issues. Edited by Agathe Sorel its aim was 'to inform people in general of developments in Printmaking and related fields'. This stylish, ambitious and expensive undertaking - at one point it came complete with an original print inside - was discontinued in 1970 owing to production costs and time constraints to be replaced by 'PmC Newsletter'. Originally distributed only to members this in turn was supplemented in 1982 by a regular column on PmC in the magazine 'Artist's Newsletter' written by Peter Ford. Under the terms of an agreement with the magazine PmC members could obtain copies at a discount. Two years later a new publication appeared intended to supplement Peter Ford's column with the inclusion of technical and critical articles. Initially called 'PmC Broadsheet' it was later renamed 'Impress' and by 1997 had become 'Imprint'. Still published as a quarterly magazine today, albeit digitally

and continually evolving, 'Imprint' offers a mix of opinion and information together with a regular illustrated focus on the work of a PmC member. Today 'Imprint' and social media, together with an e-bulletin and the Printmakers Council website, upgraded in 2015 as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations, ensure that communication with members and beyond is both efficient and economic.

Like any organisation the Printmakers Council has had a varied history. Many documents were disposed of when the office was reorganised in 1992 creating a large gap in the archive material. Today the original objectives of PmC have been modified to suit a different age but in essence they remain intact. In contrast to 1965 many open access print studios now exist and traditional societies are less conservative. Printmaking is no longer relegated to a subsidiary position either in contemporary art or in art education, although the advent of new technologies have challenged the notion of what printmaking is and the debate over the nature of an original print is still far from concluded. Educational objectives, and the continuing need for a print exhibition society, ensure that Printmakers Council will have a role to play for many years to come.

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