# **Interview with Stanley Jones**

On 25<sup>th</sup> April 2015

Interview by Margaret Ashman and Stephen Mumberson Jenny Jones also present

Can I tell you what I'm doing at the moment, to begin at the wrong end because basically I'm now in my eighties you see so I have to organise my existence around Curwen which has always been central to my activities, but change has happened to Curwen and part of the business has moved across to a place called Morden Hall which is in west London and joined up with Coriander because the person who is actually doing the lithography there is somebody I taught when the department was still at Curwen, in Linton Chilford Hall.

Now what happened was that the lease gave up for that part of the project and Mrs..... who owns the estate didn't want to renew it for them so they had to find alternative accommodation somewhere and I was just at that time an adviser to the studio, I'd been working with it on and off right up to that time but fundamentally they needed new premises and this is how they came to talk to Coriander and decide to merge the two companies. Being geographically so far away from where I am here; I travel on the M11 regularly to go to the Print Study Centre which is fine, I very used to it. We moved there in 1989 when Tottenham Court Road lease gave up. So you've got a story of the Studio beginning in Plaistow in 1958 as a new venture because in those days there was absolutely nothing. If you can imagine a situation in this country where even in London there's just about the Redfern Gallery that showed prints at all and the rest just weren't interested really. So there's no market until Robert Erskine came from Cambridge to start his St George's Gallery in Cork Street and it was at that time that I came down from Lancashire where I'd been studying in Wigan.

They wouldn't let me come down to London – they wouldn't give me a grant so I was stuck up at Wigan Art School, it was a good four years because in those days you had to do a National Diploma in Design, which was good grounding because it was a small school with a large staff, you got one to one tuition almost and the staff came from the Slade and the Royal College so they were well qualified for this kind of situation. Coldstream said to me, because I applied to the Slade, the same year that I took my higher school certificate and he said that he would have me as a student but that I was too young. He was quite honest, he said come back when you've done your Slade studies up in Lancashire and I'll look at your work and you can come do the Diploma. This actually happened, I did the exams and got back to the Slade, and the Slade in those days was very much under Coldstream's administration and so on but actually subjects like Printmaking were defined as subsidiary subjects. What happened was it was primarily a school for painting and sculpture, and space was a premium so you had to draw lots for poses in each of the rooms (life painting) and if you didn't get a place then you went and researched your subsidiary subject, it could be sculpture if you were doing painting, in my case it was printmaking. Now I'd done a lot of printmaking in Wigan with a man who'd studied at the Royal College so I knew very well potentially what lithograph and etching meant in those situations. And I was fascinated by the fact

that in this country these ways of working were always given as a subsidiary point of view. They were never treated as an important element, and it was a puzzle to me, so when I came down to the Slade they had just started a lithography department down in the basement and on this particular morning because I hadn't got a place in the life room I wandered down to see what it was like and there was Ceri Richards, puzzling over a lithographic plate. He wanted to know who I was and what I wanted, he said well you know more about this than I do! He was in charge of the department but he was just appointed as a figure head, almost. All the technology that you had to acquire was from other people. There wasn't even a studio assistant to teach you that. So he and I formed quite a good friendship. He was doing his own work and that same time trying to teach people, talking to them as they came and went and he actually relied on me in helping him out when he got stuck with his technology. So those two years that I spent at the Slade were really for me quite crucial because I began to concentrate very much on lithographic plate making as well as doing the Slade diploma so I had to work particularly hard because there wasn't the provision for it you see.

Anyway in my second year I met Bill Hayter and John Piper who were visitors and Hayter said to me if you want to really investigate lithographic printmaking you'll have to come to Paris. He said, how you'll do it I don't know because I don't know of anybody whose done it before. John Piper said the same thing. John had just been doing some work at Muller's in Paris. He said these people have never had any break in their administration working with artists, they know how to treat artists, they know what artists want and so on, so he said you must try and do some work across there. At the end of the term I was given two scholarships, two small scholarships by William Coldstream to actually make this journey to Paris. Now my knowledge of French was basically school certificate and of no use whatsoever. The French at that level won't speak any English, you have to speak French. So I contacted Bill and he said to me, I know a young lithographer who can help you, he's just round the corner, this was in the Rue de Guerre, where his studio was – his name is Patris, I'll give you an introduction, go and see him, and this is how I started my association with Atelier Patrice which worked out particularly well because there were other young people in the group... and I just had to learn technical French as well as day to day French. I stayed there because it was a fascinating experience really. You had to work very hard, you see we were printing editions for school of Paris painters and they would come and go and have their work proofed but the printing as such was often done during the night when the presses were quiet and lasted sometimes from 9 in the evening until 9 in the morning. So you had to get used to this kind of contact, but I met a large number of people and the experience was invaluable.

# What year was this roughly?

We're talking now about 1956 to 1958, so you are thinking of a group of people coming through that studio like Giacometti, ...... and people who were current at the time and commissioned to make prints for publishers like..... and so on . So what you've got is an experience factor which was really for me invaluable. Now I'd have still been there had not Robert Erskine in his St George's gown had not come across as he had a problem. He used to sell my work in his gallery and he said to me if ever you go across to Paris to work, let me know and some day we might have a studio in this country to work at the standard or level that the French ateliers do because he had to send any

artist that he commissioned across onto the continent. There was no one in this country who could do that kind of work. He could cope with etching because there were one or two etching printers, there was a Mr Welsh who had a professional etching set up and he could work with people like Anthony Gross.

.....

He said I don't know the Curwen Press, I know of them. He said well if you go back to London, would you mind meeting the managing director because they have the intention, two young directors of forming a studio, not in the building because they don't want any problems with the union. But further down the road there was a set of stables that they can convert for artists' use. This was how, in the long term, in November 1958 this was finally completed as a studio and what you've got is myself at that time down in st Ives because I'd come back on the assumption that Robert Erskin's studio would be ready. It wasn't so he sent me down to St Ives to work with Patrick Heron and Barbara Hepworth and people like that. But we had to take all the equipment because there wasn't anything there, to demonstrate to them and help them to proof ideas for him to publish in his gallery. So this is how we, in November, took all the equipment back to London, put it in the new studio with other equipment and began the new studio. It was the only one at the time, in London.

And the curious thing was, without any advertising it attracted a constant stream of artists. Erskine, and Timothy Simon who was the main director commissioned people to come and for the first time produce limited edition prints by hand for this market that was beginning to grow in this country. Once you get a situation like that it rapidly spreads and eventually by the 1960s there was a growing boom beginning in London. And gradually Paris lost it's domination, and with New York as well you've got a growing interest in Printmaking. In it's wake you get individuals in Art Schools actually wanting to make prints as part of their

## And establishing their own workshops

Yes that's right. So the 1960s for us were very important. And we moved the studio because it was so successful, into Tottenham Court Road, into premises in Bedford Place and my book which I'll show you later on gives you photographs of what the activity actually was. We stayed there until 1989 and established it's reputation which became worldwide. But that in a nutshell sets the scene.

Perhaps you are wanting to know who really pioneered all this (Printmakers Council).. Well other people apart from Curwen, including Birgit Skiold, who was actually operating before myself because she had a premises in Charlotte's Street – etching and some lithography – where a lot of people met and talked about printmaking as an artform and she was fanatical in spreading this idea. And its from her that a lot of all these ideas about societies and exhibitions originated. She came from a culture which was already well aquainted with artists making prints. In this country, as I say, it had died and disappeared so it's really her origination that we are talking about. And I think this is where she becomes one of the important.......

## The particular idea of the artist print rather than a reproduction of something

Absolutely, this has always been a battle I'm afraid. It was even more so in those days

I expect you've had the same conversation about reproductions and limited editions

Oh yes, on going.. even today there's a lot of confusion but it's a lot better than it used to be.

## I get the feeling it's worse

Perhaps you want to ask me, Margaret about

I'd like to ask you about the origins of the PmC and the connection

Well can I just be very general about this because if you can imagine a city like London with all kinds of activity around arts schools and so on but not much to do with printmaking. You did have societies, exhibiting societies who were professional artists making prints by whatever means. The Senefelder club that I was a member of was one of these societies that had existed since about the 1900s and it was every year they had an exhibition, people submitted prints and most of them were done by artists with their own equipment. They would have a small litho press and that would be their submission each year, to produce one or two prints. Even Matisse was a member of it, can you imagine? Yes how he got involved I've no idea. But it was a society that had an up and down existence, sometimes more successful than others, you can imagine. But it only dealt with lithography and the etchings more or less were put in the hands of the Painter Etchers. Do you know them?

#### The RE

Well what is now the RE, yes, But in those days it was a very separate society. It would not entertain anything in colour. It had a charter from the Royal Family to say how it had to operate, it was mostly in black and white, engraving, very respectable in all aspects but totally narrow in its concept.

# The charter still exists but it's been revised radically.

Yes, when I was a member of the council, the Printmakers Council, I went to see them because I had the idea that we should have a combined exhibition in London so that the public could have an idea of what original printmaking could be, and I met the president, a man called Harry Ecclestone and he actually was a designer of banknotes, that was his main occupation, and I had this appointment with him and he said oh, you're from this Printmakers Council and I said yes, we're a broadly based printmaking organisation and I'd like to suggest an exhibition including your members and some date that we can agree on. He said 'hang on a minute, we can't combine with you at all. First of all you're using colour which has been banned by us, and also we're not allowed to combine with anybody. He said it would not be allowed, full stop. That was

the end of the meeting more or less, he said the charter won't allow it. I thought how on earth do these people live? From decade to decade with this very narrow way of thinking. So we went off back to a meeting of the PmC to discuss this . And it was decided to link more with galleries who were by then publishing prints on a broader basis, and see if we could organise a big exhibition which would include anybody in the country who wished to send work for selection and luckily this is how the major exhibition started

## The National Print Open?

Yes, the original one that began was Robert Erskine. He started at the whitechapel an annual exhibition which began as a national show, and from then on each year until his funding ran out, he had this major exhibition, Graven Image, it was called. Come across it?

## Yes, I have

This print of mine was in it

Yeah, yeah..... and he won £200 and was able to have a garage on the side, unheated

These were pioneering days believe me!

It's interesting that that principle of people sending in work from any part of the country which still is a major part of how shows operate. They are very radically different from say the RE where you have to become a member before you are even considered.

That's right, they make it an obligation

Are they still not in colour?

You can use colour now, you can even use silkscreen

Do they approach the Queen for something?

You do have to, ironically to change any precept in the consititution you have to apply to , I've forgotton exactly which government office it is.. which communicates with the royal family and it has to go and be signed by the monarch and approved and you pay a fee for doing it. Every change would cost you about £700..... they haven't changed things for a bit, it's not cheap....... costly business. They could turn round and say no we don't want to sign this. It hasn't happened but it is a bizarre situation to find yourself in.

How did it begin?

It began because a group of artists who were really copyist engravers of other people's work, same story, because if you are a copyist you are not a real artist. They tried to apply to join the Academy and the Academy refused so they went away to establish their own organisation and it grew from that.

It was the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were very skilled operators. There's nothing.... to give them their due, they had a whole series of apprentices and workshops and so on. Central London used to be fully alive with this industry of engraving. It was a recognised operation. All kinds of people disapproved of their attitude and so on but it was a commercial idea, and you've got banknotes, this is where you've got our friend the president, Harry Ecclestone, he ended up. That was his skill really, engraving.

What were the other achievements of the Printmakers Council that you can remember?

You see what you are looking at is a group of people, and I'm not quite sure, you see I knew Birgit very well, because Birgit and I had talked a lot about Printmaking when I was a student at the Slade, I used to walk across Tottenham Court road because Charlotte Street is parallel to it, and see what she was doing and we had this conversation. When I disappeared to Paris she said to me 'don't stay too long because I have ideas'. This was the kind of thing that happened, and when I came back the studio began a particular level. You see I was absolutely determined that the level of the work should be the best possible of printing and edition printing and so on. Now these are things that Erskine particularly wanted so that he could exhibit the work in international exhibitions and so on, so his ideas were correct, you had to train people in the studio as well as do the work. And this is when Jenny first came to the studio because she was working in the London office, this is how she and I met

Timothy Simon had heart trouble, a young man, very ill, and so the reason for me to be there, they didn't know what to do with me and so they brought me down and that's how I met Stanley.

There were all sorts of issues which I won't go into now because they're not to do with the PmC, but there was the union problem which I managed to get through, I'll tell you some other time. But basically, the men working in the factory where the machines that were meant for printing steel but were now printing zinc plate, we were supplying them with artists' work on a plate for producing posters, book illustrations, and so on and this was a good thing because I got to know the people working the machines. It took a time, but gradually a good relationship built up and for the first time ever they were handling what they termed as non-union work. You know this was the mentality that actually happened for a long time actually. But we didn't have any strikes or walkouts or anything like that.

It would be demarcation, whatever the limits of the job had been previously agreed.

That's right. I was given a certificate by the union which gave me permission to actually touch the machines

The holy grail!

Yes, it was curious

You are laughing but I do remember this, especially when I was very young, looking at the print industry, thinking about college, and there were all these strange levels of demarcation, where you would be allowed to do this or that but no further.

This is the background to it. Now Birgit and I got the idea that because we'd got no positive response from the other society, that we should form our own committee, which would encourage progressive printmaking. You see what had happened was the School of Paris and New York were bringing artist to London and sending, and the kind of work they were doing was totally different to the more conservative English Printmaking ideas were at the time. So we were keen to be more rebellious if you like.

#### Was this still in the Fifties?

The Fifties? Yes. And who actually became part of it. You had a committee of about six people. You probably know who they were because...

## Michael Rothenstein

Michael was one of them, Birgit, you had Bernard Cheese, you had the sculptor Gertrude Hermes, she was one of them as well. And myself and I think there was one other,

#### Clem Beer?

Yes, yes. And a lot of other people anxious to support it, but they wouldn't like to sit on the committee you see. So you had an outfield of supporters but the committee actually comprised that number of supporters. And we were active in the sense that we met initially in Birgit's workshop, to discuss a policy and so on. Gradually through meeting and talking we got this off the ground as an exhibiting society, but it took about four or five years of this to get this recognised by people, educationalists, gallery dealers, and so on because it had come out of the blue. It had not got a long traditional element attached to it. And from then on it gradually attracted practising artists so that they could show their work not only in galleries but through these chanels. Now you are talking about 1962 to '65 for this to get off the ground.

Yes, one of the dates of the very first meetings was the 23rd June 1965

Do you know where it was held?

## The ICA?

### In Dover street

In Dover street, you've got Editions Electo publishing prints, you get Cornwall Jones and the Petersburg press publishing prints. You get a whole lot in Cork Street of private publishers suddenly from America and from the continent, bringing in artists and it began to grow as an atmosphere of productivity generally, and in Art schools of course once you get this happening you get students anxious to benefit from all this activity.

There was also a connection with the US, do you remember that?

Yes, it varied, because in New York there were quite a few established printing places and people publishing prints but there were also quite a few societies, exhibiting societies that invited the PmC to send work and vice versa so there began to be a much freer interchange between countries and the PmC began to have a certain status, to get a status to you have to have a lot of work and be patient about progress, but it did actually take off the ground.

Do you know what size, from about '65 onwards, what kind of size of membership was there?

To begin with not large, you're talking about 50 members, no more than that. And of course once you get art schools providing printmaking courses, you then get young people making prints and wanting to send to PmC exhibitions so it began to grow very much on that basis. You also had a lot of artists who had associations with galleries who would become a member of the PmC as well. So that also helped and gave it a status.

That's how I remember finding out about the PmC, through all my lecturers being members of the PmC, I don't know when I first became a member it must have been about that time. That was a bit later on, early 70s.

Yes, actually the big problem that we had was finance....... the Arts Council would never give us any money, for various reasons. And at one stage we used to meet in an old building in Farringdon which once housed Hunter Penrose material and that was our regular meeting place. It had an office and we were allowed to have the meetings in the hall of this building. But it was actually Camden Borough Council, they were the people who gave us most agro because they used to present us with conditions for giving us money. Because it was a labour council they were anxious that the people we had in the PmC, it wasn't the work, it was the political attitudes that the were interested in... so we refused finally to cooperate on this so we raised money by other means. But finance always was an issue

Initially it was supported by the Arts Council

There was an person working in the office whose name I now forget, there was a three year grant

I remember that grant, don't I?

Yes

I'm hazy on the history of this, but at one point we did get some money, and it dried up because the arts council criteria for funding has changed, rightly or wrongly, because it's a public body they put very particular criteria, which essentially would be impossible to fulfil. Rather than saying lets support an organisation that's promoting good work from everybody because we don't have exclusion clauses, but we could be seen as an organisation that could fulfil the expectations of public funding.

I believe that one of the ways that they did fund raise was to make the PmC non selective, increase the membership

Yes, that's right there were all kinds of issues that developed with it. Exhibiting in this country or abroad was always a prime concern, and they did manage to make a lot of contact with societies on the continent and have exhibitions and so on. By the skin of its teeth it managed to survive. It's been one of the things that's always been difficult to operate because of that, because most of the members or the committee members were fully occupied doing their own work or teaching or something like that so to keep a steady progression year in year out wasn't easy. This is the kind of background we all had to cope with. There's no escape from it you see. I was very pleased that you'd managed to get this lottery grant, does this help at all?

Oh, absolutely it does help

Because that's what would give it background stability you see

I seem to remember it was difficult to have anybody in the office

This is it, a lot of the people are volunteering or something and because of that you get the wrong people doing the jobs, not doing it efficiently, and so on.

It's very much a voluntary organisation and you have to take people as they are

And be thankful that they are willing to do it almost

So, its had a very checkered kind of history. During the years of the Print Biennales in this country it too did very well I think in Bradford........... But I had to retire from it because the Curwen Company and all its ramifications was taking a great deal of my time and I couldn't really devote proper time to it. So my initial participation in it gradually diminished. People died off like Michael and so on, and of course, Birgit, so you're left with a succession of people hoping to keep it going but not the original inspired group that tried to bring in the concept of printing ideas, modern ideas, things which would excite the public and students and so on, which I was sort of very much involved in with the studio at Curwen.

# It's quite a long track record isn't it?

What I find interesting from what Stanley's been saying is how much still survives in a slightly different form but essentially the tenet that you've just described is the tenet that still exists today. We've moved it around a bit and done different things but essentially it's the same.

You see there now exists a body of people like yourselves who are aware of print and aware of it's potential. Key to it really is to hand on that potential to succeeding generations.