

# Experiments and traditions in Ukrainian contemporary printmaking

## ABSTRACT

*The article covers the phenomenon of synthesis of traditions and innovations in contemporary Ukrainian printmaking. The trends of today's art of circulation graphic arts in Ukraine, novelty, tools of artists of the new generation are considered. The problem of danger of classical techniques disappearing due to strengthening of C.A.D. positions is raised. Attention is focused on ways to preserve classical traditions using the example of intaglio techniques: etching, mezzo-tint, aquatint, dry point. The main trends in the existence of these techniques and ways of their preservation in various combinations are analysed. Work of the most distinctive schools (Lviv, Kyiv, Odesa), their brightest representatives who use traditional intaglio techniques, combining them, experimenting with technology, materials, creating new variations of traditional techniques, is covered. Attention is focused on the work of the Lviv school representative Oleh Denysenko who patented a new technique he invented, "gesography", which became the most important tool in the process of preserving printmaking, in the modern artistic field and transforming it into an updated stronghold of fine arts of modern times.*

## KEY WORDS

printmaking, etching, art-book, gesography, levkas, aquatint, mezzo-tint

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## Introduction

Ukrainian art of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is the territory of challenge. A challenge that traditional classical art poses to contemporary artistic process. A challenge of today's art field to its predecessors – the battle of traditions and innovations does not always lead to creation of an organic synthesis, sometimes this process results in complete destruction of one of the participants. A challenge from the part of classical heritage, in its turn, to modern experimentalism, asserting the need for classical training, education, school. But one thing is certain – today's Ukrainian art lives in an era of experiment. And one of the most striking examples of its implementation is the art of printmaking. It is the one which refers to one of the most complex forms of art that are in a borderline state today – the question of its future is being decided. Printmaking has always been difficult for a viewer as well as for an artist or a critic. For creator it's difficult in technological, economic aspects, since

various graphics techniques (especially printmaking) require knowledge of materials technology, the basics of chemistry when creating sheets. Later – of the basics of pricing when selling them, since circulation graphics has many specific conditions when selling works.

## Traditions and innovations in contemporary Ukrainian graphic arts

The milestone of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries challenges specifically graphic arts, both free and printmaking. And above all this is due to emergence of new technological opportunities for artists, making it easier for themselves to create a graphics artwork, first of all – computer technologies, computer graphics. It is this technique, in all its diversity, that is rapidly pushing classical printmaking away from its leading position (Romanenkova, 2015).

It is difficult to say that these phenomena will be able to coexist – young generation gets used very quickly to innovations of C.A.D. (computer aided design), the arsenal of which can imitate watercolours, pastels, pencil drawing, many effects of printmaking techniques, artificial intelligence tools also come to help this arsenal. When looking at a work, it is impossible to determine with the help of solely primary visual examination how it was created, modern technologies challenge classical printmaking techniques imitating them. As a result, the system of values within the art field is changing radically. Among designers of the new generation there is an opinion that it is not at all obligatory to be able to draw, a necessary program, an application or an artificial intelligence will do everything what's needed (Chyrva & Olenina, 2021).

Therefore, the foundations of art education are changing, the principles of pricing for works created in this way shift as well. Printmaking is pushed into the background much faster than free graphic arts, since mastery of its techniques requires training, professionalism is achieved by experience, skill, and scrupulous work. Today hardly anyone is able to do this or choose to do so. If one still can experiment with charcoal and pastels of different types, etch an etching, combine it with aquatint or mezzo-tint, cut an engraving on steel or do miracles on lithographic stone today is a task which not so many masters are able to comply with, mostly those of an old school, academically trained Romanenkova, Bratus & Kuzmenko (2021). Artist-printmaker masters drawing, plastic anatomy, the basics of chemistry, composition, color, he must know the properties of metals, be able to work with a burin, acid and much more. While with the help of computer graphics all this remains beyond attention, some designers do not have art education. But own computer programs and facilitate their tasks as much as possible when making what is called works of art which imitate works created using printmaking techniques. Classical techniques are being seriously challenged, they turned to be on the verge of extinction. Of course, from the point of view of value of such works, even in terms of pricing criteria, this cannot be compared with what is created by artists using free-form and printmaking techniques. It is clear that the value of a pastel or an etching, even taking into account the possibility of replicating a printmaking sheet, is undeniable. However, accessibility and ease of mastering technical skills of creating a kind of a “clone” of a printmaking work using computer graphics, do their job. Mini-print, for example, is increasingly using computer graphics in its arsenal. Ex-libris created with its help have been popularized for more than two decades, in the late 1990<sup>ies</sup> there already have been masters in Ukraine who switched to these techniques, like Kyiv artist R. Vygovskiy, who actively used them when creating book plates (Figure 1) or Kyiv resident Yu. Kamenetskaya who created ex-libris in C.A.D. in the 2020<sup>ies</sup> (Romanenkova et al., 2022) (Figure 2).



» **Figure 1:** *Vygovsky R. Ex libris P. Nesterenko. C.A.D. 1997.*



» **Figure 2:** *Kamenetskaya Yu. Ex libris I. Pavelchuk. C.A.D. 2023*

Young generation gets used to such an arsenal of technical capacities very quickly, and giving up such an ease in creating a printmaking work is hardly possible. That's why adequate response options have to be searched for as a reaction to challenge posed to classical techniques of graphic arts, first of all, it goes about printmaking. And only experiment can be an answer. Printmaking for all its diversity would have been doomed to disappear, if masters had not experimented with techniques and had not offered something new, that could make this type of art be kept in sight of an audience and prevent it from fading away.

Only experiment may be an answer to rapid popularization of graphic works created using computer graphics techniques. And its product is a work that is difficult or impossible to imitate and replicate (Kamenetskaya, 2018).

The art of Ukrainian printmaking accepted the challenge of modern realities. Itself it challenged today's artistic processes and exploded with novelty, experiments in the field of techniques, technological innovations and not only survived in the cultural space, but also reached new horizons. In fact, this already is about a symbiosis of traditions and innovations, updated classics, demonstrating the courage and non-standard technological solutions of masters. So, the main goal of this article is to prove that the classical traditions of Ukrainian graphic arts cannot be replaced or displaced by any technological innovations, while new technologies enrich classical graphic arts and serve it.

## Experiments in contemporary printmaking of Ukraine (intaglio)

Masters who presume to remain faithful to the art of printmaking always try to resort to non-standard solutions. This happens not only in printed graphics, where the field for experiments is very wide, but technically quite complex and burdensome. But that is it, which became a kind of a Rubicon, a peculiar contact zone where interesting processes take place.

An example of this is artists' appeal to the phenomenon of an artbook, an author's book. There experiments are conducted which may be called a mirror reflecting all the processes peculiar to present-day printmaking. At the same time this is a preservation, maintaining interest in a book and an attempt to introduce novelty of form, technique, technology into a traditional phenomenon, to preserve traditional techniques instilling interest in them. It is especially important to emphasize that quite often art book becomes an object of study for future artists – a task of creating an art book is quite popular in art institutions of today's Ukraine.

Such works are also created using free graphics techniques, experimenting both with the form of a book itself and with illustrative content. For example, Kyiv graphic artist Anna Myronova turns to the art book herself (and encourages design students to work with the book as well).

The works by A. Myronova most often relate to avant-garde research, studies in the field of non-objective art, free graphic arts techniques, different variations of drawing. Illustrations of a number of artbooks by this artist are abstract in content, sometimes she works on her book for quite a long time.

Sometimes an artbook becomes a symbiosis of free graphic arts and printmaking techniques, when artist synthesizes both, creating a kind of fusion of traditions and innovations in one work. An example of such experiments is the artbook by Kateryna Pirog in which letterpress techniques are used (engraving on cardboard, blind printing and free graphic arts tools – liners, drawing).

Sometimes an artbook becomes not only a work of art, but also a form of active communication, a tool that quickly and directly conveys the idea to the viewer.

This is how the art book 2023 which covers everyday life of refugees from Ukraine in 2022 was used – the project “Visual Diary of War” includes illustrations by Antonina Semenova, was presented in one of the Dnipro museums (Figure 3).



» **Figure 3:** Semenova A. Artbook “Visual war diary”. 2023

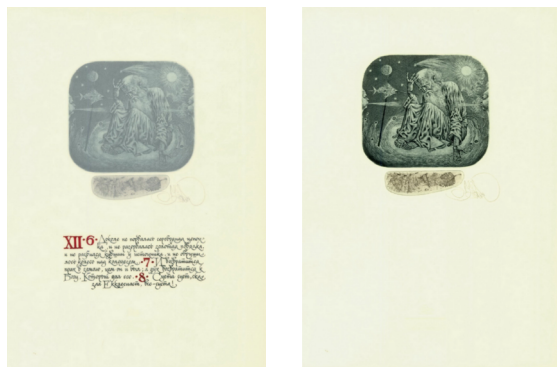
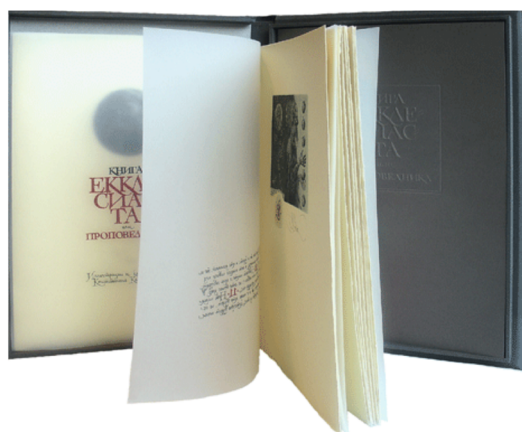
Young artists use liners, pencil, ink to create their artbooks, but also turns to C.A.D. experimenting in this case more with the form of an art book. This is a significant educational aspect – generation of future designers receives the basics, getting used to culture of creating a book, significance of a work which is not subject for replication, has to be unique, as it used to be with a book several hundreds years ago, when each one was created and decorated by hand.

Even if in the process of creating an artbook printmaking techniques are used, it may remain exclusive despite technical possibility of replication. In this case such exclusiveness becomes possible either thanks to the highest level of professionalism in execution of works or thanks to non-standard technological solutions. Example might be the “Ecclesiastes” artbook with illustrations by the Luhansk artist Konstantin Kalynovych (World of art, 2024).

This is the case when an artbook can be considered as a standard appeal by an artist-printmaker to the heritage of printing and a proof of traditions being maintained at the highest professional level (Romanenkova & Araya Berrios, 2021). This publishing project by Tymofei Markov and Kiril Aveliev is also a kind of challenge posed to computer technology in service of contemporary art.

Of course, it is not correct to match and counterpose these categories, but in this case we are talking about C.A.D. as personified innovations of the modern artistic field, and about classical printmaking as an epitome of traditions, so the parallel is appropriate. The “Ecclesiastes” project is a challenge to innovation from traditionalist professionals for whom the main weapon is a high level of professionalism, including technological one.

Back in the 1990<sup>ies</sup> K. Kalynovych was creating illustrations for the book “Ecclesiastes” (Belichko, 2017), as a result of which a handwritten version of the book with etchings appeared. It was created in only two copies: one, in the author’s binding, is kept in the USA (Mount Holly Oak College- 1997), the second – in Russia (collection of K. Aveliev- 2002). Few more years the artist made etchings for “Ecclesiastes” in small editions, but, as a result, ten years later they were put together again (Book “Ecclesiastes” or Priacerh) (Markov & Aveliev, 2012).



» **Figure 4:** Kalynovych K. Book «Ecclesiastes» or *Preacher*. Etching, calligraphy, relief stamping, hand cast paper. 2012

Already in 2012 a printed version was created, also with illustrations using the intaglio technique (Figure 4). Several years were spent on this work, it became the fruit of collective labor. This work is created in classical traditions of the French livre d'artiste with unbound sheets (Markov & Aveliev, 2012). The text was made by Dmytro Bugaienko using the silk-screen technique, German hand cast paper “Hahne Muhle” (300 g/m<sup>2</sup>) became its basis, gift

box is covered in fabric with a genuine leather spine, protective case is made of acid-free cardboard (Book “Ecclesiastes...”), bookbinding and stamping were done by Alexander Barsuk. The book was published after several years of painstaking work on it (1993-1996). The circulation of this publication is only 33 copies, after offprint of the last copy was done, the artist put the stamp “Circulation closed” on printing boards, which significantly increases price of such work of book and printmaking art, since it is no longer possible to repeat it. One copy of the book on trade, at different auctions, was valued at amounts (as of today) ranging from 1,650 to 2,200 US dollars.

Eight sheets of hand cast paper, size 29.7x21 cm, with etchings, placed in parchment paper with fragments of text from the Old Testament, protected by tracing paper with the author's calligraphy, with quotations from “Ecclesiastes”, all enclosed in a folder-dust jacket with relief stamping, all together placed in a protective case. All eight etchings are monochrome, the artist does not attract attention with a flashy palette and does not combine the classical etching technique with another arsenal. In general, the author’s book synthesizes etching, calligraphy, relief stamping, highly professional examples of bookbinding, which gives the idea of professionals’ capacities in this field already at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## New art with ancient traditions: Lviv school invention

Works by K. Kalynovych, representative of the Luhansk school of graphic arts, can be considered an outpost of of printmaking traditions in the modern art field, almost always he turns to pure etching, not combining it with other intaglio techniques, and only from time to time tinting it with watercolours by hand. Of course, there is a number of artists who work primarily in etching without adding effects of other techniques (O. Fedorenko, A. Voznyi, A. Melnykova, O. Kryvoruchko, B. Drobotiuk, etc.), there are many Lviv residents among them (Romanenko et al., 2021). Serhii Aksinin, Yulia Protsyshyn, Bohdan Pikulyts`kyi, Serhii Ivanov, for example, can be placed among them (Shepet', 2019). The latter works in monochrome etching, creating complex multifaceted compositions, but in pure etching, without enriching neither the technique with mixtures, nor the palette with additional colours; Lviv graphic master Serhii Khrapov, whose printmaking of small forms is always monochrome, and at the same time complex both in conceptual solutions and compositional structure (Figure 5), periodically limits himself to pure etching. Vladimir Pinigin, who has experience in a variety of techniques, also often preferred etching in its pure form. Lviv graphic artist O. Dergachov demonstrates examples of high professionalism in etching technique in both monochrome and colour variants.





» **Figure 5:** Hrapov S. "Semiotic phantoms". Etching. 2017

Special place in this cohort belongs to Oleh Denysenko whose etchings are always monochrome, most often complicated with interspersing of calligraphic combinations which are multi-layered, as regards the filling of sense, and also monochrome. At the same time, many artists of Kyiv, Odesa, and Lviv schools resort to synthesis, experimenting with various combinations of techniques when creating their prints. It is almost impossible to visually determine techniques used to create a printed sheet, it may be difficult even for a professional. Viewer, naked eye, won't distinguish pure etching from what is usually called "mixed technique". Intaglio masters experiment with a combination of different techniques using the most characteristic technological methods, combining them in one sheet, bringing complexity to perfection, achieving desired effect, creating unique textures, colour effects and character of a stroke. Etching and aquatint, etching combined with aquatint and mezzo-tint have become the most popular combinations, variations of dry point and mezzo-tint are used not so often, but there are also cases when 4-5 intaglio techniques like etching, aquatint, mezzo-tint, soft varnish, dry point can be combined in one graphic sheet.

In such sheets, of course, visual effects are much richer – depth of tone is easier to achieve, there are often variations in the palette, the texture is varied, which is more often manifested on backgrounds or large planes of compositions.

The popular combination "etching, aquatint" ( $C_3C_5$ ) is not an identifying feature of a particular school – representatives of various outposts of printmaking resort to it. Such examples as sheets of Odesa artist Hennadii Vereshchagin, Lviv residents Mikhaïlo Drimaylo, Vasyl Fenchak, Mariana Miroshnychenko, Kyiv graphic artists Ruslan Agirba, Kostiantyn Antiukhin and others can be given as a proof of it.

Such a combination of technological experimental research, complicated by introduction of mezzo-tint, as is done, for example, by the Kyiv artist Oleh Naboka (Figure 6) is of additional interest. At the same time, sheets remain monochrome, while, for example, the works of Mykhailo Drimaylo are polychrome (Figure 7) following Roman Romanyshyn from Lviv. He works in the same combination of techniques – etching with aquatint. Introduction of additional (especially bright) colours into graphic sheets in mixed technique gives them decorativeness, in some cases – even lubok features (R. Romanyshyn, M. Drimaylo), variegation.



» **Figure 6:** Naboka O. Ex libris J. Sleep. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint. 2007



» **Figure 7:** Drymaylo M. Ex libris H. Manche. Etching, aquatint. 2019

Dominant significance of line weakens, and the emphasis shifts to spot, colour, which brings the complex of means of impact of a work of art on a viewer closer to those of painting. Quite often masters use a combination of “dry point and aquatint” which gives an interesting result, visually just as rich in texture and effects. This combination gives a synthesis of background depth and dryness, clarity of line, combination of deep saturated spot and a velvety stroke, and, if it is also enriched with colour, then the texture can resemble a pencil drawing, as, for example, by the Vinnytsia artist Serhii Kyrnytskyi (Figure 8), Odesa graphic artist David Bekker.

A characteristic feature of the representatives of the Lviv school, who experiment with textures combining technological tools of several techniques, is monochrome. They resort to rich palette only occasionally. While Kyiv and Odesa schools are more inclined to experiment with polychrome, without abandoning work with black and white or monochrome graphic arts created by combining mezzo-tint, aquatint and dry point.

Interesting effects are obtained from a combination of etching, dry point and mezzo-tint. In this combination Lviv graphic artist Serhii Udovychenko creates his sheets by resorting to complex technological processes combining these three techniques in one sheet, complementing it with multicolour, while the palette, unlike colour variations of Mykhailo Drimaylo or Roman Romanyshyn, is most often soft, pastel, with delicate stretches and half-tones.

Any such experiment, that generates an unusual texture, a combination of strokes of different densities and degrees of rigidity and different textures, becomes a pledge of printed graphics being still viable, competitive, having the richest potential and positioning itself as a unique, inimitable phenomenon.

But Ukrainian artistic field is known for one more representative of the Lviv school, who went even further in his technological experiments, which led to birth of a new phenomenon in contemporary art, which has no precedents (Streltsova, 2023a).

Oleh Denysenko, mentioned above in connection with the characteristics of Ukrainian etching, created an art phenomenon, the uniqueness of which is officially confirmed by being certified – the invention is patented. Sometimes this is called a new type of art, sometimes – a technique (which is closer to the truth), but the main thing is a synthetic, boundary nature of the phenomenon, which the author himself called “gesography” (Antiquitas Nova, 2024).

There are many reasons for its emergence, and among them is the subconscious, at the genetic level, artists’ desire to adopt the right of existence of classical art in

its academic foundations, to preserve traditions, giving them new life through experiments with techniques and technologies. Gesography, purely technically, lies at the intersection of levkas, graphic arts and sculpture. This type of author’s art implies excellent mastery of intaglio techniques, knowledge of technological features of levkas in which Oleh Denysenko often works and of the tools of sculpture, as long as we are talking about relief, working with volume, surface texture (Streltsova, 2022a).



» **Figure 8:** Kyrnytsky S. *Ex libris Li Na Mann*. Dry point, mezzotint. 2017

Gesography is the quintessence of characteristic features of icon painting, etching, relief. It not only lies at the junction of graphics, painting and sculpture, but is also at the border of high art and craft: it is used to decorate things of an applied nature (Streltsova, 2023b; Streltsova, 2022b). Oleh and Olexandr Denysenko, father and son, using oil, levkas, wood, taking Oleh’s etchings as a basis, recreate these compositions in their unique technique, not just giving them a second life, but also turning everyday objects into works of art (Mihalchuk, 2020).

Most often gesographies are author’s replicas of artist’s philosophically interpreted compositions, converted into another technique. Unlike etching each such work is unique. Material comes from painting, complex of visual techniques of artistic language – from graphics, work with a surface plane – from sculpture. Curious to learn is that when studying only a reproduction or a digital image of such work, it is perceived exclusively as a graphic sheet, touched up with a colour but rather a monochrome etching, with all characteristics intrinsic to it. And only when perceived “live”, at studying the original, by seeing dimensions, the plane itself, its thickness, seeing and knowing the materials used, the basis, the viewer understands that he faces a symbiosis not only of techniques, but also of types of art based on several categories at the same time.

Most often gesographies as independent works of art are quite large in size, which distinguishes them from printmaking works which mostly tend to seclusion.



As an example works that were exhibited at many exhibitions can be given: "Iron Wing" (gesography: wood, levkas, oil, 114x76 cm, 2021), "Saint Christopher" (gesography: wood, levkas, oil, 111x73 cm, 2021), "The Flying Pilgrim" (gesography: wood, levkas, oil, 2021), "Elixir of Life" (gesography: wood, levkas, oil, 60x60 cm, 2022), "Euterpe" (gesography: wood, levkas, oil, 84x60 cm, 2022), "Four Elements: Water" (gesography: wood, levkas, oil, 114x84 cm, 2021), etc. Many of gesographies become a means of decorating everyday objects – according to Olexandr Denysenko, craftsmen try to return application-oriented function to high art and at the same time give an aesthetic character to everyday objects (Romanenkova & Streltsova, 2023).

Thus, compositions "Flying Pilgrim" and "Four Elements: Air" (Figure 9) have "double life", both existing as independent gesographies as well as applied works: the image of a pilgrim became an adornment for an iPhone case and a box for it, having turned into a VIP accessory decor, and allegories of the four elements were transferred as table decor base (Figure 10) transforming the interior of the 21st century into a medieval castle or a Renaissance palace accessory, stretching red thread between eras. Thus, the master demonstrates transformation of a work being subjected to peculiar technological "mutations", exploiting the same composition in different techniques – first as an etching, then as a gesography, and finally, as a base for decor of an applied work of art, or rather, thanks to this work, turning an everyday circulation item into an exclusive work of high art (Figure 11).



» **Figure 9:** Denysenko O. "Four elements – air". Gesography. Wood, levkas, oil. 2021



» **Figure 10:** Table with gesography by O. Denysenko "Four elements – air"

## Conclusion

All of the above examples illustrate the main trend of modern Ukrainian printmaking: experimentation as a key to survival and evolution. Many authors abandon classical printmaking techniques because they are complex, expensive and require many years of preparation, that of an artist (to create a work) and of a viewer (to perceive and read it) both. In this case preference is given to computer graphics, which is compelled to become a substitute for traditional graphic techniques, imitation thereof. Tool replaces result for creation of which it is intended to serve. First of all, this concerns the young generation, which, although prone to non-standard solutions and searching for new things, manifests it mainly by facilitating for themselves the process of creation of a printmaking work. But other masters, whom, fortunately, there is a lot, working with traditional techniques and materials, preserve life of classical printmaking, using experiment as their main tool and instrument, that allows to build a modernized object on a traditional foundation, synthesize traditions and innovations, breathe life into academic traditions, making them viable, preserving and developing them while accepting challenges of realities of the new time.





» **Figure 11:** Denysenko O. «Flying Pilgrim»: Etching (1997), geography (2021), iPhone in a case with geography and a mahogany case

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