

## What Is A Monotype?



Daffodils with Purple Drape

*Monotype* means "one" "print". A mono - type is a print of a painting done on glass, plastic or metal, even gelatin. Then it is printed on paper. Artists use a variety of mediums: oil paint, Litho ink, gouache, watercolor, etc. Different effects are achieved by printing on paper that is sized or unsized, wet or dry, heavy or light, machine made or handmade. A *Monoprint* refers to a series of prints from one plate which have been altered by the artist to create a number of unique prints. The technique goes back to the early 1600's. Many great artists like Rembrandt and Castiglione experimented with monotype. Degas did many beautiful prints, sparking interest among his colleagues who also made prints. It is a technique that is very popular with painters.

In 1981 The Metropolitan Museum of Art had a show of monotypes from the seventeenth to the twentieth century titled *The Painterly Print*. A very informative catalog of the same name, depicts many wonderful prints by well known artists who took the medium very seriously, although it is still not well known by the public.



Cymbidium Orchids and



Vermont Autumn

Printmaking has always fascinated me, but the lack of space, time and money prevented me from getting involved with etching and lithography. I have a strong graphic arts background and spent years closely allied with the printing and publishing world so when I "discovered" monotype as a printmaking method I was instantly hooked.

Monotypes take me back in time to my early years as a painter, when I didn't know anything, I had only a crude "technique" and every brush stroke was pure excitement. The exuberance of painting, getting it all down in a rush of energy, was slowly beaten out of me by teachers who said "take your time", "slow down and look", "study your subject carefully before you paint", or "you'll never get it right working that fast!"



Connecticut Sunset

They were right, too. Studying the craft, learning technique, color theory, anatomy, and all the rest that goes into making a picture is important. I can build on that. I love painting details of drapery, eyeballs, lips, flower petals, highlights on glass pitchers. But quick drying paint on a plastic panel won't wait for me to do all that. I have to select. I have to catch the moment.

Painting *alla prima* is demanding, vigorous and thrilling. I am once again new to painting. Because each monotype is an investment of a day or two, or perhaps only hours, instead of

months for a major painting, I can take risks and chances. I become loose, big, intense, and painterly. At any moment in the process of producing a print a disaster awaits; the paint is too thick, too thin, too dry, the paper too wet, the paper sticks to the paint, the paper falls apart into a soggy mass. Suddenly I'm eighteen again, and careering down a country road with the top down and the music loud, almost, but not quite, out of control.

I love fine paper. With Monotypes I can experiment with different textures, weights, and types. Heavy etching paper, the consistency of blotting paper, dampened, gives a lovely soft look to the print. Tissue thin oriental papers that are printed dry make a crisp image while Japanese papers that feature fibers and other additions add a unique texture and surface appearance. Artists use rags, painting knives, erasers, fingers, and other tools to scrape out paint, smear it around, and sometimes paint is allowed to puddle and run with the addition of turps and oils.

I prefer to use plastic for my plate, although glass and metal work well too. If the painting is very large, or complicated, I start the day before and design the painting and draw it with dark paint. Early the next morning I start to paint. I add poppy seed oil to my paint to retard drying. Certain colors have different drying rates which further complicates the process.

Some artists use an etching press to make monotypes. Since I don't have one I use an old silver cooking spoon or a device called a "Palm Press". I lift the edges as I go to check on how the painting is transferring.

The last step is surveying the print. I keep my palette mixtures until the print is finished to touch up any areas that may have dropped out. I prefer not to over paint my prints, although sometimes it is necessary to salvage a day's work!

Doing a monotype reminds me of going fishing. I might catch the biggest fish of my life, or the tastiest, but most of the fishermen I know will say that the thrill is being out there and what they bring home is a bonus.



**Across the Cove** 10 x 12  
Monotype on Rives BFK Etching Paper



**Palm at Dawn** 8 x 10  
Monotype on Grey Rives BFK Etching Paper



**Amaryllis and Mangoes**  
Printed on Japanese  
handmade paper

(Left) This monotype was a lucky survivor of a big mess! I discovered that black is very difficult to transfer to paper, so the whole background was dried out. In an effort to salvage the print I first sprayed the whole thing with water, and when that didn't work, turpentine. I had to over paint a lot of the background, but in the end I began to love it, and it is now the focus of my living room. The delicate Japanese paper was not so delicate after all, and stood up to massive abuse!



**Moonset over the Gulf** 20 x 10  
Monotype on Blue Rives BFK Etching  
Paper