



# MONOTYPE

A SINGULAR IMPRESSION



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onotype is a method of printmaking invented by the Italian artist Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609-1664), though his contemporary Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) is also credited with its sudden popularity in the 1640s.

The terms monotype and monoprint are often used interchangeably. Both involve the transfer of an inked pattern from a plate to paper, canvas, or other surface. A monotype is normally a work created just once, with no repeatable elements, while a monoprint is produced by a plate that has been indelibly altered with an image, feature, or other permanent mark. Monoprints, therefore, can be considered variations on a theme: one aspect of the design persists on the re-usable plate, and changes can be made to the resulting prints — perhaps a different color, some extra texture, etc.

This article focuses on the monotype, however. To create one, the artist draws or paints on a smooth, non-absorbent surface. In the past, this was a copper plate, but today it can be made of almost anything, from zinc to glass. Normally the design is applied in printer's ink onto this surface with a brush, without reference to a previous sketch. The plate's design is then transferred onto a sheet of paper by pressing the two together, usually through a press with rollers. (The ink may be black or colored; it is typically oil-based, but might be water-based. Obviously, the ink's color and viscosity affect the mood of the resulting print, as do the texture and tone of the paper selected.) As in all printmaking, the artist must draw the original image "backwards" because it will ultimately be reversed as it passes through the press.

(THIS PAGE) GIOVANNI BENEDETTO CASTIGLIONE (1609-1664), *An Unidentified Legendary Subject*, 1660, monotype on paper, 10 1/4 x 14 3/4 in. (overall), Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2015. ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE) BOB MUELLER (b. 1957), *Portrait of Dan Greene*, 2012, monotype on paper, 7 x 5 in. Collection of Salmagundi Club, New York City





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(OPPOSITE PAGE) **CANDICE BOHANNON** (b. 1982), *Vigil*, 2015, monotype on paper, 9 x 11 1/2 in. Collection of the artist ■ (THIS PAGE) **CANDICE BOHANNON**'s identically sized ghost print of *Vigil*. Collection of the artist

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17

Robert W. Pelt

The process just described is “additive,” in that the artist adds ink to the plate’s surface, but he or she may prefer a “subtractive” technique. That entails covering the surface with a dark ink, then removing certain areas of the ink so as to form a lighter image. This can be done with brushes, Q-tips, rags, or sticks.

Be it additive or subtractive, monotyping prioritizes gesture, impulse, self-discovery, and chance; all play key roles, and often a mistake yields the most successful part of the final product. Monotype’s uniqueness and unpredictability are alluring to some — though hardly all — kinds of artists.

The monotype process normally produces a single print, because most of the ink comes off during the pressing. If enough ink remains on the plate, however, subsequent pressings are possible: the results are called “ghost prints” and are always more subtle than their predecessors.

Although it first appeared in the 17th century, monotyping was pursued with particular enthusiasm by such 19th-century masters as Degas, Cassatt, and Gauguin; eventually expatriates in Europe (like William Merritt Chase and Maurice Prendergast) brought it home to America. In the mid-20th century, modernists like Pablo Picasso and Milton Avery cherished the method for the highly individual expressiveness it allows. Given all these starry names, it’s no surprise that monotypes can be found in the print rooms of the world’s great museums, and also for sale in commercial galleries. Today this tradition is flourishing among artists who work in a wide array of styles.

### THE SALMAGUNDI CLUB

You literally can find monotypists throughout the United States; among their gathering places are the Monotype Guild of New England and New York City’s Salmagundi Club. The first monotypes associated with the Salmagundi appeared in 1880, when it mounted its third annual “black and white” exhibition at the National Academy of Design, which was open to American and European artists, and also to women. The exhibitor of these “copper plate impressions” was no less than William Merritt Chase, who was not yet a *bona fide* Salmagundian. The following year, such artists as M.J. Burns, Joseph Lauber, and Charles Alvah Walker (who coined the term “monotype”) exhibited their own creations in Salmagundi shows. In the next few decades, they were succeeded by such prolific monotypists as Charles Warren Eaton, J. Francis Murphy, Albert Sterner, Oscar E. Berninghaus, Joseph Henry Sharp, and Xavier Barile.

On April 16, 1897, the Salmagundi hosted its first official “monotype party,” attended by 75 members. An article in an August 1897 issue of *The Book Buyer* paints a delightful picture of the evening’s activities, and monotypes made that night can still be admired on the walls of the club’s headquarters in Greenwich Village. (The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco own an 1897 monotype by the now-obscure artist Corwin Knapp Linson illustrating one of the club’s monotype parties.)

Under the leadership of the artist Robert W. Pillsbury, who now serves as the club’s president, the first Salmagundi monotype party in modern times

took place on February 9, 2010. That event focused on the club’s newly purchased Charles Brand press, one of two presses now in the building. Open to members and non-members alike, these parties are held every month; attendance is capped at 25 people to guarantee sufficient elbow room, and the only cost is a modest materials fee. Each event concludes with a vote on which newly created monotype will be acquired for the club’s permanent collection. Its curator, the artist Bob Mueller, explains that “our re-establishment of the monotype party tradition emerged from a desire to get back to our roots. The creative energy in the room is palpable as artists share in the creative process, exchanging ideas and techniques and basically having a good time, just as their predecessors did.”

### LOOKING FORWARD, AND BACK

Monotype’s distinctive mix of drawing and printing, of infinite combinations and “happy accidents,” continues to attract converts. Not all of them work in communal situations like the Salmagundi Club, however. For example, the Northern California artist Candice Bohannon (b. 1982) lives in a rural area, so she works at home on her own press. Her introduction to monotype came during undergraduate studies at the Laguna College of Art and Design, and now — in addition to drawings and oil paintings — Bohannon creates monotypes using classical methods and also experimental ones that involve dripping and different brushes, textures, and inks.

Artists aren’t the only ones who stand to benefit from monotype’s renaissance. Collectors and connoisseurs can also fall in love with the singular impression, and now is an ideal time to do so. On August 9, the Denver Art Museum will open a rare retrospective devoted to the medium’s inventor, Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione. *Castiglione: Lost Genius* uses 90 drawings, etchings, and monotypes to explore how he produced brilliant works that combine the flair of his draftsmanship with his passion for printmaking, despite a turbulent private life that ultimately prevented him from becoming more widely known. Drawn entirely from the collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the exhibition’s contents have been co-curated by Denver’s own Timothy Standring, who became a Castiglione fan during his graduate studies in 1978. The show will remain on view at Denver until November 8, and then will make its final appearance at Fort Worth’s Kimbell Art Museum (November 22, 2015–February 14, 2016).

Finally, don’t forget that anyone can pre-register for a monotype party at the Salmagundi Club; just wear old clothes and get ready to experiment. You will be glad you did. ●

**Information:** [salmagundi.org](http://salmagundi.org), [denverartmuseum.org](http://denverartmuseum.org). For details, read Henry N. Rasmusen’s *magisterial* *Printmaking with Monotype* (Philadelphia: Chilton Co., 1960).

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See more monotypes in the expanded digital edition of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.



**CORWIN KNAPP LINSON**  
(1864-1959),

*A Monotype Party* (held at the Salmagundi Club when it was headquartered at 14 West 12th Street), 1897, color monotype on paper, 7 3/4 x 7 4/5 in. (image)

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



Robert W. Pillsbury (left) and Bob Mueller (second from left) work the press at a Salmagundi Club monotype party. Photo: Anthony Almeida