



# A NEW MEDIUM IN TRADITIONAL FINE ART GRAPHICS

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*Contemporary fine art is a never-ending search for new meaning, new materials, and new media. Fine art reflects personal attitudes toward reality — and the true artist is constantly trying to break the boundaries of conventional thinking and traditions. But until not so very long ago — and throughout most of human history — art was considered taboo, and artists were viewed as agents of a higher power, almost equal to magicians. Only with the rise of Impressionism at the end of the nineteenth century did artists win full freedom of creative self-expression.*

*illustration by Zenon Burdy // digital*

## COMMERCIAL OR FINE ART? — A BACKGROUND

Just as poetry is considered to be the queen of literature, painting is still viewed as the royalty of all visual fine arts. Maybe this is because painting—like poetry—has the greatest power to communicate feelings. But sculpture, illustration, graphic arts, photography (and lately even video) can all fulfill the true calling of the artist—which is to experiment, manifest, shock, and above all, search for new methods of expression.

The art of reproducing individual images on paper has been utilized in China, India and Japan since ancient times. But it was the development of the letterpress (attributed by some to the Dutchman Lourens Coster) and the invention of moveable type by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s which launched the era of commercial printing and distribution of the printed word, and later art. The first book with illustrations was “Edelstein”, printed by Albrecht Pfister in 1461.

The first recognized graphic arts technique was the woodcut, since wood was an abundant and easily workable material. To make a woodcut, a line art drawing must be chiselled from a block of wood. This stencil is then covered with ink and pressed onto a piece of paper. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, woodcuts generally depicted every day life, architecture and historical scenes and were sold at village fairs, markets and in small general stores in which you could buy anything, including small pictures.

In the meantime, printers (many of whom were graphic artists themselves) kept experimenting with new materials and techniques. Soon they discovered that using metal for stencilling produced more refined results. Thus a new graphic technique was born, called engraving. Engraving is made by drawing on a sheet of copper with a sharp burin. In this technique, ink is applied only to the face of the stencil. Etching, aquatint, intaglio, serigraphy, lithography, linocut, mezzotint, dry point and endless mixed techniques followed.

But since the beginning of graphic arts in the fifteenth century and for the next half millenium, serious painters treated graphics as a hobby or sideline and only a few of the great painters are now recognized as masters in graphic arts. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), Rembrandt (1606-1669), Francesco Goya (1746-1828) were the most renowned artists for using graphic arts methods in their work.

Over a long period of time, printers were separated from the creative process and became what they are now—a production service for graphic designers and artists.

Graphic arts as a recognized category of fine art was really defined only when graphics departments opened in European fine art schools shortly after World War II. And the strict definition of graphic arts said that graphics are those fine art images which could be reproduced as a series of exact prints of the original stencil. But remember that at the time, graphic arts—just as with fine art painting—involved creating images from

scratch from an empty piece of paper, wood or metal. Certainly this was fine art.

But then a few decades later computers came along, and the clear definition of graphic arts grew blurred yet again.

## THE PERSONAL COMPUTER — ADDING NEW AND POWERFUL TOOLSETS TO THE FINE ART PALETTE

The addition of digital technologies as a new and powerful creative toolset increased the palette and reach of the artist. The world has truly become a global village where everyone knows more and more about everyone else. Now artists show their work at international exhibitions and competitions more often than selling it to local patrons, and they use the Internet to send art to galleries and friends in other countries and on other continents. Fine art has become a common denominator for all cultures and all nations.

You can see this most clearly when you follow the top recognized international graphic arts competitions such as Graphic Biennale and Triennale (events organized every two or three years) in Sapporo and Kanagawa (Japan), Frechen (Germany), Venice (Italy), San Paulo (Brazil), Paris (France) and Krakow (Poland) [for a list of the top ten most prestigious international competitions, see page 16].

The computer was introduced as a creative medium for fine art in the early 90s. But the *crème de la crème* of the fine art world were reluctant to embrace it, and it took another half-decade before digital graphics began to be accepted by international competitions and showings. At that time there wasn't even a name for digital graphics and an artist creating work with the use of a computer had to categorize it as “own technique”, meaning it was neither one of the main recognized graphic techniques. Ten years ago even the best computer couldn't do half the things which can be done today with the cheapest one.

It has been about eight years since the first digital art made its way into fine art competitions. But even today the fine art world has not completely accepted digital technologies—most prestigious events still don't have websites, and results from these events are not easy to find online.

To see how computer art is doing in graphic (fine) art competitions, we focused on three recent contests.

**Triennale in Krakow, Poland.** In 1994 there were no awards for computer-generated graphics, but by 1997 three out of twelve awards were for digital art.

**Graphic Biennale, Sapporo, Japan.** Out of 41 awards in 1998, only one was for digital art. But in 2000, just two years later, three of 28 awards were digitally created, and from a total of 161 accepted entries, ten were digital.

**Triennale, Kanagawa, Japan.** The 2001 Triennale also confirms the digital trend: from 203 accepted entries, twenty were computer-generated.

## HOW DO WE DEFINE 21ST CENTURY GRAPHIC ARTS?

Fortunately, the pioneers in digital art have not given up, and with each passing year more artists are choosing to use computers for creative work. At the same time, digital technologies have been evolving at breathtaking speed. Software continues to offer more tools as hardware continues to provide better quality input and output. Today artists can create digital graphics which can be distinguished from graphics created with traditional methods only by a trained eye and a loup.

The number of fine artists using computers is growing steadily, but the odds of winning an award for a digital image at international graphic art competitions are still slim—one in twelve at best, with the average one in twenty.

There is good reason for the general reluctance by the international scene to recognize the computer as a mainstream creative medium for fine art. There are more pros than cons for using computers in fine art, but these pros pose a major obstacle for artists—it is easy to get lured by technical possibilities and allow digital complexity and cheap tricks to degrade aesthetic standards, creating banality instead of art. This is especially true given that much art is used for commercial purposes. The phenomenon of advertising has tended to overshadow fine art, and the ease with which work belonging to other artists can be “borrowed” has led many people to think that creativity no longer drives art and that it has been replaced by push-button tech-

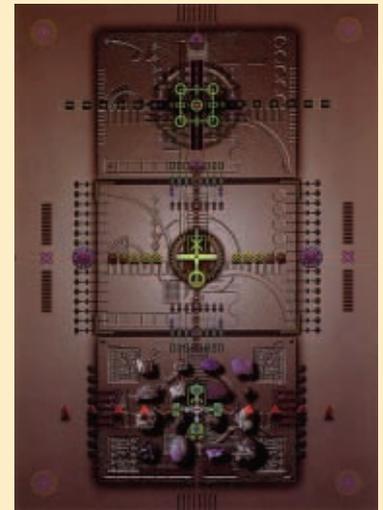
2001 International Print Triennale  
Kanagawa, Japan  
Grand Prize, Julio Cesar Pena Peralta, Cuba,  
*Ruberos del Momento*, woodcut



2001 International Print Triennale, Kanagawa, Japan  
First Prize, Waldemar Wegrzyn, Poland, *Cloning.tif*, digital print



2000 Sapporo International Print  
Biennale, Grand Prize  
Qiang Wang, China  
copperplate/silkscreen



2000 Sapporo International Print Biennale  
Sponsors' Prize, Akiyoshi Miyake, Japan  
*February 11, 1999*, inkjet print



2000 Sapporo International  
Print Biennale  
Sponsors' Prize  
Krzysztof Kiwerski, Poland  
*Cathedral 31*, computer graphics

Note: There is still no official name for computer graphics in international fine art awards — choice of digital terminology is left completely to the artist.

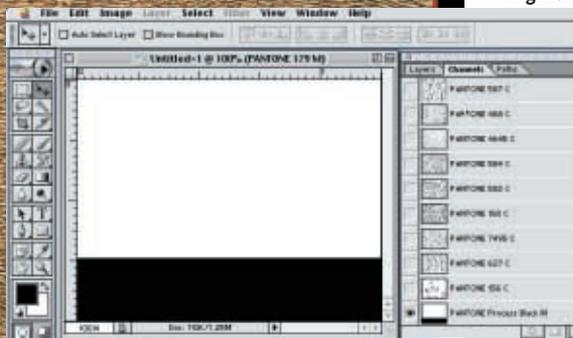
Figure 1



## Six steps for creating a digital linocut using spot color channels in Adobe Photoshop

It took 100 hours to create this linocut using traditional techniques, most of the time spent cutting the design into a piece of linoleum. It took only four hours to re-create it using desktop software.

Figure 2



1. Create a separate black and white line drawing for each stencil. You should make one drawing for each color that you want to use in the final image. Use any draw or paint program, or scan the hand drawings (or you can also draw directly in Photoshop channels).

2. Open a new Photoshop document and in the Image pulldown menu choose Multichannel from the Mode submenu. Regular color channels will change into spot color channels (Figure 1).

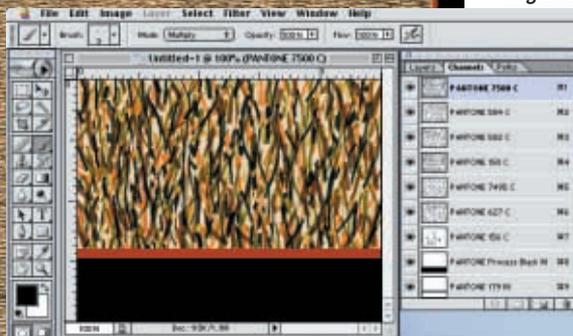
Figure 3



3. Paste your line drawings (or draw directly) in individual channels. You can add a new channel by choosing the New Spot Channel command from the Channels palette flyout menu. You should end up with as many channels as colors you want to use (Figure 2).

4. Double click on a channel icon to get the Spot Channel Options dialog window and assign a specific color to the channel. Repeat this for every spot channel you make (Figure 3).

Figure 4



5. You can preview the color effect simply by making more than one channel visible at a time (Figure 4).

6. If you want to output the file to a desktop printer, this is when you will stop and print. But if your destination is a printing press, you must save the document as a DCS2 file to color-separate it correctly.

*The original linocut titled "Two Red Lines" by Toronto artist Zenon Burdy was displayed at the 2000 Sapporo International Print Biennale.*

niques. Indeed, it appeared for a while that, in this age of computers, artists may have lost sight of the fact that their role is creation—not re-creation.

But when you look at recent results from any fine art graphics competition, (including the *Graphic Exchange Digital Art Awards*), you will see that genuine talent slowly but surely makes its way to the top. Canadians, too, are winning awards and gaining recognition—unfortunately, most often outside their own country. Yes, the chances of being recognized are slim (of thousands of entries in international competitions, on average only a few hundred are accepted). But the best incentive is that it costs almost nothing—average entry fees are only about US\$35 (per artist, not per submission), covering the cost of returning work to the artists.

Famous art theoreticians—including Umberto Eco, Herbert Read or Schirrer—have written countless volumes on ethics and aesthetics in fine art. Endless numbers of artists and fine art com-

petition judges spent their lives arguing over what fine art is and how to judge it. The rules may change over time, but one rule still stands since the rise of Impressionism and the release of the artist's spirit: if an image grabs you, the artist succeeded.

For 21st century fine artists, the digital toolset can be a powerful addition to the creative palette, but let us never forget that it is just another medium within which to work—for in the end genuine fine art remains a skilful blend of thought and technique. ●

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# TOP 10 INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS FOR FINE ART GRAPHICS

For a full list, visit The Biennale internationale d'estampe contemporaine de Trois-Rivières at <http://sites.cgocable.ca/biennale.trois-rivieres/pages/liens.html>

## BULGARIA

International Print Biennale  
65 Lenin Boul.  
9000 Varna

## GERMANY

International Grafik Triennale  
Frechen Kunstverein zu Frechen,  
Johann-Schnitz Platz  
9-M. Postfach 1564  
5020 Frechen

## ITALY

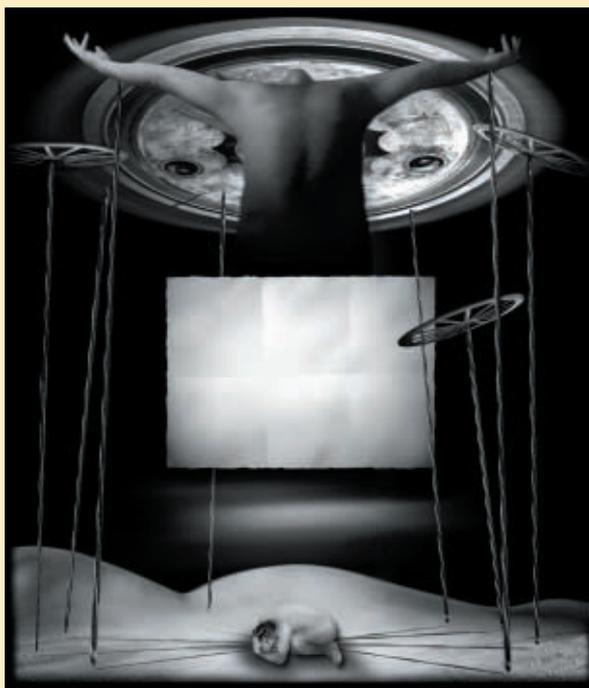
Premio Internazionale Biella per  
L'Incisione  
Via Torino 56  
13051 Biella, Italie  
[www.biella.alpcom.it/biellapr](http://www.biella.alpcom.it/biellapr)

## JAPAN

International Independent  
Exhibition of Prints - Kanagawa  
Kanagawa Prefectural Gallery  
3 - 1 Yamashita-cho  
Naka-ku  
Yokohama-shi  
Kanagawa-ken T231

## Sapporo International Print

Biennale  
Osawa Bldg 6F  
Nishi 1-chome  
Minami 1-jo  
Chuo-ku, Sapporo 060-0061



This 30"x34" digital image by Canadian artist Bohdan Vandiak, titled *I Was Unhappy*, was on display this year in Kiev, Ukraine at the National Museum of T. Shevchenko.

## POLAND

Cracow Triennale International Print  
ul. Dunajewskiego 2/6  
31-133 Cracow  
[www.triennial.cracow.pl](http://www.triennial.cracow.pl)

## SLOVENIA

23rd International Biennial of  
Graphic Art, Ljubljana  
International Ctr of Graphic Art  
Ljubljana 1000, Pod turnom 3  
Grad Tivoli  
[www.biella.alpcom.it/biellapr](http://www.biella.alpcom.it/biellapr)

## SOUTH KOREA

Seoul Intl Print Biennale  
Promotions Department,  
The Dong-A Ilbo, PO Box 307  
Kwang Wha Moon, Seoul

## SWITZERLAND

Xylon International Triennial  
Exhibition of Relief Printing  
Gewerbemuseum Winterthur  
Kirchplatz 14  
CH-8400 Winterthur

## TAIWAN

International Biennial of Print and  
Drawing  
Council for Cultural Planning and  
Development  
102 Ai-Kuo East Road  
Taipei, Taiwan