

Collaboration with the Master Printer, Monsieur Philippe Parage

Matthew Hilton

INTRODUCTION

Printmaking's primary interest for me is the way it captures the traces of an action or sequence of actions, which may be as varied as the artist's imagination, ranging from thumbprints and football marks on a wall-hung paper through to laser printers triggered by the random passage of gallery visitors. In this article, I would like to focus on and draw out some of the forces that mould the traces of actions in the completed print that are inherent in collaboration. I shall give some background information before discussing the nature of the working relationship that has developed between Philippe and I, followed by a narrative of our collaboration. I will conclude with a description of our financial arrangement.

BACKGROUND

I have known Master Printer, Philippe Parage, for ten years. I wanted to walk south from my home near Pamiers, France, towards the Pyrenees, sketching as I went and then working up some editions with him to exhibit in public halls local to those walks. Phillippe's studio is on a busy main road next to a traditional Relais Routier, or lorry driver's lunch stop. He is the last traditional lithographic printer in the Département de l'Ariege.

When an artist has approved the hand-pulled "bon à tirer" proof, Philippe sets up the cast iron and steel machinery that crouches in one corner, a 1930's Marinoni press. Philippe inserts wedges, adjusts screw heights, places paper, loads ink, and presses buttons as carefully and deftly as he would wield a litho crayon or grind a stone to produce limited-edition lithographs. Some of his own works, finely done geometrical lacings, are displayed on the workshop wall.

To support his own practice for the last thirty years, Philippe has attracted three classes of clients. First came commercial commissions, like the facsimiles of classic advertising posters he pulled for the

Musée de l’Affiche (poster museum) de Toulouse, MATOU.

This 1938 Coty advertisement was by Charles Loupot (1892–1962). The poster museum is said to have a collection of 20,000 posters that have been curated into one small exhibition space and is entirely dependent on the generosity of the municipality. Philippe's commission came during a brief flurry of chest-beating that the museum permitted itself at the end of the last century.

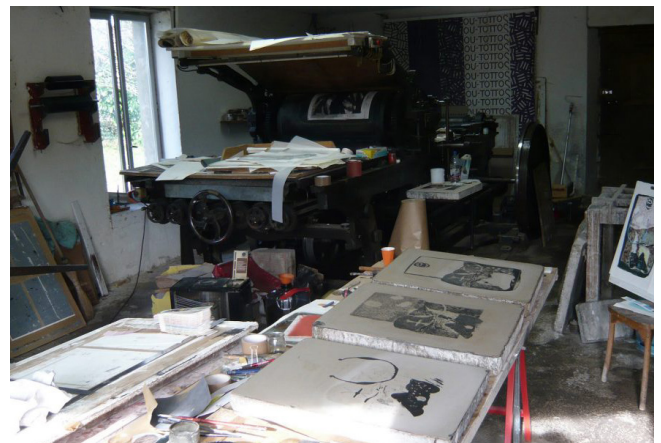


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. The studio. In the background, the Marinoni press. Photo by Matthew Hilton

Figure 2. Levé 2 (2014) Philippe Parage Three lithographs on different coloured papers gummed to canvas. Dimensions: 600 x 2170 mm

Then there are approaches by painters who feel flush enough to have one of their paintings translated by hand into a limited-edition lithograph. I have seen the beginning of the reproductive process. Philippe locks the painting into a sort of rack so that it will not escape and then lays over it specially robust tracing paper. He has already been busy looking at the painting and analyzing its colours. Now he traces the form of the elements that include the dominant hue, whether dark or light. Then he makes the second tracing and so on. The painting I saw the beginning of took six stones, and I remember that a spatter of white gave him a couple of sleepless nights.

Philippe takes his work seriously, even though he is not deceived about the status of some of the works he is asked to reproduce. In order to do his own work, he has to armour himself against an erosion of his integrity so that, like a lawyer or taxi driver, he will accept the next job that comes along rather than muddle the issue by acting out aesthetic judgements on other artist's work. When working with an artist on a reproduction, he has the necessary self-effacement. He is a worthy servant.

The third type of client (including me) is an artist who works with the stone to create an original print, with or without a maquette (model). Philippe can come out of the background; he can push and pull a little to help the artist shape up.

BALANCE

I am not a stranger to the collaborative process. I have experienced collaboration between artist and printer as something of an occult process – a sensitive balance between thought transfer and paranoia. But Philippe can't read my mind, so I have to tell him what is in it in a way that he can understand. In the analysis of the work, we shuffle and shove our two languages together. His language is informed by a very thorough, very French, art school education. I did not receive that training, but I learned by doing lino reduction printing as my sole practice for eight years and have worked with master printers such as Beth Fisher at Peacock Printmakers in Aberdeen and Kip Gresham at his various silkscreen studios, and the late Hugh Stoneman in London. (A useful account of printer/artist collaboration centring on Stoneman can be found in Tooby 2008).

'Eternity loves the works of time...' London poet and printmaker William Blake's words speak to me of the plunging into a consciousness that seems to expand as attention is directed at working on minutiae. The process of printing successive proofs, the making of colour decisions that sometimes lead nowhere, the re-drawing on stones, all these steps could be compared with successive visits to a tailor for a new suit, sometimes half the shoulder padding is all out while you debate buttonholes. Both of us let go different elements to be dealt with later. Furthermore, if the artist has experience as a printmaker and the master printer is also an artist, there is a strong undercurrent of aesthetic debate or struggle.

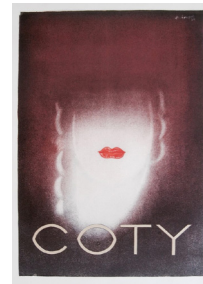


Figure 3

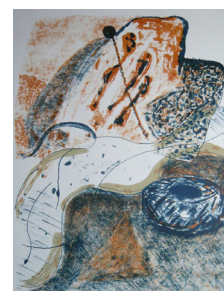


Figure 4

Figure 3. Levé 2 (2014) Philippe Parage Three lithographs on different coloured papers gummed to canvas. Dimensions: 600 x 2170 mm
 Figure 4. Coty (1990), Philippe Parage after Charles Loupot. Lithograph, 440 x 315 mm
 Figure 4. Le Gorge de Péreille (2020) by Matthew Hilton. Three stone lithograph, 410 x 290 mm

NARRATIVE

We are at the beginning of the day, sitting at Philippe's kitchen table. He offers me coffee. We enquire about each other's health, gauging each other's mood and strength for the day's work. In ten minutes of chit-chat, we strip out most of the noise and a calm, collaborative mood emerges. The offer of coffee continues throughout the day. Sometimes I refuse, sometimes I accept. It has nothing to do with coffee since my morning caffeine normally gets me for the day. The coffee comes from his kitchen upstairs, so he has to walk down the staircase with two full cups if I say yes. He likes to break for a coffee every hour or so; sometimes a refusal on my part seems a little brutal, but is also a sign that I am concentrating on the work in hand, that I am making a claim for autonomy, however clumsily. After all, the first thing to do in a studio is to control the space; I put my coat there; I sit there; I must have elbow-room to work properly.

There was much disappointment at first. Garish and clumsy, the first proofs were discreetly put aside by Philippe, "... we'll look at those later in the context of the whole exhibition..." He knew that putting the stones aside for a few months meant they might not be printable again. I wanted to recover my lost children even though writer Conan Doyle's advice to murder your darlings echoed in my head. I pushed to the point of breaching our mutual trust, but I realized that I wasn't going to discover what I needed to find out if I crossed that line. Thereafter, I let the management of the stones be his affair.

Two months later, things got tense again. Since the technique was new to me, I had the habit of making tentative gestures on the stone, a bit like testing handholds to see which way I could advance the construction of the image. For Philippe, who had to take care of the preparation and de-preparation of the stone, this made for anxious moments, since each cycle meant the loss (microscopically speaking) of image clarity.

I had to develop the insight to know when I was being stubborn out of fear and when my reluctance was based on sound instinct. From that awkward pinch point came a breakthrough (an object lesson expressed in metaphor) when I was half way through the next leg of my journey south.

Come with me now, gentle reader, I am following a stream, my map flapping about me. The stream's chuckle carries me along. The path changes to a windy tunnel with much fallen wood on the floor. I cross a stream and walk along the edge of a tree-lined paddock. Narrow rock walls rise up to five hundred feet in the Gorge de Péreille.

There are two ways in. I have to pick and choose which pecked line to follow, which hedge to hop to get alongside the wall. The choice employed criteria far from road choosing, as in I thought to myself... I prefer Beethoven to Mozart, so I shall choose the road that looks more like Beethoven on the map...



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. Watercolour maquette for Au-dessus de Calzen (2021) by Matthew Hilton. 440 x 330 mm

Figure 6. Two different colour versions of Au près d'Arvigna (2021) hanging on the wall of the studio, by Matthew Hilton. Four stone lithographs 410 x 330mm

But I miss the subtle opening and I am forced onto the other path. It is part lack of attention, lack of synchronization with the concrete world, like when I forget to roll up my sleeves before working with brush and ink on the slab. Perhaps synaesthesia comes into it, turning map shapes into music. Is this perhaps how one finds one's way into the studio?

I stopped walking and waited. The walls of the gorge nearly overhung. Views are short and locked. There are penned hunting dogs in the corner of a field. At fifteen yards, something black and bulky—a beast? No, a tractor tyre. I unhitched my pack and set up my folding stool. There aren't always tree stumps handy when you want to have a break, and it is bad news to have to get right down onto the ground and then up again. A stool makes for an instant safari. You stop, you take off the pack, unfold the stool and sit on it, and then unpack it all around you like a drum-kit, so you can eat, sketch, or just look and listen.

Philippe has lovingly crafted for me A4 sheets of paper coated with gum arabic from which my sketch can be transferred directly onto the stone. The sheets are pleasantly rough with a seductive white surface. I had snapped them onto a clipboard and slid them into a bubble-wrapped envelope.

I decide to make something out of the tractor tyre. I take them out of my pack. Then I realize I can draw separate elements that can be recomposed on the stone. I could work forward, constructively discovering techniques as I went. I called Philippe on the spot to tell him I had cleared my ideas. He was driving, so he cut me short, but a spark of my enthusiasm was pocketed by him.

I sketched the tyre and the water rushing by rocks and the wall rising up to the skyline, five hundred feet above. I took photos of the vigorous stream, the Douctrouye, coursing through the rocks, thinking of David Hockney braiding the hair of Leonardo da Vinci.

Springtime came round again. My walks were long behind me. What you get the most out of art is one thing leading to another, both physically and mentally. We work on two lithographs in parallel; one of them is a new technique for me where the stone is painted selectively with a varnish and then rubbed down with silica and then painted again and rubbed down again and so on. The joy of it for me is that the image, notionally abstract, is actually a transcription of a topographical feature – a view from the sky.

DISCUSSION

This seems an appropriate point to break off from the narrative of how I explore the land, and to open up the discussion about the working process. I will come back to the narrative later. When we began, I thought it would be like me as the Beatles and him as their sound engineer, George Martin, but as we moved down the track, as confidence and mutual understanding developed, and as we began to construct a language of set operative phrases, it became (all proportions admitted) more like Lennon and McCartney. Nothing of



Figure 7

what we produced could have been done by either of us on our own.

We communicated in French, but it might be more accurate to say we stood there silently looking at the latest proof. I am waiting for my eyes to get used to it, then I am waiting to see if he is going to speak, and then I am waiting to see if I have anything useful to say. Science tells us that our visual input is mediated by historically informed feedback loops, which is to say that what we see is what we see plus all we've ever seen that was like it (Gerald Edelman discusses this at length in *The Remembered Present*). When a proof appears from under the press blanket, the job is to look at it and adjust your brain to strip out as much of the brain-added information as possible, to get down to raw vision, the letters of the alphabet rather than the words of the dictionary.

In our sessions together, we are two complex animals dealing with each other's qualities and frailties. Raw assertions of will are rare. Sometimes Philippe will be blinded by his competence and I will be able to leapfrog to a happy accident. This feels like forcing open a closed system. Sometimes I have to risk being crushed by the weight of his habitual pessimism. Part of the armour with which he protects his integrity in order to do his own work consists of ascribing little value to any idea of promoting his practice. By now I am able to crack a joke or two about this mechanism, and by now he can turn on me and say my thinking is muddy that day-and so we divorce the trivial human power struggle from the object and let the object be the master.

NARRATIVE CONTINUED

Halfway through the work, at short notice, Philippe was offered a commission to reproduce a painting. I began to look like a luxury he couldn't afford. As we struggled to find space in the studio to continue my project, I began to lose myself in the proof we were working on. My hold on the layers began to slip. There was suddenly no room to manoeuvre and he told me to take a holiday while he dealt with the commission. For the first time, he mentioned money, "I can't be your banker..." I gave him two hundred euros to order paper and pinned up two versions (see Figure 5) on the wall of my studio at home in order to figure out what had happened.

Meanwhile, I concluded my walks. I slipped past half-built bungalows on the edge of La Tour de Crieu within the roar of the dual carriageway, a Spainward spur of the Autoroute des Deux Mers, to a footbridge over a stream I'd last seen away up in the hills. The path slid on. I saw whizzing cars through the thin screen of trees. The path fell into a concrete lined channel. As I walked down a ramp, the cars would go over my head. Six months later, it was included in our final lithograph.

FINANCES?

Apart from a brief period when I was under contract to a gallery, I have always supported my practice by working in non-art fields. Philippe

Parage tailors his financial relationships with artists according to their projects. As Shefali Wardell points out, it may be difficult for artists to discuss publicly the economic imperatives behind what they make....it is hard to open up about the truth behind everyday decisions around making in case honesty makes things even worse. (Wardell 2020). The clash we had had over priorities when M. Parage was offered paid work exposed in its honesty the necessary overlap or conflict between our needs (that sentence is French!).

For ten years, we had always worked together on a fifty-fifty basis. I did not have to put any money in, and we split the money from sales equally. Now, in 2021, in the back of my head, I'd pretty much decided to move nearer to the Mediterranean. There would be money from a house sale. I offered a new deal: since he was reluctant to give me a cost price per sheet, I would decide the retail price and give him an advance on his share; when sales covered that advance, we would revert to equal shares.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration? Collaboration has resonances in France, the memory of war: can I force Philippe to betray his Beaux Arts allegiance in favour of a wider aesthetic? What yellow-flavoured compromise have I in turn assented to? I feel I have become a more competent draughtsman in stone. I feel able to work on stones remotely from Philippe; his understanding and approach lie mentally at hand if I need it.

I have no idea how the passage into the image world of another has affected Philippe's own work. Maybe not at all-he is a sworn enemy of the aleatoire (the accidental), but perhaps I have given him heart in his proud isolation. Perhaps nothing more than ink and paper and the time used, nothing finally floated off. Time will tell.

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Accessed 25th of August, 2021

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. The studio. In the background, the Marinoni press. Photo by Matthew Hilton

Figure 2. Levé 2 (2014) Philippe Parage Three lithographs on different coloured papers gummed to canvas. Dimensions: 600 x 2170 mm

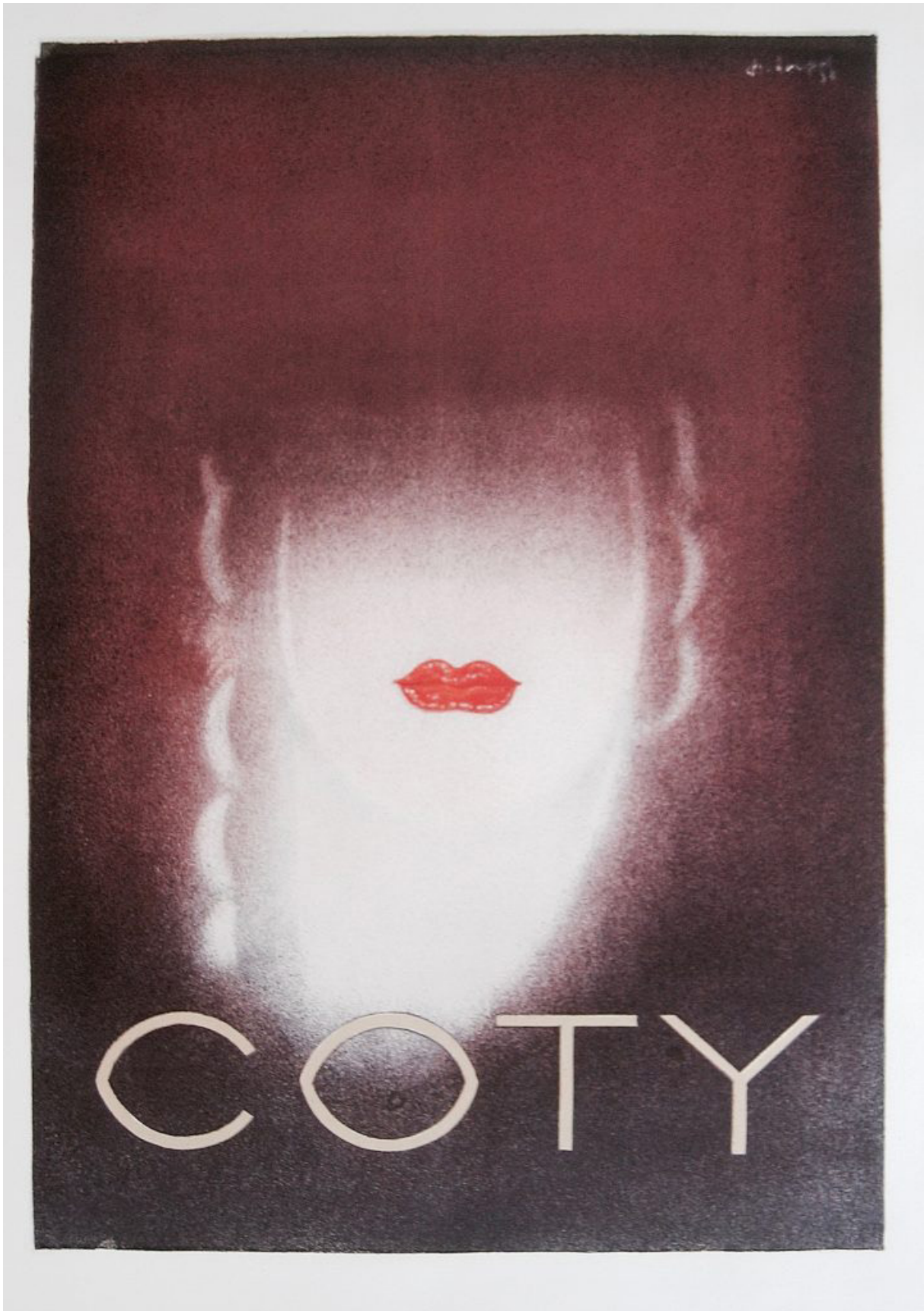


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Figure 6. Two different colour versions of *Après d'Arvigna* (2021) hanging on the wall of the studio, by Matthew Hilton. Four stone lithographs 410 x 330mm



Figure 7. L'entrée à Pamiers (2021) by Matthew Hilton. Three stone lithographs, 470 x 370 mm