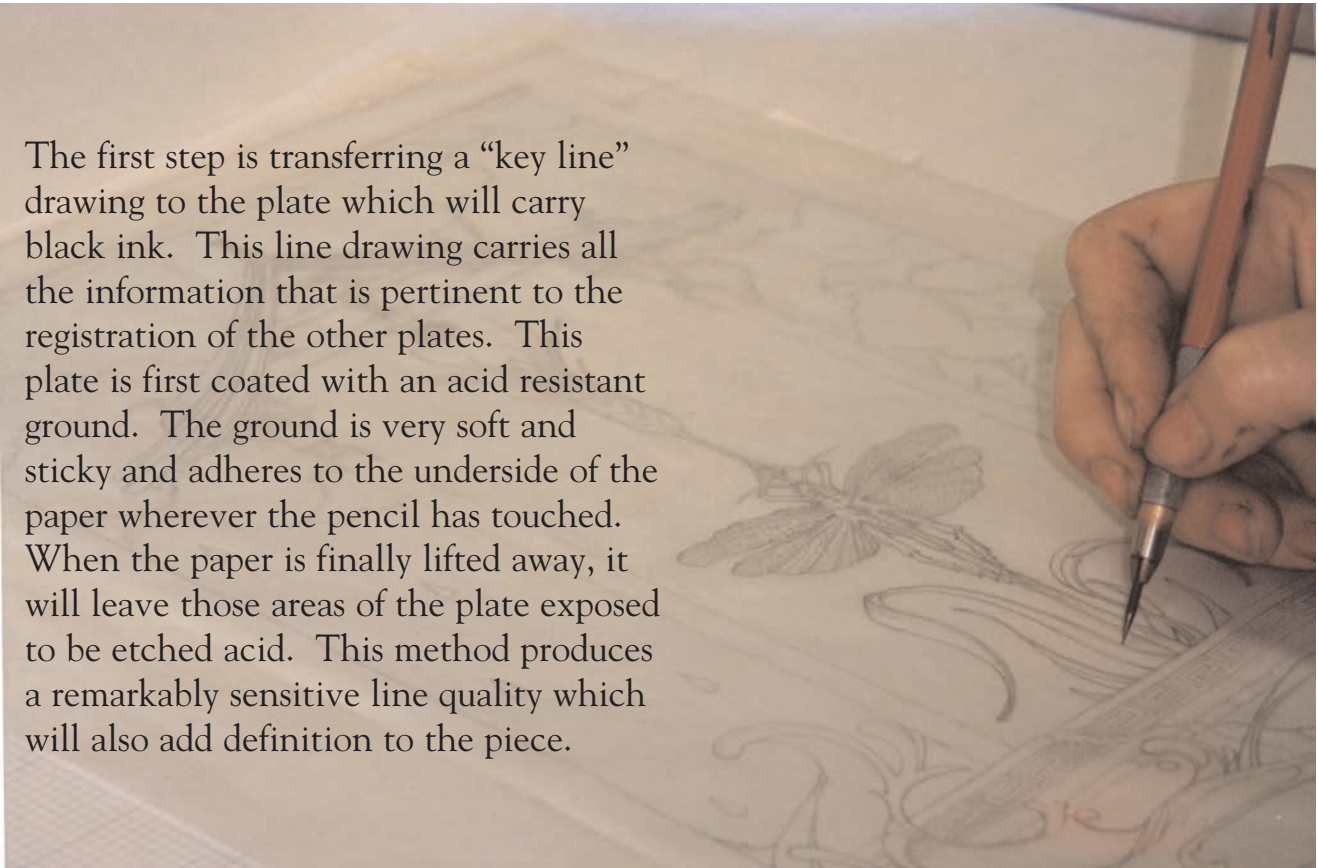


"The Year of The Locust" is a multiple plate mezzotint, aquatint and softground etching. It was created on four copper plates which were then hand inked and printed on Italian paper using an etching press. The inking process that was used is called "A la Poupee" which means "of the doll" in French. This is a technique whereby different colors of ink are applied to the plates individually and then mixed together with a chamois dauber (referred to as a "doll"). This allows for subtle gradations in tone to occur. It is a very slow process and requires some patience to achieve the desired effect with consistency throughout an entire edition. The printing of this particular piece was quite slow. Only 5 or 6 could be printed in a full day. These methods are at the opposite end of the spectrum from today's high speed, high volume runs produced on offset presses. The result is very different as well, and makes it all well worth the effort.

The first step is transferring a “key line” drawing to the plate which will carry black ink. This line drawing carries all the information that is pertinent to the registration of the other plates. This plate is first coated with an acid resistant ground. The ground is very soft and sticky and adheres to the underside of the paper wherever the pencil has touched. When the paper is finally lifted away, it will leave those areas of the plate exposed to be etched acid. This method produces a remarkably sensitive line quality which will also add definition to the piece.



Here is one of the secondary color plates. This plate has been prepared to carry just selective amounts of information which will be needed for specific areas.

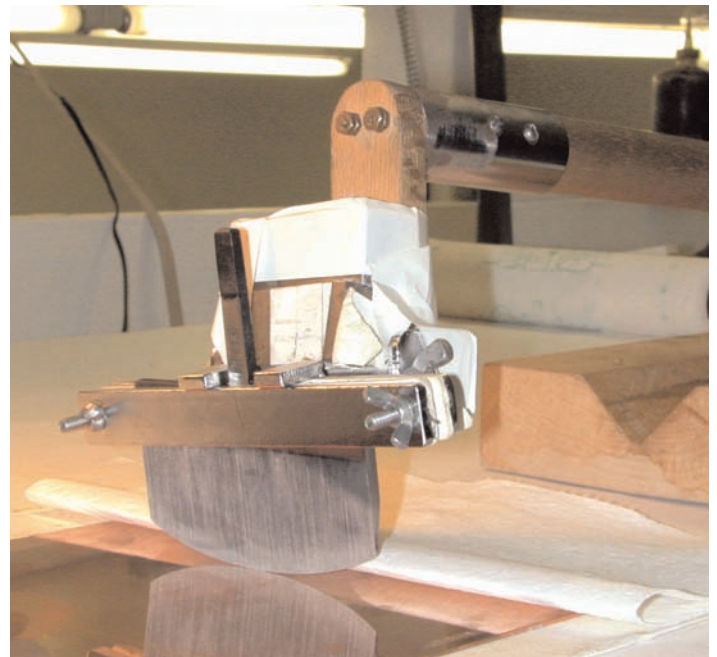
In this case, these lines will be drawn very faintly on the plate using a diamond pointed scribe. They will not be visible in the finished piece and are simply there to provide registration guidelines for the mezzotinting and/or aquatinting these areas.



Here is a plate being mezzotinted with a 65 screen rocker. The 65 means that there are 65 small sharp teeth per inch running across the edge of the rocker. When slowly rocked across plate, these teeth will abrade the plate surface. After several passes, the plate will have a texture which resembles velvet. This will mean that, when inked, the plate will trap a great quantity of ink thereby producing a rich full rich tone.

Rocking the plate surface is only the first step. Once this texture has been created, the work of drawing the design onto the plate will begin. This will be accomplished with a series of small burnishing and scraping tools. The effect of these tools will be to smooth down or scrape away the surface texture in areas where lighter tones are desired. In this way, the plate is carefully taken from an absolute black, to lighter and lighter shades of grey and all the way to white. The velvety burr of the plate is so pressure sensitive that it is capable of infinite subtlety and detail. Pieces done in this manner have a soft, mysterious quality not easily achieved in other printing methods.

Rocking a plate can take a very long time and put significant strain on the wrist. This can lead to problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome. To avoid this, I have chosen to use a custom built pole rocker, which allows arm to keep a more natural angle during the long hours of work. I recommend to anyone wanting to do larger mezzo-tints that they consider using one of these. The effect is still very much that of a hand rocked plate, without the considerable risk of developing a repetitive strain injury.





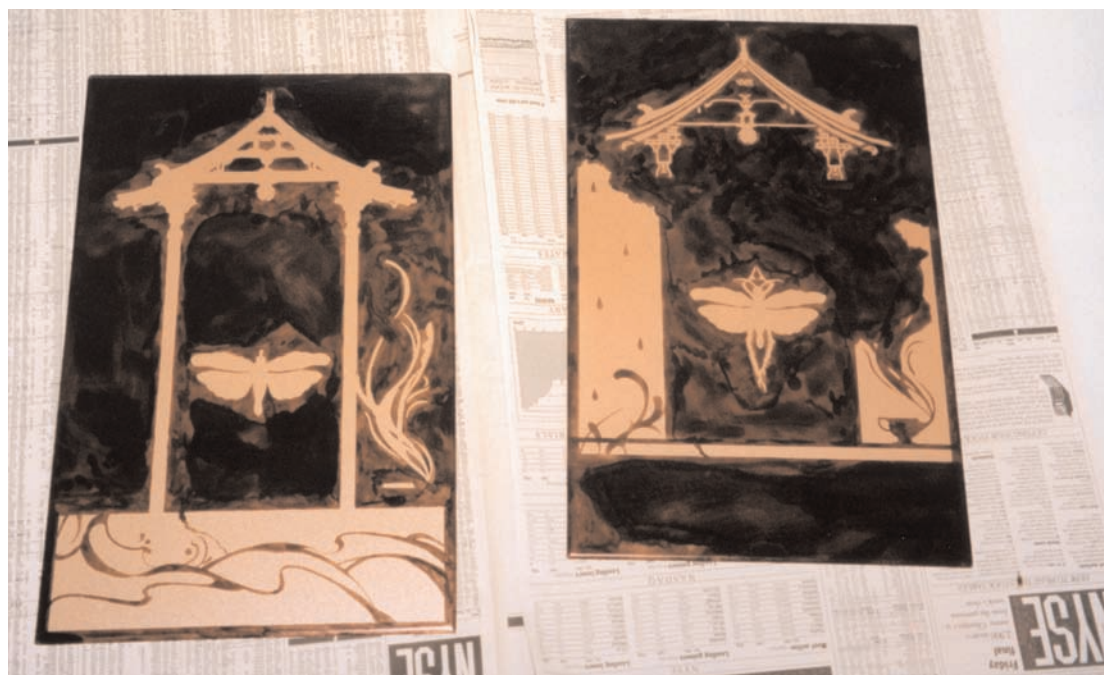
These are some of the tools which are used to draw into the mezzotinted surface of the plate. The tool on the far left is a small scraper used to produce the most dramatic effect by scraping the fine burs of copper away so as to produce the greatest degree of lightening. The three middle tools are varying sized tiny burnishers. They are used for detail work and produce more subtle changes in the drawing process. On the far right is a larger, broader burnisher which can be used to achieve a smooth gradation in tone.

One of the greatest challenges in drawing this way is knowing how much effect one's efforts has had on the image. It is not always evident by merely looking at the plate. Occasionally a plate must be inked and actually run through the press to check on its progress. Proofing a plate this way is necessary but it must be done sparingly because the tremendous pressure of the press wears out the delicate mezzotint very quickly. The less proofing the better for the longevity of the plate. Once the actual drawing is completed, the plate can be steel plated to give it the strength to stand up to the rigors of editioning.

Even so, mezzotint editions are relatively small. Despite the steel coating, the fragile burr will eventually wear out and the plates must be retired. "The Year of The Locust", for example was a relatively large edition of 160. This is certainly as large a run as I would ever be willing to make. More normally, plates can be counted on for between 80 to 100, provided they are treated politely.



This plate will be one of three that will carry color information using areas of both aquatint and mezzotint. Aquatint is a method used to create broad tones much like a mezzotint, but it has a very different visual quality. An aquatint is much comparable to the half tones which are used to print pictures in a newspaper. If one looks closely such a photo, the pattern of dots which make up the image become apparent. With an aquatint, this pattern is very organic looking in nature. This is because it is created by allowing the plate to be covered with a fine dusting of rosin powder. The dust coats the plate in a random pattern and is then carefully melted, in this case using a torch. The goal is to melt the rosin particles just enough to allow them to adhere to the plate's surface but not to over do it causing those grains to overheat and run together. Once the rosin is melted, it will resist acid wherever the grains are attached. The surrounding areas will etch and subsequently hold ink. The longer the etch times, the darker the tone. The size of the dust grains, the melting temperature and the length of time the plate is etched are all factors which play a large role in the end result. Because these variables are so inconsistent, each aquatint has an individual character which is part of the beauty of the technique. It is also more subject to disaster than any of the other methods I use. When the planets misalign, and the karma is not quite right, the plate can be literally ruined.



Here are the three color plates aquatinted and painted with acid resist to protect areas which will remain blank. They are now ready to etch. Some areas are then mezzotinted over very selectively. Heavy masking stencils will be used to protect the white areas of the plate during this “spot” mezzotinting process. This extra mezzotinting is done with very tiny rockers and is used to vary the texture and density of some colors.



Here are all the plates inked and ready to print. They will be put through the press one at a time, carefully registered by hand on a template which been marked to correspond to incisions made on the plate edges. If these marks are all lined up correctly each time a plate is sent through the press, the resulting image will be clear and focused looking in its appearance.





Before printing, the paper is dampened with water to soften it and then blotted on clean towels. Under the high pressure of the press, the paper will stretch a little with each pass. This will wreck havoc with the registration of the plates. So, the paper must first be run through the press several times using an uninked “stretcher” plate.





Here is the first color plate being reigstered with the marks on the template.



The first colors are laid down.





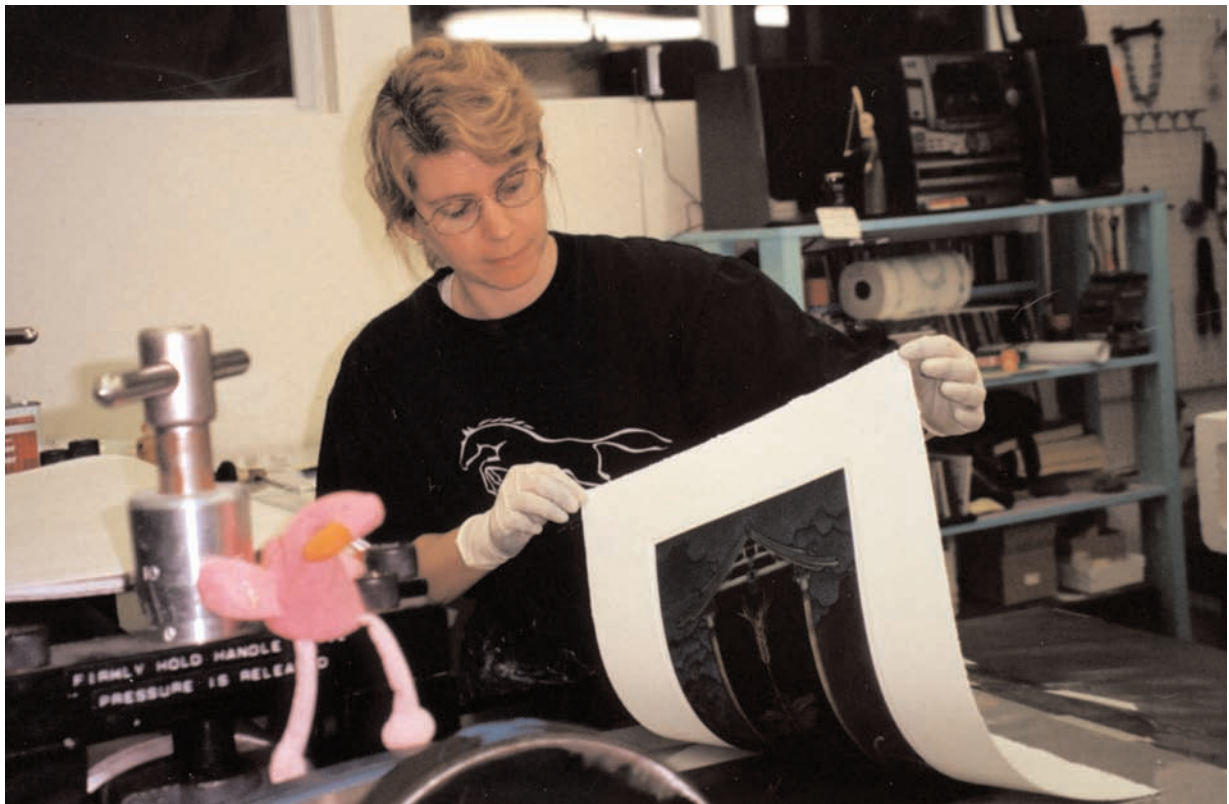
1st and 2nd
color plates



Pulling the 3rd color plate



All three color plates registered, ready to go through one last time with the black mezzotint plate.



Using the embossed edges left by the stretcher plate, the print is torn to size while still damp and on the press.



The final print

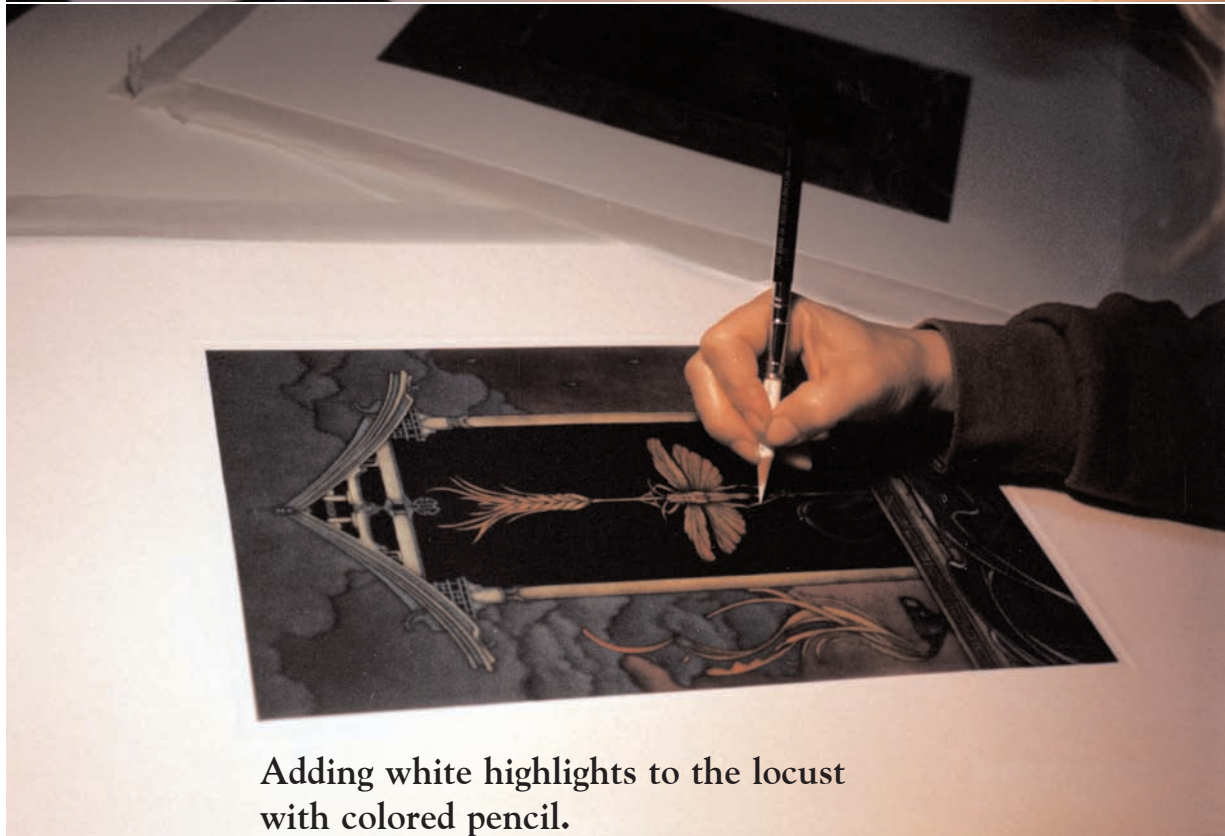


Retrieving dog hair off the print before it can become a part of the design.



Interleaving tissue is laid down before stacking the dryer and turning on the blower. The heavy black ink of the mezzotint is very fussy about the way in which it is dried. A small wrinkle in the tissue will leave a permanent mark. At the end of the day, old damp tissues are changed one last time for the night. The prints will stay in the dryer for several days, then the ink will need at least a week to air cure in front of a fan before hand coloring can begin.

Some additional details are added with hand coloring. This is done with fine brushes carrying dilute mixes of etching ink as well as with lightfast colored pencils.



Adding white highlights to the locust with colored pencil.



Adding more white to the waves.

(2:30 a.m.)