

Erich Monch and the displaced drawing

By Frederick D. Bunsen, February 8, 1995

(Re-edited July 2008)

(*Saxa Loquuntur = the stones speak*)

I visited the Leonberg home of Edgar and Michele Deplewski for the first time on the evening of February 1, 1995. The Deplewskis were art collectors, and I was keenly interested in discovering what they'd compiled in modern graphic arts. Three years had elapsed since our encounter at the wedding of András Markós in Kosec Flava, Hungary. We had agreed then to see each other in Germany over the topic of lithography, but had never found time. While in Hungary Michele Deplewski and I were discussing the extent and direction their collection when the conversation suddenly hit on their many lithographs by the late German lithographer, Erich Monch.



Erich Monch



Lithograph of Erich Monch,
"The German Cowboy" #28/34 by
Nelson Sandgren

My heart jumped at hearing the name, Monch. His person, more than any, was the pivotal median for connections to people both in Oregon, and Germany. It was the art of lithography which had motivated my transfer to Germany in the first place. It was Monch's amicable tie to Oregon lithograph professor Nelson Sandgren, and to Oregon State's dean of social sciences, Gordon Gilkey which foreshadowed my participation in the OSU overseas exchange program (despite my rudimentary command of the German language). Little did I know then, but my intention to pursue graphic arts

in Germany had placed me favorably in an important historical context inherent to both Sandgren and Gilkey.

My wish to continue graphic studies in Germany was not simply intended to attain a college degree. Much more, I'd be embarking on a tradition of art and artist exchange set by Gilkey in earlier decades, which again proved to be the quintessence and spirit of the initial Oregon Study Abroad exchange program. That convinced Gilkey! In other words, had I been an engineering major I might not have gotten the special waiver of Gilkey necessary for attending the Oregon Study Abroad Program that year.

Gilkey later volunteered fantastic stories of post war Germany about his visits to the artists i.e. Hap Grieshaber, Horst Jansen in Hamburg, Max

Beckmann, and of course Erich Monch. I recall Sandgren's stories of Monch on the press in his garage workshop, at Corvallis, Oregon, or about Monch as a guest teacher at the OSU art department: "He spoke no English, yet it was so clear what he meant, and with such a heart that everyone loved him dearly". That special relationship to Oregon State University art students endeared Monch to every Oregon art student, who in later years might trek across the ocean to his Tübingen workshop.

Sometime in the fall of 1975 I finally got around to phoning Monch from my Stuttgart dormitory. The urge to contact him, and relate greetings from his Oregon admirers had weighed upon my conscious ever since arriving in Germany (1973). Nervously I introduced myself as an Oregon art student at the Stuttgart academy, with well-wishes from Nelson Sandgren and Gordon Gilkey. With no hesitation Monch invited me to "come and print" (lithographs) at the Tübinger Künstlerbund, as his graphics association was tagged.

I took advantage of the fall and winter school breaks to visit his printing workshop for a grand total of three times. The bus ride from Stuttgart to Tübingen was to prove long, cramped, and monotone. Normally the stretch lasted 30 minutes by car, but the bus zigzagged through unknown terrain in a leisurely pattern lasting for over one hour. I can still see myself observing the rain streaked windows, contemplating the countless similarities to Oregon weather.

My first visit to Tübingen was particularly tiresome, having had to search for Monch's workshop in Tübingen's quaint and innumerable back alleys. First impressions of Tübingen were of winding cobblestone streets and towering medieval buildings along a tree-lined Neckar river. There was no time for sight-seeing then. The day was gray, cold, and rainy, and I was somewhat frustrated at having taken so much time to find the place. Arriving at the front gate of the "Stiefelhof" I was distraught to read that the workshop had prescribed closing hours. Strange for artists to hold closing hours, I thought. With only a few hours remaining I quandered my chances at accomplishing anything that day. I'd have to take a late bus home leaving me afterwards to wander several hours in Tübingen's drizzle.

Seeing Erich Monch for the first time boosted my otherwise dampened spirits. Accounts of my Oregon mentors all at once seemed to manifest themselves in Monch's radiant appearance, who just then was greeting me like an old friend. He was balding on top, by contrast revealing a large gentle face and compassionate eyes atop a heavy set stature.

Lithography workshops are inscribed with a special aura for all who print there. They hold a mystery of their own ensuing from the manner in which the lithographer cares for his stones. Lithography stones, massive slabs of limestone-type chalk, are treated with utmost respect and reverence as having survived millennia, and which in the course of printing are seduced to reveal their magical core. But this was also a German workshop with a more precise approach to the business, and above all, with a pecking order! In addition, I didn't perceive my presence as being received too kindly by the younger lithographers on whose scene I had entered uninvited.

Monch made me feel more than welcome, but just as soon left me to proceed on my own - something I wasn't quite ready for after being submerged so long in US style academics. I was presented an unprepared stone, and then directed to the grinding table. A co-worker assigned by Monch to show me the ropes proved short tempered as well. Despite long, consistent grinding on my part the lithography stone never seemed plane enough for his ever scrutinizing eye. The rest of the day had me tiresomely occupied with the grinding of this one damned stone! The monotone was broken now and then by Monch, who might spontaneously call everyone in the workshop to demonstrate a new slant on some printing method. That day he was explaining "monotypes" with one pull of the stone. Now and then he'd throw me a smiling glance although he was fully submerged in his own printing. My limited command of German didn't make coping with circumstance any easier. Not only did it retard integration into workshop proceedings, I was excluded from the incessant flow of chatter and small-talk. On the other hand, infatuation with prevailing tasks, and the mental responses they induced were more than enough for my absorption capacities. A long bus ride home, and trudge to the dormitory completed the day. By then I was reevaluating the whole affair. A ponderous university schedule made it extremely burdensome to commute from Stuttgart on a regular basis.

My last appearance at Tübinger Künstlerbund was in essence a final bid to get an image on the stone I had ground so infinitely long. Monch shouldn't gain the impression that an art student of Nelson Sandgren was lazy (!), I thought. In solemn observation I fixed on stone a crayon drawing of Monch in side profile. There arose in me a sense of gratitude and satisfaction at finally having it done, but the notion of printing it was altogether another matter. First of all, there were more artists waiting to print than printing presses available. Finally, the commuting, organizing, and printing would expend more energy and time than ever envisioned.

The stone was "gummed" with a thin layer of gum Arabic as is usual to safeguard the surface until printing, then dried, and carried down to the workshop basement aside other shelved stones. It was dark and damp inside. Everywhere laid old stones; large and small, chipped and unprepared, waiting for their next printing day - if it ever came. It was like entering an archeological tomb, a necrology of stone tablets - an invisible archive with the nimbus of countless pictures long erased through successive grindings. Within this timeless burial chamber I felt my stone would be well accommodated.

That was the last I ever saw of Erich Monch or of my stone. Because it was his portrait I felt somehow he would discover it, recognize the image, and simply understand. On returning from Oregon I always called him up with well wishes from Sandgren and Gilkey, for Monch - a fragile link to another place in time. Yet never once in the course of our conversation was mention made of the Tübinger Guild and the unprinted stone.

I related all of this in turn to Edgar and Michele Deplewski that same evening, who could hardly believe their ears. To my surprise Michele and Erich Monch had been close friends. It was Michele, who Monch had

confided in for an occasional art opinion, and who, after Monch's death was entrusted with sorting out his jumbled print collection, since she knew them so well.

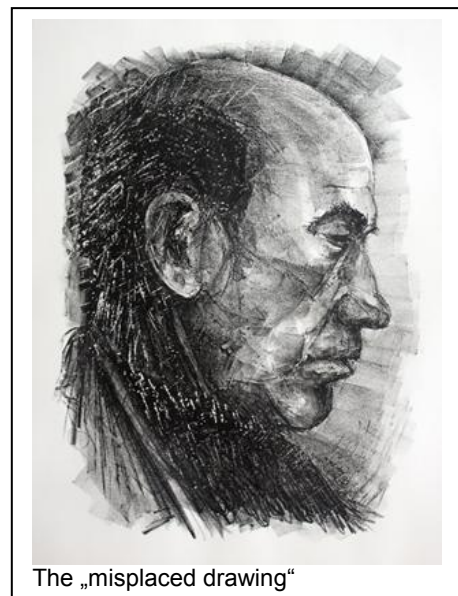
Among the family's art treasures were several Monch prints of Oregon, most likely printed in Nelson Sandgren's makeshift garage workshop in Corvallis: I discovered one framed lithograph on Demplewskis' wall of Yachats, Oregon. To most observers an unknown village somewhere on America's Pacific Northwest, a mystery for anyone who didn't realize Monch's relationship to Oregon, nor to the Oregon lithographer, Nelson Sandgren. Now there I was, an encrypter of times past explaining what it meant to do a lithograph of Yachats or Newport, Oregon with Monch's old artist friend Nelson Sandgren! There were also other prints in the collection, documentation of Monch's close relationship to the artists of the Informell Art School, particularly Bissier, and Baumeister. Several lithographs of his black forest home silhouetted by pine combed ridges bridged an obvious link to the Oregon Willamette valley.

In the mean time Edgar Deplewski had gone deeper down the pile of Monch prints, where after several minutes he'd discovered the aspired object of interest. He had found the alleged print that Michele said: "portrait him so well, and strangely, was unsigned and had no edition number". Smudge marked the right side where the printer (most likely Erich Monch) had initially pulled it from the stone. I sensed the hair along my neck rise in tingling sensation. Memories shot across my mind in wild confusion. It was that very image I'd composed of Monch on that cold, clammy day in Tübingen 19 year ago! Monch had found the stone after all, and one of the few proofs had fallen into Edgar and Michele's possession! Each minute stroke, discernible only unto its maker, recalled the very predicament which gave cause to its origin. For a minute I was reunited with Erich Monch, Oregon, and my own special place within - in recollection.

Epilog (October 2008)

Anno 2008, June 15th: My artist colleague Helmut "Helm" Zirkelback invited me down to the Tübingen "Künstlerbund" in the historical, old Metzgergasse street, where in the meantime he had established himself as a recognized engraver. It had been several years since we'd talked - then, while members of the Rems-Murr County chapter of the German Artist Association. Now he was keen on showing me some of his new work then on display in the Künstlerbund gallery.

Tübingen itself had always been one of my favorite southern German cities: It was so good to be back. The gallery was having open doors that night,



but it didn't prevent Helm from showing me around and introducing me to various members of the group.

Upon entering the printing department I found the setting wholly familiar, the sensation of might having been there before, although I couldn't say why at just that moment.

The Künstlerbund prized its graphic printing facilities, among other, three ancient hand-bar lithography presses, which judging by their contained setting appeared to have experienced livelier days. The most massive of the iron clad models caught my eye and prompted the remark, if anyone hadn't perhaps heard of the lithographer, Erich Monch. "Sure", he replied. He had heard about him from older members, but that was about all. As we turned about-face to return to the gallery front my eyed caught a side glimpse of a picture, sagging poorly in its frame and hanging center-field over the printing area. Among the rattle and chatter I had overseen it. Now it all came together: It was one of the proofs that Monch had pulled from my stone that now held a reverent place in memory of the guild's founder.

That became an evening to remember.

In returning to the place of my artistic beginning I felt that some kind of life cycle had now been completed - an impact one might get watching a lone salmon thrashing its way upstream on returning to its origins. Because I had printed in the Künstlerbund Tübingen some 34 years before I felt that I too had returned to my beginnings.

The consequent exhibition of my lithography work in the Künstlerbund in July 2008 also initiated the beginning of my membership.