

Introduction to Legh Kilpin's Printmaking

By Tusa Shea

It wasn't until after immigrating to Canada and joining the Arts Club of Montreal that Legh Kilpin took up etching. Although he only etched for a period of about four years, it was during this time, between 1915 and 1919, that Kilpin began to experiment significantly with a more expressive artistic style. Prior to this time, Kilpin had applied his technical proficiency towards achieving a pleasing, but rigid, style that strongly adhered to the established rules of certain genres. Thus, compared to the rest of his work, Kilpin's printmaking experiments are distinctive, and invite further exploration. What might have prompted this conservative British artist to begin to explore new media and methods of expression? Kilpin's interest in etching and monotype printing coincided with a print revival in Canada that first developed in Toronto, and was fostered and promoted by the Graphic Arts Club. Although etching had been popular among collectors in Montreal for some time, it wasn't until around 1914 that members of the Montreal Arts Club began to produce their own etchings. As a member of the ACM since 1912, Legh Kilpin had the opportunity to take up etching through his association with fellow artists like Herbert Raine, who was an early and devoted etcher. As a friend and colleague, Raine likely encouraged Kilpin to experiment with the medium and his influence can be seen in some of Kilpin's finished works. Legh Kilpin produced etchings of landscapes, cityscapes, nautical scenes and occasionally genre scenes, for the most part, executed in two distinct styles. Some are reminiscent of conservative prints imported from Britain and France, while others were executed in a more spontaneous, sketchy style that often featured contemporary Canadian scenes.

However, it was in the medium of the monotype that Kilpin really began to explore new territory by forcing himself to let go of his technically precise style and enjoy the expressive qualities of the materials themselves. The monotype is the simplest form of printmaking in which an image is drawn or painted on a metal or glass surface and then transferred onto paper through the use of a press. Usually only one or two prints can be pulled, and will be quite different. It appears to have been difficult for Kilpin to relax his rigid and precise style, however, the monotype process would have forced him to give up control of the final outcome of a piece. Perhaps it was this element of chance that drew Kilpin to experiment with the monotype.

The Marsh, 1917, monotype on paper, 14.8 x 19.8 cm, Langley Centennial Museum, 5899



In spite of the golden hue of the sky, *The Marsh* is a dark, murky piece. Kilpin produced a fair number of similar monotypes, often featuring a kind of quiet twilight mood with the setting sun just barely discernable above the silhouette of low brush. The ability of the artist to manipulate pigment through different methods of application makes the monotype one of the most painterly printmaking techniques. In *The Marsh* we can see that Kilpin brushed some areas, and rubbed others to create different densities of colour and texture. Here, we see him enjoying the spontaneity and tactile qualities of the process itself. Kilpin began showing monotypes in Montreal in 1918, however, even at a moderate price, they do not appear to have had as much appeal as his watercolours, oils, or even his etchings. Nevertheless, today Kilpin's monotypes are a valuable record of his willingness to experiment with new ideas and techniques.

Chateau Italy, n.d., Etching on Paper, 26.5 x 21.5 cm, Langley Centennial Museum, 5921



This etching was likely copied from a sketch made during Kilpin's honeymoon in Italy in 1891, and represents the conservative end of Kilpin's etching production. *Chateau Italy* depicts a group of people pausing near the stairwell of an Italian chateau. Their manner of dress, coupled with the fact that one of them is sitting on the ground, informs us that they are probably meant to be peasants. This piece has been presented as a "vignette" with the image fading to nothing as it approaches the edge of the frame. The vignette was a popular pictorial device during the Victorian era that served to isolate a subject from its context. The viewer is not meant to ponder a life outside the frame for these three figures. They are a picturesque depiction, and Kilpin deliberately posed them for our enjoyment. Such a device allows the viewer to comfortably experience the image as a window onto a timeless and unchanging world. Mass produced images similar to this were immensely popular among the middle class print collector, thus an image of this sort would probably have had a wide appeal to prospective buyers.

At Low Tide, n.d., Etching on Paper, 6 x 10 cm, Langley Centennial Museum. 5933



A different kind of scene confronts the viewer in the small format *At Low Tide*, where the bulky hulls of ships thrust into the picture plane from a world that, in order to make sense, necessarily must continue beyond the frame. This awareness of the frame creates an impression that the moment depicted has not stopped for the viewer, as in *Chateau Italy*, so much as the artist himself has scrambled to record it before it disappeared. *At Low Tide* represents an urban landscape that is contemporary rather than picturesque. The lines are roughly and quickly executed, and do not allow the viewer to see the subject without also seeing the artist's mark making. *At Low Tide* is the kind of etching, promoted by British artists like Whistler and Haden, which required the artist to work quickly from nature rather than deliberately from a sketch. Kilpin often worked from sketches, but etchings like *At Low Tide* point to the possibility that he may have worked directly on the plate as well. According to his son Noel, Kilpin eventually bought his own press, a serious investment that would have enabled him to experiment at his own leisure, and to work directly on a number of plates.