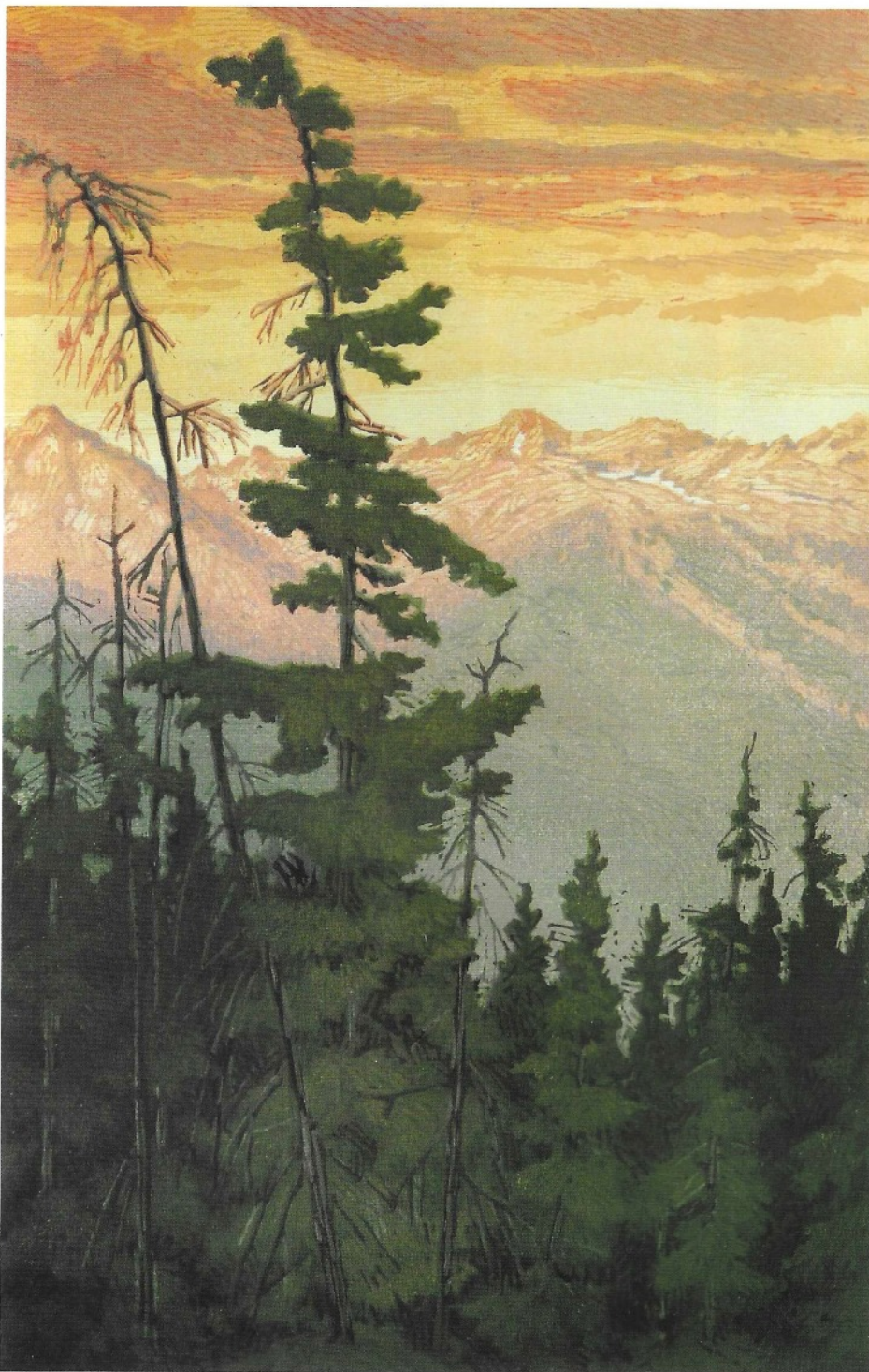


Woodblock Paintings

Claire Cuccio observes the unique, painterly mokuhanga technique developed by **Leon Loughridge** to convey his emotional response to landscape



I have always put faith in observing artists at work to comprehend what is essential to and

extraordinary about their creation.

Immersed in the experience of American artist Leon Loughridge's print process at his family's cabin in the Colorado Rocky Mountains reminded me of the critical chance to witness the artist in practice: to understand, in Loughridge's case, the emotional impact of natural landscapes he has felt since his childhood.

Above all of his other subject matter, Loughridge creates prints to capture the dynamism of the mountains, mesas, canyons and deserts of the American Southwest that he once adventured in, over and across with his brother, and where he still lives. His occasional cityscapes of architecture and industry present on the sheet like these imposing natural vistas of his childhood.

Loughridge was raised outside Santa Fe on Northern New Mexico open ranchland, migrating later to Colorado and Loughridge's old cabin at the foot of Mount Evans bears testament to multiple generations of his family who have made their home on this land. He pays homage to the local topography even through his naming of his Denver print and publishing press and his domain name, Dry Creek. Both a topographical feature across the Southwest and a characteristic name for a trail, canyon, basin and a stream through the city of Denver, 'dry creek' encompasses Loughridge's connection to the local topography.

Drafted into the military during the Vietnam War, Loughridge was sent to Germany. He returned to Colorado with sketches from across Europe, painting and

Left *Gore Range Sunrise* (2015) Reduction Woodblock, mokuhanga, 457 x 305 mm

LEON LOUGHRIDGE



Left Watercolour series.
Photo: Claire Cuccio

In the past, Loughridge created prints in the traditional western woodcut method, one block to one colour. But as he printed and wanted to adjust the resulting image, he couldn't easily add an extra block. Mokuhanga permitted a flexibility in taking multiple impressions from individual blocks. Given Loughridge's preference for working more spontaneously as in painting, he could approach a clean sheet like a blank canvas. He locates the creativity and puzzle-solving of woodblock printmaking in this unfixed space.

Reduction further allows for the spontaneity that lives in his on-site sketches. Instead of reducing from a single block, he typically reduces from 2-4 blocks, unafraid to add a new block if he needs to adjust lines of shading as in a sketch. In this way, he can enhance the colour or strengthen the character of different elements. He prints, decidedly unlike a painting, light to dark, each time evaluating what shows on paper and what he is seeking. Between mokuhanga and reduction, he maintains control of the final image. Typically he takes 15-20 impressions to develop his visual story, so that he refers to his work as 'woodblock paintings'.

Loughridge is looking for a composition every time he sits down to sketch. He considers each composition to be a stage, where he sets the lighting to capture its drama. His purpose, however, is not to force the viewer to see, feel or think in a particular way. He intends instead to convey the emotional power of being in the presence of a stunning landscape, inviting the viewer to insert themselves into it. Loughridge's woodblock paintings may later serve as a record of the value of the natural environment to stimulate human awe and reverence.

www.dcartpress.com/

Leon Loughridge will have a solo at the Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico from 30 June 2023

etching studies completed at Stuttgart Staatsgalerie and an etching press. Etching particularly appealed to Loughridge and his work sold well for a time, but the confluence of purchasing a collection of 350 Japanese woodblock prints at an estate sale and his growing intolerance of the toxicity of oil-based inks turned him toward mokuhanga. He had experimented with it before, but his encounter with original Japanese-style prints moved him to explore mokuhanga anew.

Some printmakers who have adopted mokuhanga have determined it to be the ideal medium – even beyond photography – for portraying nature. The manipulation and possibilities of colour in the printing process serve Loughridge's natural scenes, still lifes crafted of fleeting light and physical conditions. Mokuhanga's delicate washes lend themselves to every layer of nuance in a Loughridge plume or pillow of a cloud, fade of the sky, palette of greens in the trees and shrubs, and quality of light at a distinct moment in a day.

For Loughridge, the value in woodblock prints over photography lies in his evolving process from initial composition to final print. After identifying a frame of landscape he wishes to portray, he begins with sketching. He aims not for a photographic rendering. Rather, the rapid nature of sketching allows for 'distorting' fundamental elements or areas of focus according to Loughridge's emotional response to the overall scene. Another way to think about his sketching phase lies in its simple expression: putting down only the larger-scale shapes leaves room for later abstraction wherein Loughridge houses his emotions.

Loughridge proceeds to produce a series of sketches depicting the same landscape over different phases. He animates each 'view' with watercolours, selects those that he finds to be most dramatic and finally interprets these in woodblock. He relishes the fluidity of watercolour yet, at the same time, how the carved lines of woodblock bring a different atmospheric feel to the scene.