

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, Chicago, IL

A mezzotint exhibition including CRAIG McPHERSON's *Yankee Stadium at Night*

Burnishing the Night, Baroque to Contemporary Mezzotints from the Collection,
Galleries 125 – 127, February 21 to May 31, 2015



[Burnishing the Night: Baroque to Contemporary Mezzotints from the Collection](#)



Craig McPherson

American, born 1948

Yankee Stadium at Night

1983

Mezzotint in black on white wove paper

In this nocturnal view taken from the artist's apartment window, one of the Art Institute of Chicago's largest mezzotints, blinding lights emanating from Yankee Stadium offer the only sign of life in the big city. This almost alien effect rivals the Romantic destruction afflicting John Martin's Old Testament cities (on view in a case in this gallery), at a scale more commensurate with paintings than with prints. McPherson's iconic cityscape took him over a year to produce, and in its elegant simplicity offers an Edward Hopper-like ode to the loneliness of crowds.

Restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. David C. Ruttenberg, 1989.21

Mezzotint and the Sublime Landscape

The 17th-century French painter Claude Lorrain deeply influenced Romantic landscape printmaking in England in the 18th and 19th centuries. A lineage of mezzotint landscapes stretches directly from Richard Earlom's 1777 *Liber Veritatis* reproductions of Claude drawings to J. M. W. Turner's mixed-method mezzotint *Liber Studiorum*, both of which were intentionally sepia-toned to resemble drawings. John Constable's *English Landscape Scenery* and John Martin's flamboyantly dark and devastating Old Testament vignettes followed suit. Whether the views were historical, pastoral, or specifically English, they were meant to elicit emotional reactions in their awe-inspiring grandeur. The soft textures of mezzotints helped provide nuance to the depiction of atmospheric vistas and setting suns, but they often required supplementary linear elements to be introduced through drypoint or etched lines. For many of J. M. W. Turner's 71 *Liber Studiorum* prints, he translated paintings or on-site landscape drawings fully into print himself, carrying out each campaign in both line and shading. For others he carried out only the initial etching, delegating the mezzotint engraving to Charles Turner (*The Fifth Plague of Egypt*), J. C. Easling (*Frontispiece*), and others. Mezzotint landscape would find adherents in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the Etching Revival. Though the movement's inspiration, James McNeill Whistler, tried the medium, he never pursued it himself, but instead commissioned mezzotint reproductions of his paintings (gallery 125). By the mid-20th century, the medium again resurfaced, exemplified by Jiří Anderle's layered classical allusions (*Acis and Galatea*) after Claude and by Craig McPherson's emotional landscapes done in pure mezzotint (*Yankee Stadium at Night*).

Commercial to Contemporary Mezzotint

In contrast to the steady 19th-century output of Romantic landscape mezzotints, in the 20th century artists used the medium sporadically, but more experimentally. The medium's soft textures lent it to the small-scale explorations of the female form by both Ashcan School artist Arthur Davies and one-time Chicagoan Alessandro Mastro-Valerio. Requiring significant time to be produced and too delicate to sustain large editions, mezzotint plates were difficult to use in multiple-plate color printing. As a result, additional techniques developed, including the faster but less refined carborundum mezzotint preparation method, used most notably by American Dox Thrash in the 1940s. Howard Hodgkin would later use a different carborundum technique to create intaglio relief, while in 1968 Pablo Picasso created aquatints in the dark manner, using burnishers and scrapers to add mezzotint-like highlights. By the end of that same year, Abstract Expressionists Robert Motherwell and Cy Twombly each tried their hands at small editions of mezzotint engravings using traditional methods at the Universal Limited Art Editions workshop. Since the 1970s, the medium has flourished in Japan through the work of Hamanishi Katsunori and in Germany with the large plates of Wolfgang Gäfgen. Recent American masters of the process include Susan Rothenberg and Craig McPherson, whose *Yankee Stadium at Night* (gallery 127B) from 1983 may represent the ultimate contemporary rejuvenation of the mezzotint medium, as the work's compelling realism and perfect craftsmanship take the art of reproduction well beyond photography, conveying a deeply original artistic statement.

Burnishing the Night: Baroque to Contemporary Mezzotints from the Collection



Saturday, February 21, 2015–Sunday, May 31, 2015
Galleries 125–127

Excelling in eerie effects and seductive textures, the late 17th-century medium of mezzotint blossomed from an amateur fascination and hobby of members of the nobility to the 18th century's most popular reproductive printmaking method. Mezzotint engraving allowed artists to burnish soft highlights and volume into a textured copper plate that would otherwise print in a solid tone. This shading method contrasted dramatically with the standard intaglio medium, which involved either painstakingly incising engraved lines with a burin (a metal-cutting tool) or etching looser lines into a plate with acid. Ideal for nocturnal scenes, portraits, reproductions of paintings, lush landscapes, and garish anatomical and botanical studies, the versatile medium later lent itself to color printing and remains in use today.

Burnishing the Night brings together mezzotint prints, books with mezzotint illustrations, and other works on paper from the permanent collection that span the medium's predominantly Northern European origins through its worldwide use in the 20th century. Several works in the show are by Irish mezzotint engravers, especially Thomas Frye,

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A complementary and concurrent installation in Gallery 208A, *Printing Darkness and Light in the Dutch Republic*, details how Rembrandt and other artists created their own dramatic "Dark Manner" or "Night Pieces" without the use of mezzotint.