

Proceedings of the 34th World Congress of Art History

第 34 届世界艺术史 大会文集

全三卷
Vols. I-III

邵大箴 范迪安 朱青生 主编

Shao Dazhen / Fan Di'an / LaoZhu

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概 念

不同历史和不同文化中的艺术和艺术史

Proceedings of the 34th World Congress of
Art History

第 34 届世界艺术史 大会文集

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邵大箴 范迪安 朱青生 主编

Shao Dazhen / Fan Di'an / LaoZhu

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主编简介

邵大箴

中央美术学院教授。自1960年起，在中央美术学院美术史系任教。曾兼任中国美术家协会理论委员会主任，《美术》《美术研究》《世界美术》杂志主编。此次担任第34届世界艺术史大会组委会主任。

范迪安

中央美术学院教授、院长，中国美术家协会主席，中央文史研究馆馆员。主编《20世纪中国美术文艺志·美术卷》《世界著名美术院校教育丛书》《中国当代美术：1979—1999》《世界艺术史》。此次担任第34届世界艺术史大会组委会副主任。

朱青生

北京大学教授，国际艺术史学会主席。主编《中国当代艺术年鉴》《汉画总录》。此次担任第34届世界艺术史大会组委会副主任兼秘书长。

Editors-in-Chief

Shao Dazhen

Professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Since 1960, he has been teaching in the Department of Art History at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He was also the Director of the Art Theory Committee of the China Artists Association and the Editor-in-Chief of the Journals *Art Magazine*, *Art Research*, and *World Art*. He was the director of the Organizing Committee of the 34th World Congress of Art History.

Fan Di'an

Professor and President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts; President of the China Artists Association; Member of the China Central Institute for Culture and History. Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of 20th Century Chinese Art Literature (Art Volume)*, *World Art Education Series*, *Chinese Contemporary Art: 1979–1999*, *World Art History*. He was the deputy director of the Organizing Committee of the 34th World Congress of Art History.

LaoZhu (Zhu Qingsheng)

Professor at the Peking University; President of CIHA. Editor-in-Chief of the *Annual of Contemporary Art of China* and the *Catalogue Raisonné of Pictures in Han Dynasty 206 BC–220 AD*. He was the deputy director and secretary-general of the Organizing Committee of the 34th World Congress of Art History.

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Multiple Art and Original Print: Printmaking Definitions and Problematics in the Argentine Art Scene of the 20th Century

Silvia Dolinko

Conicet-IDAES/UNSAM, Argentina

“Original print” is an ambiguous term, at least in the Western art world, which puts strain on the relationship between uniqueness and multiplicity. Indeed, the bringing together of the words “original” and “print” seems to establish a conflicting definition, given that the word “print” conventionally refers to the multiple artworks printed from a matrix and not to the matrix itself. Therefore, there is no “original” from which the image is reproduced, but multiple prints obtained from a matrix created by the artist, who usually also takes part in the edition process. Due to the peculiarities of printmaking’s creative process and materiality, on those printed images there can be perceived, as Paul Valery pointed out, “an intimacy between the artwork taking shape and the artist who creates it.”¹

In order to shed light on the concept of “original print,” it is necessary, then, to establish some distinctions which articulate terminological aspects with the symbolic status of this particular production: on the one hand, the consideration of the printed image as “an original” because of its link with the creative act which generates it (as opposed to a “copy” made from an existing image); on the other hand, the tension posed by the use of the word “original” between a traditional idea of “unique” (with its symbolic meaning of “authentic”) and the seriality inherent in printmaking. On many occasions, prints are numbered according to their place in the printing sequence or edition, a record which reinforces the tension between uniqueness and multiplicity (Fig. 1).

From early Western modernity, there was an established distinction between “creative” and “reproductive” printmaking. However, the latter became rather obsolete by the end of the 19th century, when together with the expanded use of photography, innovative mechanical printing technologies were introduced not only to reproduce works of art, but also to produce all kinds of commercial prints. These innovations led to significant changes in cultural consumption patterns as photomechanical reproduction widened the access to images for a new public. This

brings to mind André Malraux’s idea of a *Musée imaginaire*, an imaginary museum in terms of a “mental” space (and not a physical one) consisting of a “universal archive” of images generated by the great availability of reproductions massively promoted in books and magazines and multiplied on posters and postcards thanks to the new printing technologies.² While Malraux implicitly recalled Walter Benjamin’s idea on the reproducibility of art from an optimistic perspective, he also celebrated the expanded circulation of images and the “surprising progress” of reproduction. Thanks to these new technologies, works of art (paintings, sculptures and architectural works) had become mechanically reproduced images which represented an expanded visual culture.

Contemporary to this process, an opposite phenomenon took place: the reaffirmation of the *print* as a *work of art* and its consequent establishment in the formula *original print*. This was a strategy to win the symbolic validation of prints by emphasizing their qualitative difference from industrially produced images. At the same time, the name “original print” could improve the value of prints in the art market, while contributing to its need to regulate these multiple



Fig. 1 Emilio Ellena editions, album of original woodcuts and original engravings by Argentinian artist, 1959–1960

artworks. Therefore, naming this multiple art as *original* appeared as a guarantee of both artistic quality and art status.

In Argentina, the recognition of printmaking as a multiple art form was the result of a gradual process of institutional validation. In this sense, this presentation will focus on two cases which I consider particularly significant regarding the tensions between original, reproduction and multiple art: on the one hand, the analysis of some proposals for promoting fine art printmaking during the first decades of the 20th century; on the other hand, a perspective on the role of prints by Antonio Berni—probably the most renowned Argentinean artist—in this process of validation.

I

In 1916, the art field in Buenos Aires was in the midst of a process of institutional consolidation. For example, The National Fine Arts Salon, which included a printmaking section, had opened five years earlier, and the Fine Art Academy had been teaching printmaking as subject for about a decade. Within this context, a group of artist created the Society of Printmakers and released three issues of their specialized magazine, entitled *El Grabado* (*Printmaking*, in Spanish, Fig. 2).

Their goal was to promote printmaking, a discipline which up until then—with the exception of 19th-century lithography—had neither developed a sustained production nor received clear recognition within the art field in Argentina.

El Grabado announced: “the originals of the works reproduced in this magazine, numbered and signed by the artist, can be acquired at the headquarters of the Society of Printmakers.”³ With this statement, they were already giving shape to the notion of *original print* as a production controlled by the artist as opposed to photomechanical reproduction. The aforementioned “originals” referred to etching works which had been reproduced by photomechanical means on some pages of the publication to distinguish them from the great number of “other images” included therein. Simultaneously, the magazine also published many woodcuts printed from the original matrix which, in spite of not being numbered and signed, could be considered *original prints*. However, these originals went unnoticed. This makes clear that at the time woodcut had neither enough background nor validation as an artistic technique in Argentina to justify the control of its edition, and therefore, these woodcuts failed to stand out among the rest of the images.

On its pages the magazine stated that their program aimed to “awaken the taste for art in our country. Through printmaking in all its artistic manifestations, we intend to take our rightful place in this fledgling

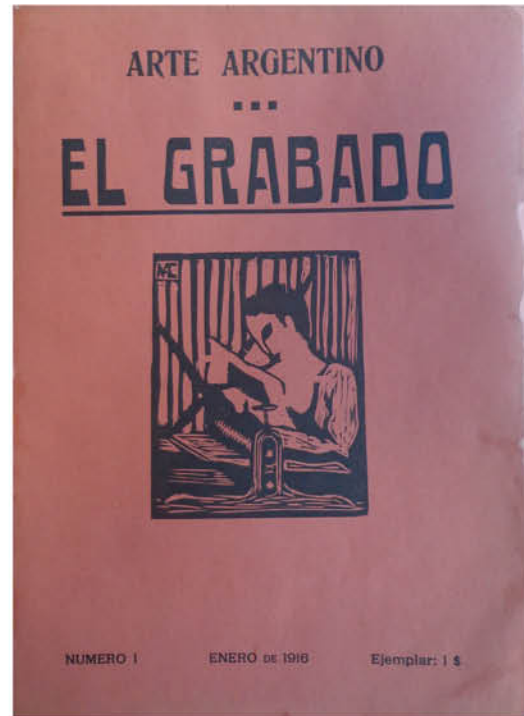


Fig. 2 *Printmaking Magazine*, Buenos Aires, January 1916

Argentine democracy.”⁴ This statement referred to the fact that the magazine appeared in 1916, the same year that the first Argentina’s democratic government elected by universal suffrage came into power. Therefore, the relevance of printmaking, understood as a democratic aesthetic vehicle, appeared as a means to expand the access to art. In line with these goals, the Society of Printmakers intended to promote printmaking through exhibitions: “(we propose) to create a campaign to reform the taste in art within every social sphere in our country [...] we will reach not only the large cities but the remotest villages, the ones most isolated from the cause of civilization and progress. These are the most appropriate and interesting places to shake the perverted taste for flashy wall calendars of loud and discordant colors.”⁵ In this way, these artists (from the Society of Printmakers) were alluding negatively to the advance of industrial reproduction, against which they advocated for printmaking as a multiple yet art-quality graphic work. In addition, they believed that the wide propagation of *art* images enabled by printmaking could, no doubt, work as an effective “civilizing agent” (Fig. 3).

The project of the Society of Printmakers was one of the first milestones in the process of validation of fine art printmaking in Argentina, a process which gradually included the expansion of its production and its increased presence and recognition at Art Salons



Fig. 3 Printmaking Exhibitions Program and Mario Canale, *Sivori*. Woodcut, in *Printmaking Magazine*, 1916

in our country during the first decades of the 20th century.

In spite of this sustained development, by the beginning of the 1940s, there was not yet an established awareness of original print, not even among the specialized public. At that time, some art critics and cultural managers were still making efforts to explain the meaning of this concept through publications and exhibitions devoted to printmaking. In parallel, other proposals aimed towards reinforcing printmaking's institutional recognition (Fig. 4).

Perhaps the most significant case was an exhibition entitled "Printmaking in Argentina," held in 1942 at the Castagnino Museum in the City of Rosario, one of the largest cities in Argentina.⁶ This exhibition worked as both a foundational and a normative one, as it gathered a relevant corpus of prints which established an indisputable printmaking canon lasting several decades. Regarding the selection criteria, the director of the museum declared that artworks should "possess a fine art printmaking character and not an iconographic one."⁷ In effect, one of his concerns was about establishing standards to define the "artness" of these printed images. Bringing together almost 400 prints produced in our country over 150 years, the "Printmaking in Argentina" exhibition stood as a local



Fig. 4 *65 woodcuts*. Printed from the original woodblocks, Buenos Aires, 1943

reaffirmation of the art status and institutional value of original print (Fig. 5).

Many of the prints included in this exhibition had been originally conceived to illustrate literary work—let us remember that book illustration had been one of the most antique uses of printmaking. On this occasion, however, these prints were all exhibited as autonomous artworks, framed and separated from their original "dependency" on a book-support.⁸ Later, these original prints were reproduced on the pages of the exhibition catalogue, no longer as illustration prints but "only" as reproductions of original prints. In relation to this, we can notice here a significant movement: the one going from the artist's press to the walls of the museum and from the walls of the museum to the industrial press. Due to the wide circulation of these images, this catalogue, even today, stands as a key record of the history of Argentine printmaking (Fig. 6).

Soon after the exhibition, some of the displayed original prints were acquired by the museum to add to their collection. However, these prints remained in the dark of the museum storage for 70 years. It was not until the year 2012 that they were displayed again, when the Castagnino Museum held an exhibition of their own collection to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Antonio Berni's award at the Venice Biennale (Fig. 7).⁹



Fig. 5 “Printmaking in Argentina” exhibition, Castagnino Museum, Rosario, 1942



Fig. 6 *Printmaking in Argentina*, Castagnino Museum, Rosario, 1942



Fig. 7 “Printed in Argentina” exhibition, Castagnino Museum, Rosario, 2012. Photograph Lucía Bartolini / Gentileza Museo Castagnino + Macro, Rosario

II

Berni is one of the most renowned figures in Argentine art. His recognition is strongly related to his winning of the Venice Grand Prize in Printmaking, the highest award won by an Argentine artist up to that date, in June 1962. This prize was given for his prints about a poor boy from a shantytown, a character he named Juanito Laguna. Those prints were both experimental and impacting due to their unusually large size and to the incorporation of heterogeneous elements into the woodblock. Effectively, the images came from the impression of metallic cuts from industrial waste nailed onto the woodblocks, elements which alluded to the marginal environment of his character. In times when the avant-garde lineage of

collage was being reaffirmed through new exhibitions and productions, Berni was introducing this resource into traditional woodcut. Combining tradition and experimentation, his *xylo-collages* (as he named them) proposed a unique interweaving of “high” art and “low” materials (Figs. 8–10).¹⁰

In August 1962, after his successful time in Venice, Berni was in Paris taking part in an exhibition on Latin American art.¹¹ At that very same time, the Castagnino Museum in Rosario was exhibiting his *xylo-collages* for the first time in Argentina (Fig. 11). That is to say, while Berni was physically in Paris, his prints on Juanito Laguna were on show in both Rosario and Venice, as the Venice Biennale exhibition was still on until that October. So, two sets of these five original



Fig. 8 Antonio Berni, *Juanito Fishing*, 1962. Xylo-collage, 194 cm x 145 cm



Figs. 9–10 Antonio Berni, from the *Juanito Laguna* series. Details from the woodblocks with collage, 1962



Fig. 11 Castagnino Museum, Rosario, August 1962



Fig. 12 Antonio Berni exhibition in Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art, 1963

prints were simultaneously receiving public viewing on both sides of the Atlantic.

The public in Buenos Aires had to wait for one year to see the prize-winning prints from Venice, when an exhibition of Berni's works was held at the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art in 1963. The over-sized prints were dazzling; the images, format and technique of these artworks were perceived as an exciting find. A review in a local newspaper stated: "The visitor is surprised by the unusual size of Berni's works; within the large museum hall, Berni's prints occupy walls and panels in the same way as large paintings which serve as murals do."¹²

That exhibition in Buenos Aires included an unprecedented feature. Together with the impressions, three woodblocks used by Berni to create these prints were also put on display. In effect, as only the impressions were considered to be art pieces,

exhibiting those printing surfaces was unusual in relation to the implicit graphic-art rules of the times, which considered the matrix as an element of the printmaker's "backstage" and not as a work of art in itself (Fig. 12).

In this case, exhibiting the woodblocks conveyed a redefinition of the materiality of the artwork, as it showed the starting point of the process of transmuting the industrial waste into a printing block and the printing block into an impression. Exhibited in an autonomous way, almost as sculptural objects, these matrices paradoxically gave to multiple prints an auratic value; in contrast to the series of impressions which stood as multiple originals, the matrix stood by itself in its dimension of uniqueness. The notion of originality within multiple arts was reinforced by including the numbering of the limited editions into the catalogue, a rare record within the local art field.

Given that this museum exhibition had been organized by an art dealer, the display of the matrices and the reference to the original print's limited edition sought to combine both symbolic legitimacy and business strategy.

In that 1963 exhibition, Berni also introduced a new character, Ramona Montiel, depicted at different stages of her life: an innocent girl, a young seamstress, and an adult prostitute. Berni developed this series especially through a *xylo-collage* technique with paper relief. With the integration of mass consumption objects redefined into the image, the scenes of Ramona's life aimed to give weight to a body to be consumed by the representatives of the local establishment: the military officer, the bourgeois man, and the politician.

For this series, Berni expanded his repertoire of resources: pieces of plastic tablecloth imitating lace, together with buttons, coins, keys and pieces of Meccano, were used to compose the garments of the prostitute. While all these materials represented the worldwide society of consumption, local flavour was added by, for example, the image of tango singer Carlos Gardel under a lamp with a Picassian air in *Ramona Lives Her Life* (Fig. 13). The title of this piece was probably inspired by the contemporary Jean Luc Godard's film *Vivre sa vie*, which also tells the story of a prostitute and had been presented with an award at the 1962 Venice Film Festival while Berni was in Paris.¹³

Berni continued narrating his graphic saga on Ramona Montiel during the 1960s, through powerful, striking—and multiple—original prints: printed images easy to carry and therefore, with a greater possibility of wider circulation. In this way, the prints depicting the turbulent life of Ramona were presented in various cities: Buenos Aires, Paris, Tokyo, Rome, Miami, Santiago de Chile and Montevideo, among others. Specifically, I would like to conclude this presentation with the example of Berni's exhibition in the city of Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1966, in which a tension between the notions of original and photomechanical prints, once again, took centre stage.¹⁴

In June 1966, a photograph of Berni staring at the print of *Ramona in the Show* was widely reproduced in several local newspapers (Fig. 14). At that time, the artist was still depicting different moments of Ramona's life in the company of her new "friends," who now were not only people representing power—like priests and bishops—but also men linked to her own pleasure, such as the characters of bullfighting, a topic associated with Goya's and Picasso's canonical corpus of prints.

With this new series, Berni expanded his experimentation with the *xylo-collage* technique, exploring the effects of a greater relief on the paper surface and working intensively with *collage* elements

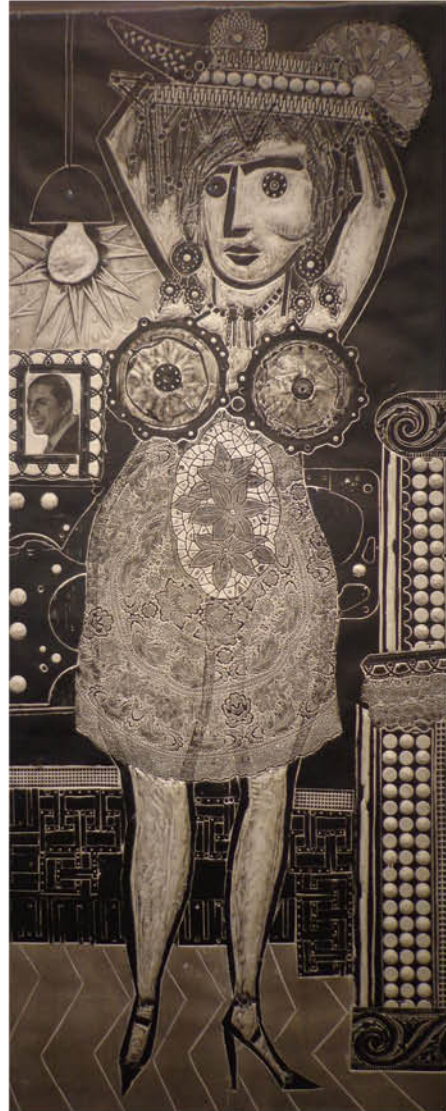


Fig. 13 Antonio Berni, *Ramona Lives Her Life*, 1963. Xylo-collage relief, 148 cm × 33 cm



Fig. 14 *El Día*, Montevideo (Uruguay), June 16, 1966

to create the eye-catching garments of his characters. A Uruguayan reporter described Berni's work as a "superior craft," when stating: "Of each of his works, the printmaker produces a numbered and limited edition, with which he accomplishes his purpose of promoting artistic creation. Some people might think of these reproductions of prints as a 'minor' sample of Berni's work, but this consideration is erased as soon as the visitor walks through the exhibition and looks at these posters with protruding reliefs and deep lines so artistically rendered."¹⁵

Probably based on the highly elaborate and detailed handicraft required to produce the matrix and the printing of this work, the reporter was alluding to the old division between arts and crafts. In turn, his article combined the terms "original print," "poster" and "reproduction" with a high degree of imprecision, describing original *xylo-collage* prints with relief as "reproductions of prints." Evidently, even by that time, the idea of a multiple art was still imprecise and complex, if not confusing.

However, it is true that during the 1960s Berni's prints oscillated between both ends of production: the art print and its reproduction. Thus, together with the edition of the *xylo-collage* impressions on Ramona printed from the artist's press, in 1966 a commercial

album with photomechanical reproductions of these works on Ramona was also produced.¹⁶ Even though the album contained high-definition copies, the images lacked the relief and tactile textures which characterized the corresponding original prints. These were, indeed and undoubtedly, *reproductions*. The images of Ramona reproduced in the album were the same as those displayed at the exhibition in Montevideo, only that the latter consisted of the original impressions, in their "numbered and limited" editions.

The *original prints* on Ramona were circulating in different scenarios by that time: for instance, in August 1966, after the Montevideo exhibition, one of the impressions of this series was given an award at the First Print Biennial in Krakow.¹⁷ The simultaneous exhibition of Berni's works in different places around the world was demonstrating, in terms of both its materiality and its symbolic value, the possibilities of an expanded presence of prints as an original and multiple artistic production.

If, as we've tried to demonstrate, the art status of original print in Argentina went through a changing and evolving process of validation, Berni's work implied, no doubt, a milestone in the establishment of its recognition.

NOTES

- 1 Paul Valéry, "La conquête de l'ubiquité," in *De la musique avant toute chose* (Editions du Tambourinaire, 1928). Reproduced in *Nouvelles Littéraires* (March 28, 1931). Included in *Piezas sobre arte* (Madrid: Visor, 1999).
- 2 André Malraux, "El museo imaginario" [Le musée imaginaire], in *Las voces del silencio* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1956 [1947]), 28.
- 3 *El grabado*, no. 3 (March 1916), 12.
- 4 *El grabado*, no. 1 (January 1916), 1.
- 5 "Exposiciones de grabados" [Printmaking exhibitions], *El grabado*, no. 1 (January 1916), 3–4.
- 6 *El grabado en la Argentina*, October 25 to November 22, 1942.
- 7 Letter from Hilarión Hernández Largaía to González Garaño, Rosario, August 25, 1942.
- 8 For example, the etchings of Lino Enea Spilimbergo for *Interlunio*, books of poems by Oliverio Girondo (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1937).
- 9 *Impreso en la Argentina. Recorridos de la gráfica social a*

partir de la colección Museo Castagnino+macro [Printed in Argentina. Social Graphics arts from Museo Castagnino+macro Collection], Rosario, June 15 to December 3, 2012.

- 10 Silvia Dolinko, *Arte plural. El grabado entre la tradición y la experimentación 1955–1973* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2012).
- 11 *L'Art Latino-Américain à Paris*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, August 4 to October 2, 1962.
- 12 "Berni," *La Prensa*, August 18, 1963.
- 13 Silvia Dolinko, *Arte plural. El grabado entre la tradición y la experimentación*, op. cit.
- 14 *Antonio Berni*, Montevideo, Instituto General Electric, June 1966.
- 15 Aprendiz, "Originales grabados de Antonio Berni," *BPColor*, Montevideo, June 17, 1966. Berni Archive, Fundación Espigas, Buenos Aires.
- 16 *Antonio Berni* (Buenos Aires: El Mate, 1966).
- 17 "Berni," *Clarín*, and "Premio a Berni," *La Nación*, August 11, 1966.