

HELIOGRAVURE – Introduction to the process

The heliographic process for the preparation of copper plates, engraved according to the procedure already conceived around 1840 by the London-based Fox Talbot and defined in 1879 by the Czech Karel Václav Klíč (so-called Talbot-Klíč process) consists of several phases connect by two legs: a photographic one – shooting and settling on plate of an original picture or drawing – and an engraving one, where the image is ‘bitten’ by acid onto the metal and next inked and pressed on paper to get the final copy.

The process is therefore included among the *photo-mechanical*, such as rotogravure or photolithography. The two ‘legs’ require photographic notions – or better ‘*graphic*’, understood in a modern and overall sense, including traditional and digital photography – and notions plus skill on engraving, especially in relation to the aquatint method.

From this we can understand how the classic Talbot process has been in every epoch integrated and bent to the possibilities and needs of the proper time.

In particular, if in XIXth century there were no precise measuring tools, scanning devices or ... electronic screens, ... even it was easier – for better or for worse – to find some materials that today must be cunningly replaced and religiously experienced nor to degenerate the process or its visual peculiarities.

Having said that, it follows that every experience in the execution must be verified, every ‘*recipe*’ tested, adapted to personal needs, manual skills, availability of equipment and room and every error ... repeated at least three times. The whole procedure hence – as the following indications – must be understood as personal and adapted to the working way

Meaning not to give an ABC of the implementation – texts already exist even modern – here some dexterities are suggested and few concepts conveying the ‘character’ of the process and – most general – of the mishaps and sweat that any handwork imply.

To make up for it, bitumen photogravure (heliogravure au grain, fotocalcografia al bitume) is probably the most sophisticated legacy of all the photographic field trial of the second half of ‘800 and the one giving amazing visual impact before a faithful reproduction of an original photograph, or a charcoal, a watercolour, an oil painting