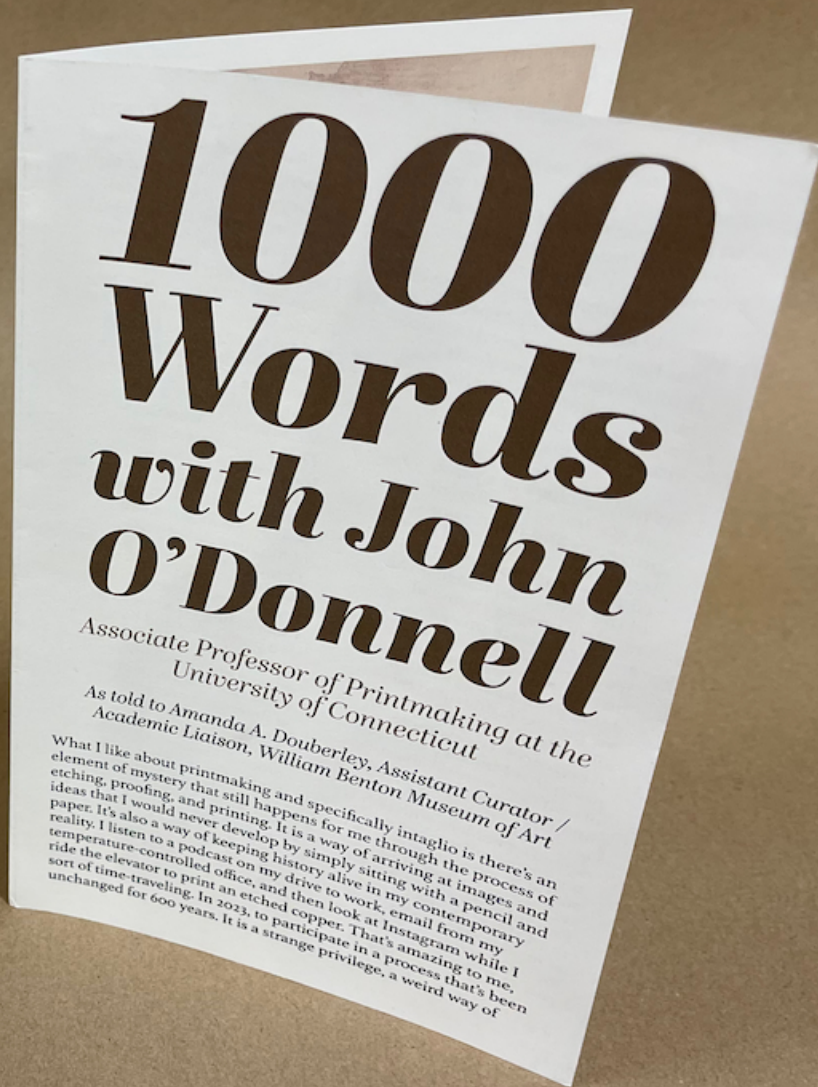


1000 Words with John O'Donnell

Associate Professor of Printmaking at the
University of Connecticut
Academic Liaison, William Benton Museum of Art

As told to Amanda A. Douberley, Assistant Curator /
What I like about printmaking and specifically intaglio is there's an
element of mystery that still happens for me through the process of
etching, proofing, and printing. It is a way of arriving at images and
ideas that I would never develop by simply sitting with a pencil and
paper. It's also a way of keeping history alive in my contemporary
reality. I listen to a podcast on my drive to work, email from my
temperature-controlled office, and then look at Instagram while I
ride the elevator to print an etched copper. That's amazing to me,
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connecting with technology and history at the same time, in the same room. I also feel like that's one of the more important things about teaching printmaking—it gives people access to an experience that has been rendered invisible through modern methods but is fundamental to the conventions of written and visual information today.

When you look at a print, you see traces of different processes and impressions, but nothing that would ever educate you about the making of the work. The image is the result of unseen chemical and mechanical processes. It's almost like practical art history. And because I'm doing printmaking in 2023, my process is informed by all kinds of technologies and experiences. For example, prints that I finished a couple of years ago were all about finding ways of using imagery inspired by merging green screen technology with 18th-century print language, a way of bringing moments of technology backward and forward at the same time. I think this is an important part of making prints today, looking for that intersection between past and present.

I got really into collecting

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antique prints during COVID. While on lockdown, I revisited my personal collection of 18th-century print history books. Disappointed by the low quality of the printed reproductions, I went online to find higher-resolution images, and what I found was the best-resolution images were hosted by auction house websites, many had a resolution that was as high or higher than even the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The detail was amazing. But the prints were thousands of dollars. I realized might be able to find a version that's a little beat up for maybe a couple of hundred dollars, or less. Through all these deep dives at auction sites, I started to see myself drawn to certain images. I was testing my knowledge as a printmaker and being able to zoom closely into the edge of the plate impression. It became this fun moment of detective work, searching for certain things, evidence of authenticity. Through that process, I became familiar with quite a few different artists, and I got really familiar with their style, and I was able to snoop around and locate prints that were interesting to me. That's the lens I've been operating through, finding things that are genuinely interesting to me and connected to the history of printmaking.



Johannes van Doetecum (Netherlandish, 1528/32–1605) and Lucas van Doetecum (Netherlandish, active 1554–72, died before 1589), *Prospectus Tibertinus [View of the Tiber]* (after Peter Brueghel the Elder) (c. 1555–56). Etching and engraving, William Benton Museum of Art.

For two years, every day I was waking up and going on eBay looking for a specific 18th-century print by Piranesi. And then, boom, I finally found the print that set off this collecting journey. I was able to purchase a tattered version on eBay for \$200, and a mint condition version was listed on Sotheby's for \$4,000. The print is of a temple outside of Rome in a town called Tivoli, which is the same location as the print in the exhibition engraved by the van Doetecum brothers after a

drawing by Brueghel. I'm going to be drawing at that exact location on the River Tiber this November.

Through collecting, I found that I was interested in having a physical object of study, I wanted the real thing. I wanted to avoid a digital screen. I began collecting postcards, early photographs, and 19th-century travel guides. Many different representations of the same location. I also realized that there are all

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these different prints of, say, a location like the Colosseum, which is represented differently in each century, based on levels of excavations and the construction happening around it. Once photography is invented you can see amazing documentation of the excavation of the Roman Forum, and around that time a lot of archeology is happening at all these Roman sites. And so, the history of photography and printmaking dovetail together to create an understanding of ancient structures, which is cool.

There are even some structures that we only know through prints, like the Septizodium, which was outside of the Roman Forum, facing the river, so that people would see it as they entered Rome. It was destroyed in the 1500s to build St. Peter's, but I have prints of it. We know that it existed because of prints. I own a print series that was known for accuracy—you can take it as a concrete fact that this structure existed, simply because its existence

is represented in an etching. So, prints in a lot of ways can function as primary sources for architectural events. I thought that was a neat thing, to be able to possess this artifact that's an index for something long gone.

All of my work in the faculty exhibition started in Rome and was completed in America. It's fun to have a new direction. I mean, I was always doing prints that were connected to architecture, but then I thought, wow, I can dig even deeper into printmaking history by collecting and visiting Rome. It's something I was always interested in. After so much research and buying prints, I realized, like, oh, dang, I just really need to go to Italy. By studying and drawing in Rome I have a whole new knowledge of architecture and the history of printmaking. I was just following my nose and discovered a new method of understanding my approach to printmaking. It is a really cool process I didn't anticipate.

This essay accompanies the exhibition, Prints and People Before Photography, 1490-1825, at The William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, August 29 – December 17, 2023.

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