

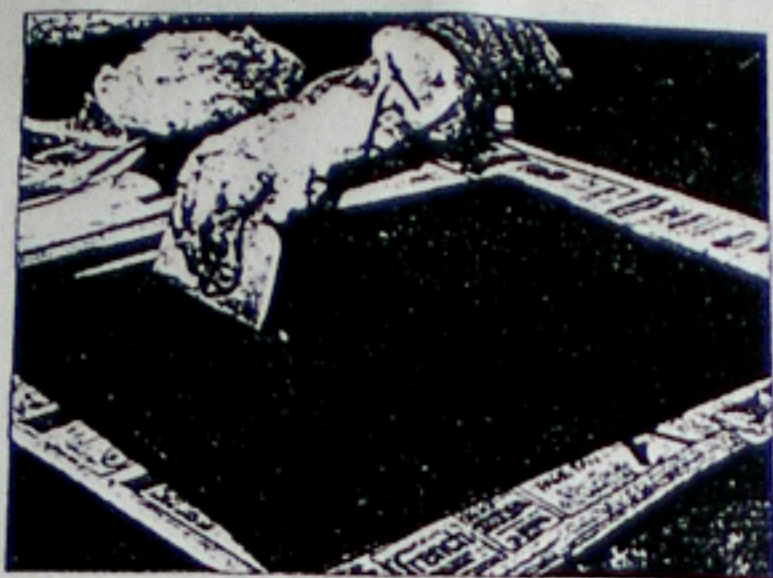


# **H O T OFF THE PRESS**

**Duplicating masterworks is an exacting task. Rarely credited for the finished product, the printer's printer works alone, breathing life into cold lead plates and, finally, destroying them. In an insecure profession, he counts on personal satisfaction—and, hopefully, good pay—as his applause.**

BY LINDA POLONSKY





PHOTOGRAPHY/LINDA POLONSKY

**F**or master printer Francesco Copello, working is an exercise in contradictions: While printing an etching, he is surrounded by messy inks, pungent acids and a clutter of implements. The results of his labors, however, are immaculate: printed etchings, free of smudges, inky fingerprints or creases, each hand-printed work is—as if printed by machine—identical to the next.

Born in Chile to Italian parents, Copello is a multi-talented artist in his own right: His works have been exhibited in both the United States and Italy and are represented in the permanent collections of prestigious museums such as New York's Museum of Modern Art and Brooklyn Museum, the New York Public Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris. He's also a performing artist, whose dances and pantomimes have been staged in the United States and Italy.

But for almost three years now, 48-year-old Copello has been working in New York as the personal printer for Sandro Chia, the world-renowned Italian artist who divides his time between America and Italy.

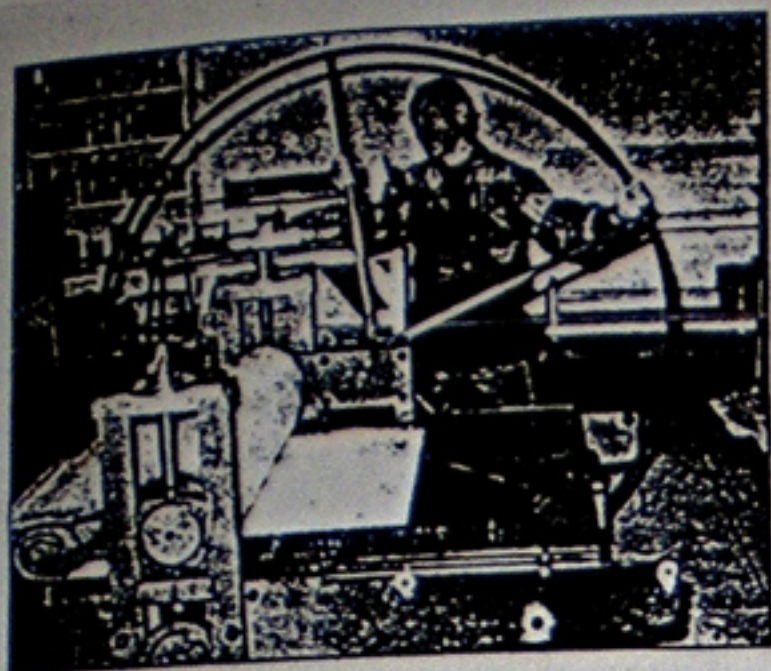
Copello's friendship with Chia goes back many years to their student days at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, where both were working on their master's degree in fine arts.

After 1966, the two had lost touch. Copello came to the United States, where he studied at New York's Pratt Institute, later worked as a lithographer and finally opened his own studio where he printed etchings for fellow artists and also created his own works. Chia, meanwhile, was working as an artist first in Florence and later in Rome.

Returning to Italy in 1975, Copello went to work in a Milan print studio; nine years later, he came to New York for a visit. "I only intended to stay for about three months," he says, "but then I met Sandro in New York and he asked me to work for him as a printer."

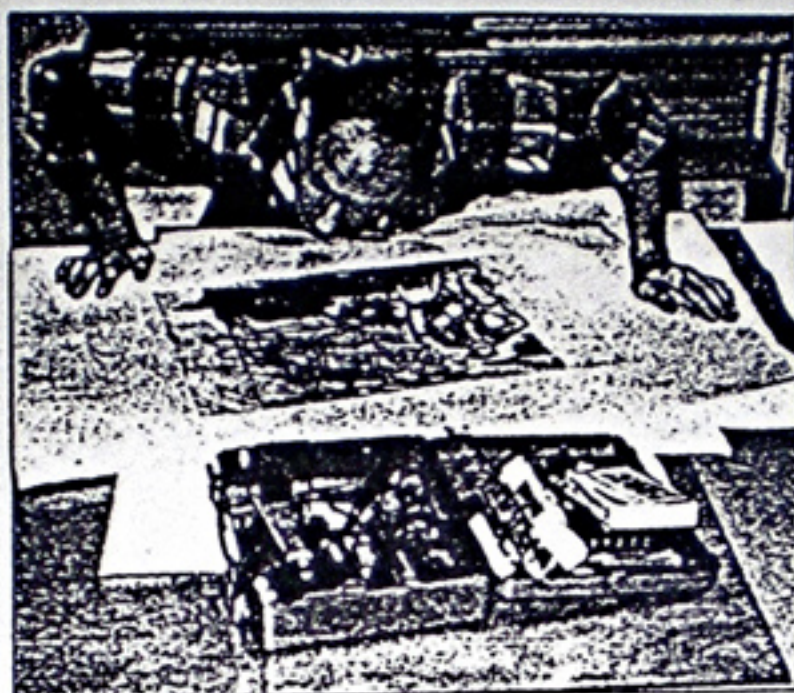
One might imagine that executing someone else's works would be frustrating for an artist such as Copello, but the arrangement provides him with a degree of financial security. "You have to make a living and Sandro gives me a lot of free time to be creative," he says. In fact, he only spends about six months of the year etch-





lines drawn by the artist. "Working with the acid is one of the most mysterious and delicate parts of etching," says Copello, "because the acid is affected by temperature and humidity. And there's no way to tell somebody when the plate is ready. It's just experience."

Areas where the acid has bitten sufficiently are now covered again with varnish for protection. If other areas need deeper depressions—which will eventually result in darker printed marks—they must be exposed to the acid for a longer period.



ing for Chia.

For Copello, printing an etching is like performing an intricate dance. "I enjoy the manual part of printing an etching," he says. "It's very physical because you have to keep moving and you have to be very fast." During a deadline period he will frequently work ten hours a day. In fact, he recently finished printing 400 of Chia's latest etchings in just six weeks.

Creating an etching involves close collaboration between artist and printer. For example, Chia is very classical in his choice of color, preferring subdued blacks and browns. Copello, in contrast, loves bold color and has managed on occasion to persuade Chia to experiment more with color. "It's by mutual agreement," says Copello.

The process is complicated and exacting. First, the artist covers a rectangular zinc or copper plate with varnish, allows it to dry and then draws directly onto the plate with a sharp metal instrument called a point. The drawing is initially done in reverse; it will be reversed again during the printing process.

Once the drawing and choice of color is complete, the etcher takes over. First he places the etched plate in a deep tray, filled with acid. He leaves it there between five to 20 minutes, depending on the depth and thickness of the etched lines. "You have to move the acid tray all the time," says Copello, "to distribute the acid evenly. It's like nursing a baby." Those parts of the plate protected by varnish will not be affected by the acid; it will eat only into the

"With one of Chia's recent etchings, *To Be A Boy*, I put the plate back in the acid six times to get the degree of darkness I needed," says Copello.

In order to introduce ink into the grooves, the plate must be heated and the acid rinsed off. The plate is inked heavily and the excess is removed with pieces of loosely woven cloth—and with the palms of the printer's bare hands. The inked plate is now placed face-up on the press; the paper—wet so it will not crease during printing—is placed over the plate and both plate and paper are covered with several thick, wool blankets. Copello then turns the wheel of the press, which causes the plate and paper to pass under a heavy metal roller. Pressure from the roller forces the ink from the grooves in the plate onto the paper.

If the final etching contains several different colors, the marks in each particular color are etched into a different plate; each plate is then printed individually onto the same piece of paper.

When the printing process is completed, the work is placed on a rack to dry. "The etching could take 12 hours to dry," Copello says, "but if the depressions in the plate are very deep it could take two or three days." After the ink is dry, the paper is dipped quickly in water once again and then dried under pressure between two thick blotters. "This gives you a clean, flat, professional look," he explains, "because when the paper dries the first time, it has curves and creases."

The prints are now ready to be signed by the artist; they are also numbered in the order in which they were printed. Certain prints, however, are given names rather than numbers. "The artist's proof or 'AP' is the first print you pull," says Copello, "but I may make 10 or 15 artist's proofs. I will usually get one or two of these and Sandro will keep the rest." The artist may, however, decide to sell his proofs, which is why they are sometimes found in galleries.

Before printing the full edition the printer pulls a final proof, or "BOT" (a French abbreviation for "bon à tirer" meaning "good to pull"). This print, which has to be approved by the artist, is the standard by which all future prints are judged.

For Chia's latest series, Copello had to print 70 each of five etchings. Ensuring that they are all alike is one of the most difficult aspects of his work. "You really have to concentrate with this work. You can't watch TV while you are doing it," says Copello. "And you usually discard at least 15 percent because they are not up to standard."

Once the printing is completed, the artist is required by law to destroy the plate, thus ensuring that further editions—which would reduce the value of the original work—cannot be printed. "You usually destroy the plate by scratching two diagonal lines across it or making holes in it and letting the acid eat these marks into the plate," says Copello.

In spite of the fact that the printer's work can generate large profits for publishers and dealers, the printer himself rarely enjoys financial security. For example, Copello is able to charge \$100 per print, partly because of his experience and partly because he agreed to have payment staggered over a one-year period.

The price of one set of five etchings, however, increases substantially once it is sold: An art dealer would pay \$4,000 for the set of five; the public, in turn, would pay \$6,000.

Yet, as Copello notes, unpredictability is an inevitable part of the existence of both printer and artist. "It's an awful feeling—all this insecurity," he says. "It drains your energy. And you spend a lot of time worrying that should be spent on working." The need to work creatively is part of Copello's personality, a part he cannot resist. "You create something that comes from inside of you, and you have to take care of that creature," he says. But creating and nurturing are not enough. "You have to try to communicate your emotions and intentions to your audience," says Copello. "And that can be very exciting."

Linda Polonsky is a freelance writer based in New York City.