



ON *Annarita Librari: Engraved
in Wax and in Time, The
Chiaroscuro Watermarks of
Annarita Librari*

LYNN SURES

*Portrait of Annarita Librari, at the Museo della Carta e della
Filigrana (Museum of Paper and Watermark), in Fabriano, Italy.*

Photo: Lucinda Leach, June 2009.

My first tangential encounter with Annarita Librari took place long before I met her. Traveling with students in 1997 to the Museum of Paper and Watermark in Fabriano, Italy, we came upon backlit sheets of paper containing mysteriously sculptural images. They were an arresting sight. I could not imagine how the images got into the paper. They were perfectly reminiscent of famous works of art, almost three-dimensional, intriguing and fascinating. Additional visits to the museum over the next couple of years confirmed this first impression. Finally in the summer of 2003 I was introduced to the magician who created them. The story of this patient, dedicated artist has slowly unfolded for me.

Born in Fabriano, Librari attended the State Institute of Art in her hometown. She studied graphic design and publicity, and with the encouragement of a wonderful art history teacher, she developed a keen appreciation for the subject. In 1999, she received a degree in Modern Letters with a major in Art History. Here is the part of her story that differs from most of us: from a young age, she watched her grandfather (Eraldo Librari, 1907–1988) and father (Franco Librari, b. 1943) carve wax engravings for chiaroscuro watermarks for the Miliani Papermills. Librari liked to play at engraving as a child, and from middle school on, she carved simple works, inspired by her interest in art history. After graduating from university, Librari thought about going into teaching, but at that time, her father was retiring from the Miliani Papermills. “There is no one else who wanted to learn to do this work,” explained Librari. “There was my father and uncle, but my uncle is dead, and there is just me. From the mill, the Cilotti family is finished, the Filomena family had a daughter who tried some things but realized the extent of the demands and discontinued the work...There isn’t a school to learn this, it’s always been something the Miliani Papermills has kept hidden.”¹ With her family’s encouragement, Librari decided to learn her father’s engraving technique, to continue the family tradition which otherwise would be lost. Presently she divides her time between her job at Cartoleria Lotti, a papeterie and bookstore in the historic center of Fabriano, and wax engraving at her home.

Chiaroscuro watermarking has a long history in Fabriano. “In the end of the 1800s Giambattista Miliani had a brilliant epiphany about creating chiaroscuro watermarks using the technique of engraving on wax,”



Watermark of Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera*, paper: 21 x 17 cm [8.3 x 6.7 inches], watermark: 17 x 12.5 cm [inches]. Wax engraving by Annarita Librari, 2000. Photo: Chelsea Odum.



Watermark of *Madonna dell'Umiltà* by Gentile da Fabriano, paper: 28 x 22 cm [11 x 8.66 inches], watermark: 22.5 x 17.5 cm [8.9 x 6.9 inches]. Wax engraving by Annarita Librari, 2006. Photo: Chelsea Odum.

described Librari. Modeled on the work of making wax engravings for molds to make medals, Giambattista “installed a department of wax engraving at the mill. He created a school for this practice on site...employing local artisans to produce them, including my grandfather.”² Librari lamented, “Now in today’s mass civilization things are done much faster, artistic paper has lost its importance, its value has declined. With respect to security papers, there is so much besides the watermark that creates the security of banknote papers,” continued Librari. “My father designed the watermark for the 20 euro note and the bill was, compared to the works produced by computer, too beautiful, thus appearing false; so it had to be modified to fit the security needs. The old money had beautiful images of Caravaggio, et cetera, and this is being lost.”

Librari’s studio is modest. “I work in the house,” she said, “because for engraving you don’t need anywhere special.” There is a lightbox, set on a table, which is used for the carving process to see the depths of the wax. She uses a set of engraving tools, depending on the surface area she needs to carve. The exact nature of the tools is a family secret. Her father knew a Hungarian engraver who used a single engraving tool which he jealously guarded. She added that if you are clever you can make your own tool.

During two interviews in 2007 and 2008 Librari spoke to my students and me about the four-phase process of creating an artistic chiaroscuro watermark.

“First is the wax stage,” described Librari, “which consists of carving by hand and against the light into a completely smooth plate of wax, 5 to 6 mm thick. Starting with a warmer or cooler shade of wax can create a mood for the engraver. The engraver first uses a pencil to trace the exact contours and design. The major planes of light and shade are engraved, to a greater or lesser degree of depth, with a burin or tiny knife to create the principal indications of the subject that you want to depict. This is a laborious and complicated phase which requires working patiently in a gradual manner, because if you remove too much wax you cannot replace

it. One cannot arrive directly at the lightest part of the work—instead, working in one area at a time, one creates a general intonation, then one continues reworking the entire plate to apply new values to certain parts. Working at this mild rate of speed, tiny errors can be compensated for, rather than losing 6 months’ work for an error.

“Second is making the copper positive and negative dies from the wax plate. The finished wax plate—your original, the only existing copy—is sprinkled with graphite powder, so that it will be a good conductor of electricity. It must be immersed in a tray containing a low-percentage sulfuric acid solution. The plate of wax is held with hooks. Pieces of copper several inches long and wide are sitting in the acid bath. An electrical current activating this galvanic bath detaches the copper and allows it to travel to the graphite. The graphite remains on the wax surface and the copper attaches itself to the graphite in the electrolytic bath. The process continues for a few days until the copper covering is thick enough. The copper negative is separated from the wax, sprinkled with graphite, and re-immersed in the galvanic bath to create a positive—only the graphite separates the two pieces of metal resulting from the second immersion. The copper skins are then reinforced with metal or a resin backing, to strengthen the copper surface. The wax plates that one sees on view in the paper museums are largely recreated for display by pouring a thin plate of wax into the negative copper die to cast it.

“Third is forming the sculpted screen. We insert a brass screen between the positive and negative dies and put this into a press. The screen conforms exactly to the image that we have engraved on the wax. Problems can come about in the creation of the screen. If the wax has been carved well—where nothing has been carved too deeply, or changes of elevation in the plate are within the screen’s capacity to bend—the screen does not break from the pressure of the press. If necessary some hand work is done on the positive and negative dies to permit successful stamping of the screen. Tiny



Franco Librari, Annarita Librari's father, is making a wax engraving of the Mona Lisa, at Miliani Papermills. Courtesy of Annarita Librari.



Watermark of Adoration of the Magi [Adorazione dei Magi] by Gentile da Fabriano, paper: 28 x 22 cm [11 x 8.66 inches], watermark: 22.5 x 17.5 cm [8.9 x 6.9 inches]. Wax engraving by Annarita Librari, 2006. Photo: Chelsea Odum.

wads of screen must be stuffed and stitched invisibly as reinforcement into all cavities such as the forehead or cheeks—a complicated maneuver—wherever the higher levels of the screen will be subject to pressure in couching. Meanwhile, a skilled carpenter builds the wooden frame of the papermaking mould, in such a way that the ribs encourage proper drainage, etc. The formed screen is sewn by hand with tiny stitches onto the wooden frame. The sewing requires much experience as the stitches must be placed in certain areas where they will not interfere with the image or be seen in the sheet of paper.

“Fourth is creating the sheet of paper. The mould and deckle are immersed in a vat of cotton which is very refined, with fibers nearly impalpable, as they need to enter seamlessly into every detail and pit of the screen to create gradations. The deeper depressions in the screen hold more pulp, create less translucency and appear darker when held to light; the higher relief areas collect less fiber and read with a more translucent effect. If you examine the mould surface of a watermarked sheet, you can observe the gradations of surface which translate into greater and lesser transparency in the sheet. There are classic colors that watermarked sheets are made of, an ivory and a blue. Plain white does not create an interesting shading atmosphere like colors do.”

Discussing the level of involvement of the artist in the interpretation and reproduction of an artwork as a chiaroscuro watermark, Librari pointed out, “The goal is not just to make a beautiful picture in the wax that you can hang up. The engraved image will serve to make a piece of paper...Some things can become lost in this translation of information, and thus you modify your carving to compensate—if you want a beautiful effect in the watermark, you must understand engraving first.” Librari believes that “The great engraver is one who understands all the processes, like my father. Before engraving, he apprenticed and was a worker in the papermill, thus before beginning as an engraver he already understood the difficulties that could arise in all the phases following

engraving. He understood the capabilities of the positive and the negative [copper] forms, and the chiaroscuro screen itself, so the plates he carved would not lose detail in the final watermark from a miscalculation of relative depths or capacities of the materials involved in moldmaking or papermaking.” When Librari took on the watermark interpretation of Botticelli's *Primavera*, she remembered, “My father discouraged me from creating it because of the complexity of carving all those flowers and plant elements, but his technical help and my passion for flowers and nature triumphed! It is my favorite work.”

Librari explained further, “The works are not 100% faithful copies of the artwork being reproduced, there is some artistic interpretation...colors must be rendered in black and white...I look at a photo or a reproduction placed next to the wax plate while working—a black-and-white photo helps me to see the values that result in a colorless translation of form, but color photos help clarify any confusion in a black-and-white that comes from two different colors—say a red and a dark blue, showing up in similar value. You need to rely on your eye, your ability to see, and make decisions. Some of the shading is one's own take on what is seen in the original, rather than going point-by-point without personal interpretation—this is the difference between a hand-carved watermark and those produced by computer...A watermarked sheet [from a computer-generated chiaroscuro plate of a work of art] has details that does not show up, or is odd-looking, without the engraver's judgment compensating and interpreting in the carving process.”

Librari has made wax engravings for eighteen chiaroscuro watermarks depicting artworks such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady and the Ermine*, *Gioconda* [Mona Lisa], and *Ignudo*; *Primavera* of Botticelli; Caravaggio's *Bacchus*; and William Bouguereau's *First Kiss*. In 2006, Librari completed three watermark images—Coronation of the Virgin, Madonna dell'Umiltà, and Adoration of the Magi—for the city of Fabriano's Gentile da Fabriano exhibition.



Watermark of Coronation of the Virgin [Incoronazione della Vergine] by Gentile da Fabriano, paper: 28 x 22 cm [11 x 8.66 inches], watermark: 21.5 x 17.5 cm [8.5 x 6.9 inches]. Wax engraving by Annarita Librari, 2006. Photo: Chelsea Odum.



Watermark of Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger, paper: 26.5 x 24.5 cm [10.4 x 9.6 inches], watermark: 23 x 21 cm [9.1 x 8.3 inches]. Wax engraving by Annarita Librari, 2004. Photo: Chelsea Odum.

Each engraving took four to five months to carve. Her work has become more detailed as her experience increases. “Sometimes people think I’m a little crazy,” confessed Librari. “These works can take almost a year, sitting in the dark, engraving...with respect to the amount of work I do, relatively so little is sold unless the people understand what goes into making the watermark...if you are an employee doing the work for a company, it’s different. Ultimately, this is for the satisfaction of doing it...I could do work from of my own imagination, but the museums which carry my work prefer the more known works which sell more easily—*Mona Lisa*, *Primavera* of Botticelli. I did a more recent subject by Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, but people prefer the more figurative, classic subjects.”

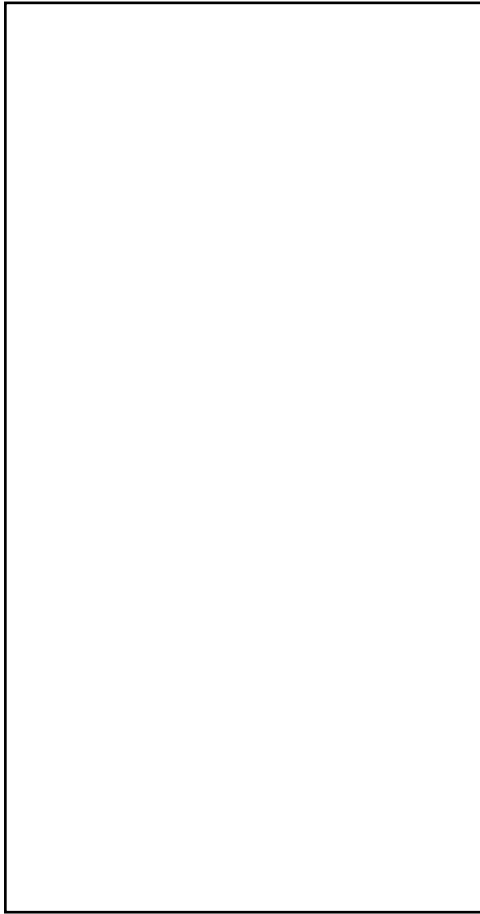
Librari’s watermarked papers are sold at the Museum of Paper and Watermark in Fabriano. She has also formed a cooperative with her parents to sell the work directly. Through the cooperative, she designs calendars and other products for sale, and develops methods of displaying watermarks.³ Librari’s personal interest is to share the traditional technique of artistic watermarks with the public and to foster an understanding and appreciation of watermarks as artistic expression, beyond its function as a security device in paper money. Librari hopes that one day the city will sponsor a permanent staff position at the museum for a wax engraver in order to preserve the technique of artistic chiaroscuro watermarks.

I am struck by the requirements of Librari’s artistic career. Her character and ability allow her to carry on a family tradition of astonishing skill and accomplishment. Few artists also bear such great, personal responsibility for the continued existence of a body of knowledge. Librari’s tremendous contribution merits the respect and gratitude of all those who understand and appreciate chiaroscuro watermarks.

A complete list of watermarks produced by Annarita Librari is available on Hand Papermaking’s website at www.handpapermaking.org/magazine. Ed.

NOTES

1. All quotes are translated from Italian by the author in conversations, interviews, and correspondence between Annarita Librari and the author spanning the period of June 2005 through August 2008.
2. For more (in Italian) on the history of chiaroscuro watermarks in Fabriano, see Terenzio Baldoni, *Artigiani a Fabriano nel’900* [Artisans in Fabriano in the 1900s] (Fabriano, Italy: stampa Arti Grafiche Gentile, 1995): 139–146.
3. To obtain her watermarks or to ask questions (in English), you can contact Annarita Librari by email, annarita.librari@lafiligrana.com.



Paper Sample: Chiaroscuro Watermark

Wax engraving by Annarita Librari

Paper made by Franco Librari

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Samples for the tip-ins were hand cut from one of the following works: Gentile da Fabriano's *Incoronazione della Vergine* [Coronation of the Virgin], *Madonna dell'Umiltà*, *Adorazione dei Magi* [Adoration of the Magi]; Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*; Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*; and a portrait of Pope John XXIII.

Annarita Librari executed the wax engravings for each subject with the exception of Pope John XXIII, which was done by Librari's father, Franco Librari.

The watermarked paper was made by Franco Librari, out of cotton pulp, beaten finely, and lightly pigmented to enhance the watermarked image.

Please lift the paper sample towards the light to inspect the fine quality of the sheet and to see the subtle gradation that results in a fully sculpted image translated from wax to wire mesh to paper.