



The History of BCG

“Smelling the Prints”

Monochrome prints reigned supreme in the early years of BCG. The presentations on BCG club nights tell the story. For example, Cyril Savitsky's lecture titled “Developers and their reaction to various types of films” on the 7th June 1951 has the makings of a PhD thesis and would not be out of place in a scientific journal. Other BCG presentations aimed at print workers included “Toning”, “Glazing”, “Negative Retouching”, “Spotting”, “Enlarging”, “Storage of Chemicals” and “Grades and Contrast of Papers”. The information eager BCG membership in the 50's was intent on making a winning exhibition print.

But let's dwell for a moment on Mr L. McKay's presentation “Oil Reinforcing” on the 20th October 1952. At that time oil reinforcement was an old and much practised method used to darken down areas of a print. As an example, the problem of poor sky tones in a landscape could be solved using oil reinforcement. The basic procedure was to squeeze out a small amount of an artists' black oil colour and mix in a few drops of a turpentine/oil. The turpentine/oil was typically 7 parts turpentine and 1 part poppy oil. The resultant brew was then worked into the offending area of the print using a wad of cotton wool. The oil pigment was taken up into the print emulsion and after 2 to 3 days drying it was permanently embedded. It would not rub off. The technique was best used with Kodak matte papers. Glossy papers were not suitable.

A skilled oil reinforcer could greatly enhance the competition value of a print. However, in the hands of a less skilled practitioner, the result could be a muddy stain obvious to all. Judges in those days took a dim view of poor oil reinforcing just as judges in the digital era are critical of poor photoshopping. In a few amateur photographic competitions of that era, oil reinforced prints were not allowed but this was not the case with BCG.

A side effect of oil reinforcing was the unmistakable and long lingering odour of turps in the print. Hence the “Smelling the Prints” technique used by BCG judges to determine the use of the oil reinforcement process. Judges greatly lauded print workers whose skilled use of oil reinforcement resulted in no visually obvious evidence of its use. Only the smell gave it away.

The records show that Mr L. McKay gave another presentation “The Various Controls of Oil Reinforcing” at BCG on the 4th May 1955.



"THE LAST LOAD."

L. McKay.

First Prizewinner in the Senior Open Competition
for February. 1/100 sec. at f/4.5 on Kodak
Super-XX Sheet Film.

From the Australasian Photo Review (APR) February 1941

The work of Mr. L. McKay featured prominently in APR. He was well known for his pictorial prints. One wonders if the tones in the sky have been enhanced by oil reinforcement. He was a recognised expert in this process.