

The Art of Pochoir Illumination: The Luxury of a Gone Era

Gilles Caron¹

What is color pochoir reproduction?²

First, it is important to distinguish between "*pochoir reproduction*" and "*using pochoir as a pictorial representation tool*".

Indeed, the use of pochoirs as a pictorial representation tool dates back to the cave era and is still popular today with artists as well as with many industrial and other sectors.



L'Hommage à Rosa Luxemburg (1992). Source: MNBAQ

On the artistic side, let's think of Riopelle's "L'Hommage à Rosa Luxemburg" which was largely made with stencils. Street art uses stencils extensively; the same is true for printmaking and particularly silk-screening, where stencils are the basic graphic tool.

In other sectors of activity, let's think of decoration, the production of idioms, for example, on streets, on packaging, etc.

Pochoir reproduction is a different matter³.

It is an operation consisting in reproducing the original work of a creator (artist, illustrator, designer, architect, etc.) by using, in succession, a set of pochoirs or templates (called "stencils" in English) corresponding to the range of colors represented by the work in order to obtain a vibrant rendering which is identical to the original. The operation is performed manually by applying successive layers of color using one or more specific mediums such as watercolor or gouache (more rarely Indian ink or wash).

The result obtained is spectacular, offering an incomparable color rendering still today in editions that are necessarily limited given the work involved. Indeed, the complete reproduction of a work can justify the use of many pochoirs (up to 120), all handmade by specialized craftsmen.

The origins

It is a process that had its moment of glory in France⁴ at the beginning of the 20th century. Jean Saudé was its main promoter. At its peak, during the period 1925-1930, France, and particularly Paris, had about thirty⁵ workshops with up to 20 employees for a total of about 600 artisans engaged in stencil reproduction.



Atelier Jacomet (vers 1930)

Because it was strictly manual, pochoir reproduction involved high production costs, which contributed to its virtual disappearance after the economic crisis of the 1930s.

Why pochoir reproduction at this time in history and in France in particular?

Among the reasons often mentioned, let us note the following:

1. France remained in the early 20th century the epitome of good taste, luxury and elitism. Paris, in particular, remained the Mecca of art, design, architecture and fashion. Those involved in these sectors were looking for a means of disseminating their products that would meet the prestige aspirations of their clientele. The limited edition publications made possible by pochoir reproduction were perfectly suited to these aspirations.
2. Added to this was the fact that France had a centuries-old tradition of excellence in luxury craftsmanship, itself based on the French "compagnonnage" know-how. Thus, the skilled labor required for pochoir reproduction was available and the traditions of craft excellence were still present.
3. At the same time, the West was going through a period of intense exotic influence that questioned what had been done until then. One thinks of :
 - African art for the representation of forms. Picasso would have been impressed by African statuary.
 - "Japonism" with its reproduction techniques, including the so-called "Katagami" pochoir. Both technically and creatively, we were ripe for new experiences based on the exoticism brought from outside.
4. In addition, a new vision was being sought, particularly in the visual arts.
 - Impressionism had made its mark.
 - The influence of photography had shattered the modes of representation.

- This led to Cubism and the Fauvists, both movements based on strong visual expression. Pochoir reproduction was particularly well suited to this type of visual projection.
5. Finally, at the end of the "Great War", a public of collectors, eager for novelties, was available to acquire the so-called prestigious works of which they had been deprived. The "Roaring Twenties" were beginning and the market was ready for the luxury of limited editions of pochoir illustrations⁶.

The use of the pochoir thus became a vehicle of prestige that allowed for the reproduction and optimal dissemination through various publications (catalogs, magazines, books, etc.) in limited editions of a new vision of French luxury. It was a vehicle that testified to the recognized excellence of traditional French craftsmanship, to the historical "savoir faire" of its artisans. The great period of the "art book" was launched⁷.

Technically, what does it consist in?

Simple in appearance, the art of pochoir imposes in reality a very elaborate and systematic technical approach as much in its conception as in its realization.

First of all, it is important to remember that pochoir reproduction is an undertaking of close collaboration between the artist and the artisans responsible for reproducing the work. From the original work that is analyzed in its multiple facets, the master craftsman, always with the collaboration of the artist, determines the number of stencils to be produced, the appropriate support (zinc sheet, copper, aluminum, oiled cardboard, etc.) as well as the sequence of use of the latter.

The site of "[Jacomet, imprimeur d'art](#)" describes the technique of pochoir coloring.

"The pochoir is made from a sheet of zinc one tenth of a millimeter thick. A very sharp steel blade is used to cut out openings in this sheet of zinc, which have

been previously traced according to the design and the color defined. The pochoir is then applied to the printed proof in engraving, lithography or phototyping.

One will have to trace and cut as many pochoirs as necessary to obtain a truthful reproduction (from fifteen to forty pochoirs on average, sometimes up to sixty pochoirs for certain more delicate works).

When tracing, it is necessary to determine the range of values in each color, starting with the lightest, and to define precisely the shape and location of the passages, anticipating the effects of superimpositions.

For each pochoir, we will prepare the color, taking care to maintain its tone and intensity throughout the print. This color, watercolor, gouache, India ink or wash will be applied with a special round brush made of pig bristle. For some stencils, it is also expected that the color will be "smeared" (dabbed) or "softened" after its application, melted and mixed with a small softening brush. The pochoir, using mainly water colors, allows by superposition and transparency to obtain many shades».⁸

Saudé in his "Traité d'enluminure d'art au pochoir"⁹ illustrates with an example four (4) different states of an image following the application of pochoirs representing as many different shades or colors¹⁰.



After 5 passes of colors...



After 10 passes of colors...



After 25 passes of colors...



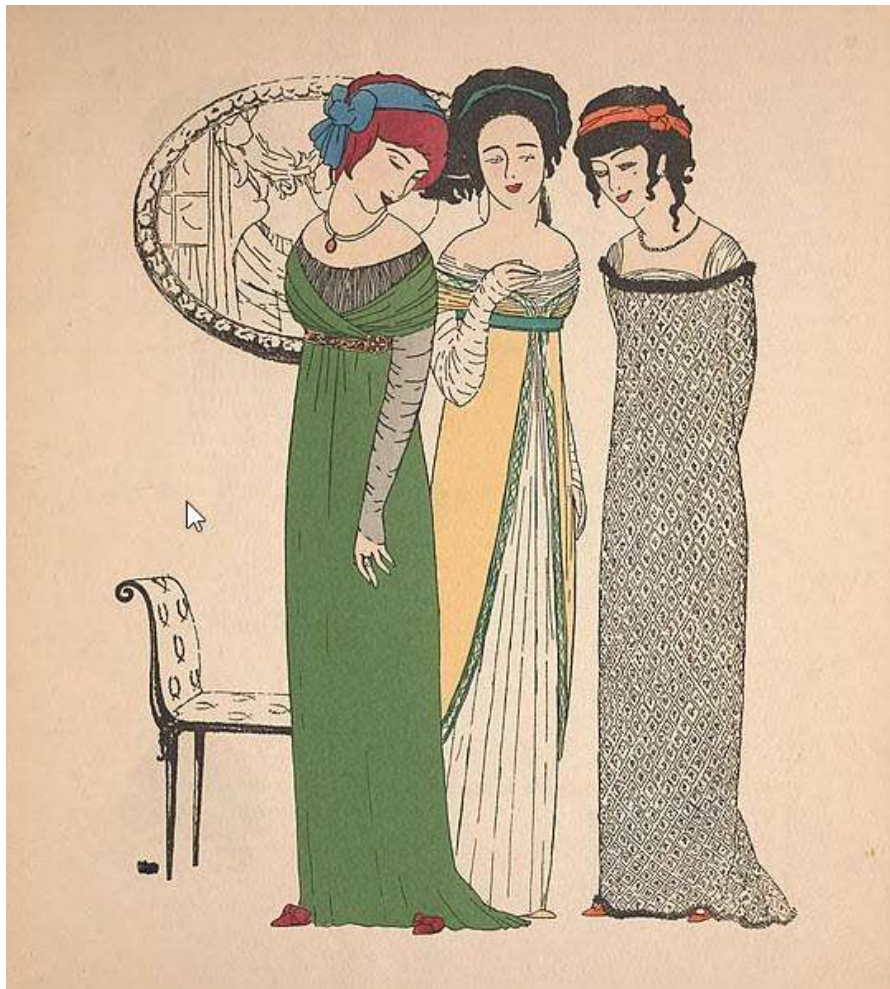
After 32 passes of colors... The result

The sectors of activity affected¹¹

All sectors associated with the graphic arts have benefited from the use of the pochoir as a technique for producing exceptional color renderings. Let us note, among others:

Fashion

The first fashion catalog with pochoir illustrations dates from 1908¹².

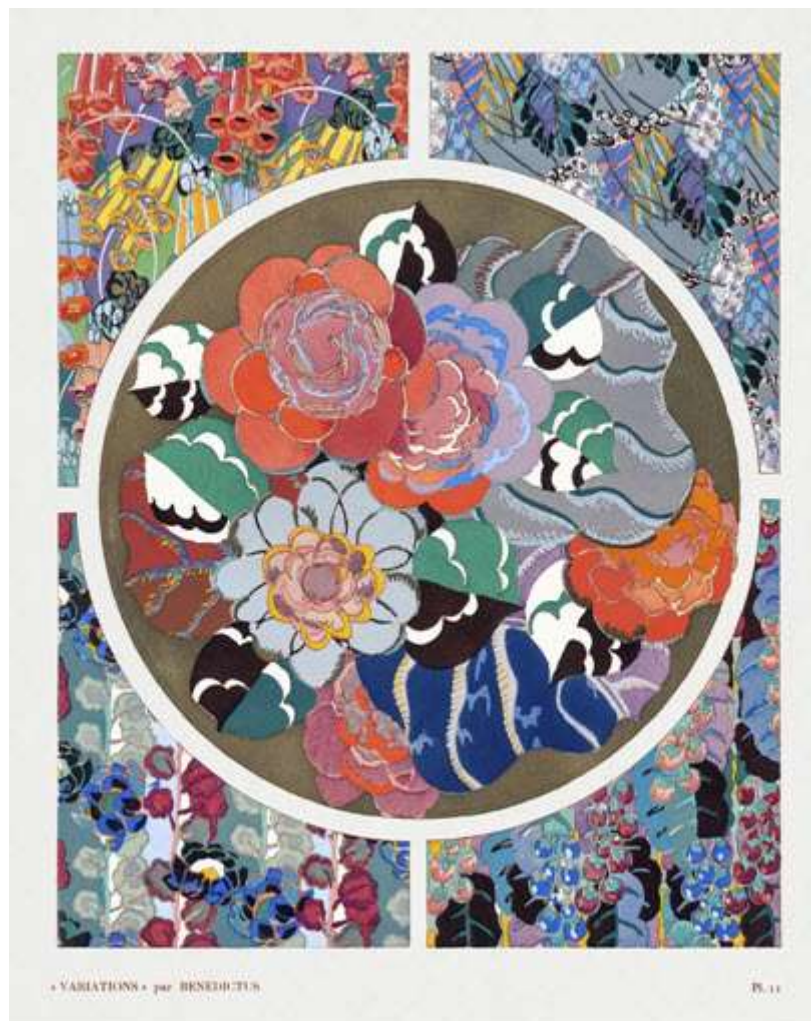


"Les Robes de Paul Poiret", p.21.

Paris, capital of fashion, was the place of publication of prestigious magazines such as "Le Journal des Dames et des Modes", "Costumes Parisiens", "Modes et Manières d'aujourd'hui" and the celebrated "Gazette du Bon Ton" where some of the most famous illustrators of the time (George Barbier, George Lepape, André Marty, Umberto Brunelleschi, etc.) worked.

The decorative arts¹³

Saudé would have been an ardent promoter of the incursion of the pochoir in the decorative arts. Others followed including Eugene Alain Seguy¹⁴, Henry Delacroix, André Charayron, etc. The most influential in this respect was undoubtedly Édouard Bénédictus¹⁵. The latter published three famous collections of decorative pochoir motifs: "Variations" (1924), "Nouvelles Variations" (1928) and "Relais" (1930).



Édouard Bénédictus "Variations. 86 motifs décoratifs en 20 planches". Plate 11.

The exhibition catalogs

Pierre Matisse, son of Henri Matisse, a New York-based art dealer¹⁶, sponsored for Miró's benefit the production at Jacomet of some of the most beautiful

exhibition catalogs imagined up to that point, all of which included illustrations produced in pochoir. Berggruen, for his part, produced between 1952 and 1970 nearly 50 booklets with pochoir illustrations, most of them produced by Jacomet¹⁷.



"Miró : Oiseau Solaire, Oiseau Lunaire, Étincelles : November 1967, Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York".



Planche du même album

In practice, most of the major European painters of the twentieth century sponsored the production of pochoir illustrations of their works or contributed to the production of books in which some of their creations were reproduced using pochoir¹⁸.

Art magazines

Two of the most famous art magazines of the last century, "XXe Siècle" and "Verve", have abundantly used the pochoir as a technique to reproduce the works of the famous artists who made their pages. Think of Matisse, Miró, Picasso, Mondrian, etc.



Miró: L'été, "Verve" 3 (1938)



Matisse: Le Buffet, "XXe Siècle", No. 3, 1928

Emerging artistic styles

Cubism and Fauvism benefited from the contribution of pochoir illustration to ensure the optimal diffusion of their artistic style. Both, with their strong colors, were wonderfully suited to the use of pochoir. Two publications are particularly noteworthy here: "L'art cubiste" by Janneau (1929) and "Témoignages pour l'art abstrait" by Julien and Gindertael (1952).



Pablo Picasso, "L'Art Cubiste", 1929



Jean Leppien, "Témoignages pour l'art abstrait" (1952). Planche XIX.

Cards (greeting cards, postcards, Christmas cards, etc.)

The period after 1925 saw the appearance of a considerable number of various pochoir produced cards made by specialized firms. Some of these cards are pure masterpieces. Some of the best illustrators of this period devoted themselves to them. Edward Halouze, Denise Rubinstein, Marcel Bloch, etc. Giovanni Meschini¹⁹, introduced to the pochoir technique by his compatriot Brunellesci, quickly became, with Ars Nova, a predominant actor in the production of high-quality postcards.



Jynn, circa 1930



Meschini, circa 1925

The current edition

A considerable number of books or pamphlets produced between 1920 and 1970 included illustrations produced with the use of pochoirs. Some of these publications featured brilliant illustrators and are exceptional in every way. Two "classics":



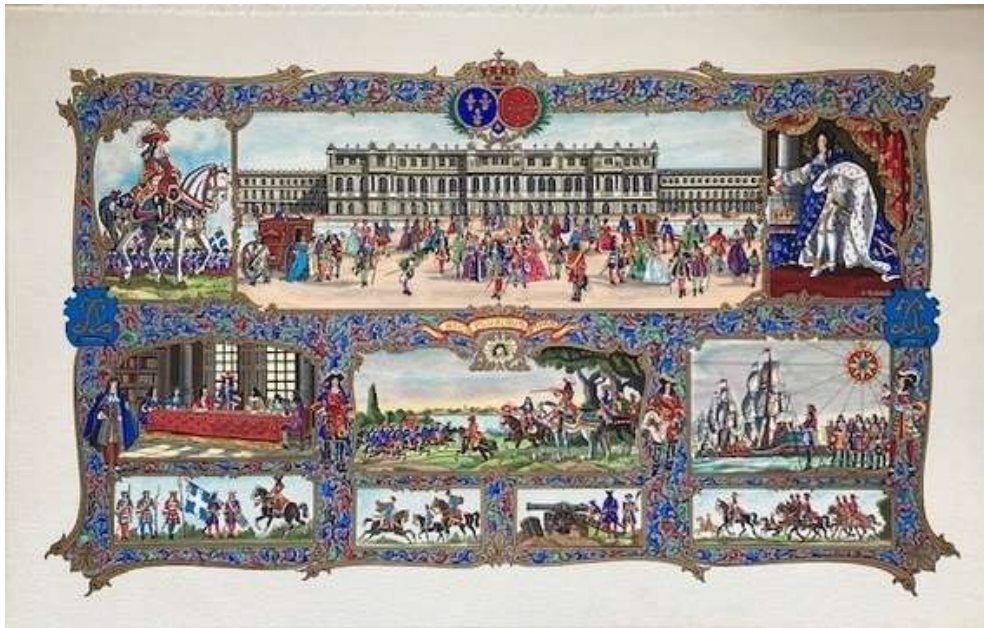
Sonia Delaunay, "27 tableaux vivants",
planche 9



Hermant/Brunellesci, "Phili, ou Par-delà le
bien et le mal", 1921

The luxury edition

Closer to the present, how can we not celebrate the exceptional work of Joseph Pardo and his family who, from 1950 to 2007, produced luxury editions of bibliophile works with stencil illustrations of exceptional quality, counting on such genius illustrators as Jean Gradassi, Dominique Pardigon, Lucy Boucher, etc.



Jean Gradassi, "Grand Rois" serie, "Louis XIV à Versailles" plate from "Le siècle de Louis XIV", Éditions d'Art Sefer, 1985. 80 color passes.

The main chronological milestones of the great epic journey of color pochoir reproduction

1. The images of Épinal (end of XIXe)
2. The blossoming. Erotic images under the coat (1910-1920)
3. Specialized publication. The first fashion catalog with a wide distribution (1908). The first periodicals dedicated exclusively to the diffusion of Parisian fashion. The great illustrators of the time.
4. Systematization. Jean Saudé and the "Traité d'enluminure d'art au pochoir" (1925)
5. The appropriation by innovative artists (Picasso, etc.) in the production of catalogs of their works, 1920+.
6. The great "Art Deco" period, the Roaring Twenties and the general diffusion. 1925+
7. Pochoir reproduction in general publishing (books, cards, etc.) and the big ateliers (Saudé, Jacomet, Renson et fils, etc.).
8. The "crisis of the '30s" and the Second World War. Strong competition from other techniques, prohibitive costs and general economic situation.

9. The period after 1945. The evolution towards the so-called "prestige" edition. The Vairel ateliers. The Matisse "Jazz" project at Tériade in 1947, "Constellations" (1959) and "Les Bleus de Barcelone" (1963) at Jacomet.
10. Joseph Pardo and the production of bibliophile works (1949-2007)
11. Post commercial period (2000+). The Kitty Maryatt project^{[20](#)}.

The pochoir and the collector

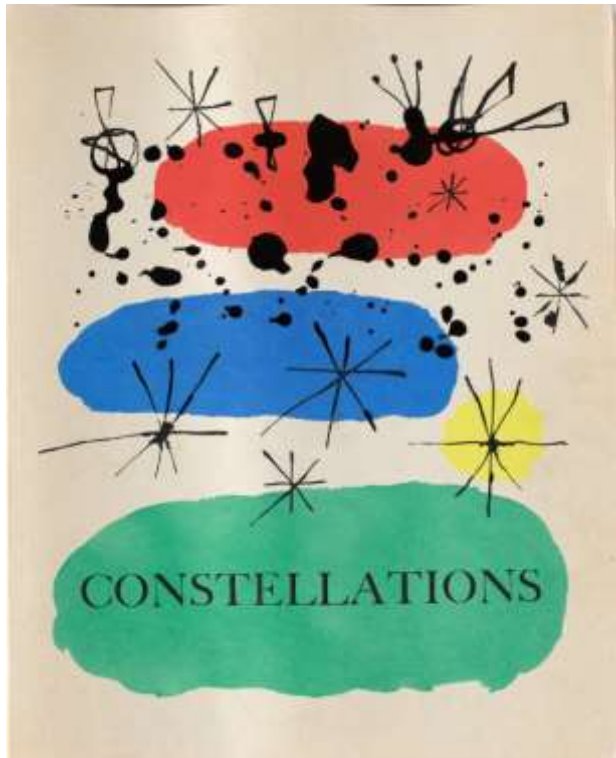
The use of pochoir in the visual arts has, however, been best known for its ability to reproduce high-quality color multiples. Because pochoir work involves total hand production, each piece in a given print run can be considered original. This explains the high prices obtained for some of the most important pieces. Of note in this regard:



Matisse, "Jazz", including 20 pochoirs, had 370 copies produced.

A copy offered at auction at Christie's London on March 20, 2013, "Old Master, Modern & Contemporary Prints" (Lot 49), fetched \$US 620,000.

Sotheby's has produced an interesting description of the work^{[21](#)} for a public sale in March 2021.



Miró, "*Constellations*", original edition illustrated with 22 gouaches by Miró reproduced using pochoirs in the ateliers of Daniel Jacomet. Introduction and 22 parallel proses by André Breton.

Limited edition of 384 copies on Arches vellum.

A copy was sold for \$75,000, including commission, at Binoche et Giquello in December 2014.

Color reproduction with pochoir today

Due to the astronomical production costs involved and the technological developments that made it possible from the '40s onwards to reproduce colors adequately, the large ateliers have gradually disappeared. The color reproduction using pochoirs from 1945 onwards has been reserved:

- either to prestige projects patronized by hyper-famous artists who could afford the cost and for which a market of wealthy buyers existed. Matisse's "*Jazz*" at Tériade dates from 1947, Miró's "*Constellations*" from 1959 and Picasso's "*Les Bleus de Barcelone*" from 1963 at Jacomet.
- or to specific bibliophile projects²² that revisit mythological works or literary classics with illustrations by the best illustrators of the moment. These works, sold by subscription, required considerable means and a corresponding sales price.

Jacomet essentially ceased its production around 1975²³; Joseph Pardo's company "*Le Chant des Sphères*", then run by his sons, produced its last large-scale work in 2007²⁴.

There are still a few craftsmen²⁵, often former members of the great workshops of the past, who try, as best they can, to maintain the tradition on the basis of personal projects or produce, on occasion, series on commission.



Monet, "Le Grand Canal". Fondation
Beyeler, Bâle
©Fine Art Museum, Boston.

Reproduced using pochoir by l'[Atelier
de coloris à la main](#).

40 color passes

[i] Gilles Caron holds a B.A. in Political Science (International Relations) from Laval University, Quebec City, Quebec, Canada (1970) and a M.A. in Library and Information Science (MLS) from McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada (1975). He was successively librarian at Laval University (1970-77), assistant director of the library at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC) from 1977-1982, assistant to the vice-rector of teaching and research at UQAC (1982-1988), assistant to the rector of UQAC (1989-1990) and director of the Paul-Émile-Boulet Library at UQAC from 1990 to 2008, the year he retired. Passionate about visual arts for more than forty years, he founded in 2010 the website "[Associated Art Collectors](#)" of which he is still the administrator and editor. It is following a chance meeting with Paul Zwartkruis in Amsterdam in 2012 that he developed a passion for pochoir reproduction of which he has since become an ardent collector.

[ii] For more information, see [The Art of Pochoir Illumination: Available Resources on Internet](#).

[iii] Attention: it is important to distinguish between "reproduction of illustrations in color", which is what we are talking about here, and "reproduction of letters", a technique that goes back to the beginning of

printing. See, for this purpose, the following text: "[La copie au pochoir au XVIIIe siècle](#)".

[iv] Very few Quebecers or Canadians have been involved as artists or illustrators in the production of images reproduced using pochoirs. Clarence Gagnon, as far as I know, is the only Canadian artist to have produced illustrations that were reproduced using pochoirs in two titles: "Maria Chapdelaine" by Louis Hémont for the edition published in 1933 by Mornay and "Le Grand Silence Blanc" by Louis-Frédéric Rouquette for the edition published in 1928 by Mornay.

[v] See: "[Le mot de Christophe Duvifier](#)", Note 15. Some confusion has arisen over the years as to the number of active ateliers, the number of artisans involved in the production of pochoirs within these ateliers and the productivity of the whole. Some people ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#) et [here](#)) have put forward figures that the remaining active artisans or those who are aware of the subject consider to be greatly exaggerated, if not fanciful. For example, as for the number of people involved in the industry (some put forward the figure of 600 artisans **per atelier**; a productivity of 500 pochoirs **per hour**, etc.). These figures appear unrealistic to the people consulted for this article (Christine Menguy of the [Atelier de Coloris en Couleur](#); David Pardo, son of Joseph Pardo who founded the Éditions Sefer and Bruno Jacomet, grandson of Daniel Jacomet). My hypothesis is as follows: this confusion likely arose gradually between, on the one hand, the entirely manual reproduction techniques used by Saudé, Jacomet, and their contemporaries, and, on the other hand, the mechanical process employed by the Pellerin family in Épinal. The Pellerin family used a device called the "aquatype," which made it possible—and still does today—to produce a considerable number of pochoir prints per hour. See [this link](#).

[vi] See: Gordon N. Ray. "The Art Deco Book in France: The 1985 Lyell Lectures" (2002), p.22.

[vii] See: Idem, p. 21.

[viii] Source : [Daniel Jacomet, Imprimeur d'art](#)

[ix] Saudé, Jean. [Traité d'enluminure d'art au pochoir](#). Paris, Aux Éditions de l'Ibis, 1925, 74 pp. Available [full text](#) on the "New York Public Library" website.

[x] For a slideshow presentation of different states associated with the production of a pochoir illustration, see:

- A plate from "[Livre de chasse](#)" by Gaston Fébus, illustrated by Dominique Pardigon (47 passes).
- A plate "[Le Pont Neuf en 1635](#)" from "*Louis XIII*" de Michelet, illustrated by Jean Gradassi (50 passes).

[xi] Source: For a more extensive overview, see: "[Masters of the Pochoir: A tour d'horizon](#)" by Paul Zwartkruis

[xii] "Les Robes de Paul Poiret, racontées par Paul Iribe". Paris, Paul Poiret, 1908. Ten plates engraved and colored using pochoirs by Paul Iribe.

[xiii] See the bibliographic essay: "[Fashioning the Modern French Interior. Pochoir Portfolio in the 1920s. Selected Bibliography](#)".

[xiv] See: Eugene Alain Seguy on "[Graphic Arts](#)"

[xv] Voir: Édouard Bénédictus on "[Wikiwand](#)"

[xvi] Pierre Matisse also represented Jean-Paul Riopelle in New York.

[xvii] For a complete list of titles produced by Jacomet, see: "[Réalisations de l'atelier Jacomet depuis 1906](#)"

[xviii] These include, but are not limited to, George Braque, Marc Chagall, Edgar Degas, Sonia Delaunay, Tsugouharu Foujita, Marie Laurencin, Fernand Léger, Jean Lurcat, Man Ray, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Berthe Morisot, Pablo Picasso, George Rouault, Gino Severini, Maurice Utrillo, Kees van Dongen, Maurice de Vlaminck, etc. A complete list of the works to which Picasso contributed and which include pochoir illustrations can be found by downloading any of Miguel Orozco's works "[Picasso. 70 years of book illustration](#)" (2018) or "[Picasso Interpretation prints II: etchings, pochoirs & woodcuts](#)" (2023).

[xix] See: "[G. Meschini and Ars Nova Pochoir Postcards](#)"

[xx] Kitty Maryatt in 2012 undertook a 180-copy pochoir reissue of Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay's iconic work "La Prose du Transsibérien,"

originally published in 1913. The work should be completed and diffusion finalized during the years 2023/24. See about it:

- The "[Blog](#)" of Kitty Maryatt;
- Books On Books Collection – "[La Prose du Transsibérien Re-Creation](#)" by [Kitty Maryatt](#).

[xxi] See: "[Matisse's 'Jazz' and the Flowing Rhythms of Abstraction](#)" by Peter Carr, March 09, 2021

[xxii] Let us think of the masterly productions of Joseph Pardo and sons within [various companies](#) including "Éditions SEFER-Le Chant des Sphères" and their collaboration with "Arts & Couleurs" of Edmond Vairel between 1949 and 2007.

[xxiii] The atelier was apparently taken over in 1974 by Fernand Pouillon (Éditions du Jardin de Flore) and was definitively closed in 2007.

[xxiv] "*Vie de Napoléon*" by Stendal illustrated by Dominique Pardigon.

[xxv] Let us note:

- "[Atelier de Coloris à la Main](#)" (Ploubazlanec-France) par deux anciennes (Nathalie Couderc et Christine Menguy) de chez Jacomet;
- [Richard Leray](#) (Fontevraud)