Bringing the history of screen printing to life

Guido Lengwiler's long-awaited book on the history of screen printing came out in September 2013. We took this as an opportunity to interview the author.

Guido Lengwiler

SIP: Mr. Lengwiler, to begin with, please tell us a bit about your background and how you got into screen printing. What particular attraction does the screen process hold for you?

Guido Lengwiler: Well, to put it humorously, screen printing was basically a "snafu" in my life—and it's lasted for thirty years now, I'm afraid...

After finishing high school I went to art school in Zurich, and Franz Fedier's professional painting course in Basel a few years after that. That was a wonderful time that opened my eyes to early and modern art. I started printing my own work during that period, in a little studio of my own. I used woodcut and photographic techniques at first, then I read about the screen printing process in a book and bought myself a stretcher frame for painting, which I covered with nylon fabric by hand. And it was easy to make myself some screen holders for raising and lowering the screen—I didn't need expensive printing presses like the ones that other fine art printing techniques require. Printing was fascinating. But then I had a major crisis in my life (disappointed in love...), which also affected me as an artist—I was practically paralyzed. So I started an apprenticeship in screen printing. Anyway, it was kind of a complicated career path. During my apprenticeship, and later on at Fred Birchler's shop in Zurich, we often printed cultural posters, but also a lot of other things, like textiles, decals, equipment housings, etc.—screen printing was booming back then. The work took brains and intuition, since both the screen process itself and the substrates tended to be "ornery." I don't think that's changed in the meantime, and it still fascinates and challenges the younger generation getting into the profession. And today, graphics and art students love to go back and experiment with traditional printing inks right alongside the world of Photoshop.

SIP: What prompted you to write a book on the history of screen printing? It certainly couldn't have been for commercial reasons.

First screen-printed large-format poster, a 24-sheet billboard measuring ca. 19.5 × 8.7 feet. Printed by Selectasine in 1916

Guido Lengwiler: I wasn't planning on writing a book originally, the research was always a journey into the unknown. It took some time before the idea of publishing anything came up—after it became clear to us that we were probably holding unique historical material in our hands. I often talked about it with my brother, who works in the archiving field.

Luckily you can't plan something like this in advance, otherwise I would never have had anything to do with a book project, for purely financial reasons—books on this kind of specialized cultural history subject are usually money losers from the start and have a questionable future. Only the support of the screen printing industry made publishing a possibility: Sefar and its CEO, Christoph Tobler, offered their help, followed by Kiwo together with the Eisenbeiss family, and then many other companies in Europe and America. The credit for getting this book published belongs entirely to them.

SIP: How much time did the en-

The first major screen-printed products: Souvenir felt pennants. Undated, probably 1910s or 1920s

tire project take—from the first idea to the final release of the book? And how much money did you have to put into it?

Guido Lengwiler: I don't remember exactly any more, since it was more of a process and not a project with a clearly defined structure. I found some correspondence from 2001 and the research was already in full swing by then. I guess the whole thing started around 1998, and research on some of the details went on until just before it went to press, which was in the spring of 2013. The research probably cost me over 50,000 Swiss francs. That sounds like a lot, but if you spread it out over all those years, it works out about the same as a regular hobby. I can tell you more specifically what the production costs were. The majority of the costs for editing were covered by Kiwo. I paid for the rest of the editing and proofreading, which was about 5,000 francs. Translating it into English cost about 12,000 francs, graphics and prepress about 23,000 francs put together. Printing, binding and shipping, probably about 70,000 francs. The production costs for 4,000 copies (German and English) were mostly covered by advance orders from the screen printing industry. The rest I'm sure I can cover with the income from sales. If the whole thing just breaks even in the end, that's great, and if I could even earn a little bit out of it—I won't turn it down.

SIP: How did you go about your research? What sources did you use?

Undated Vitachrome display, probably 1920s. Printed in eight colors

Peoria Display Company, USA, 1928. Printed in ten colors

Guido Lengwiler: I think you can look at it as a form of archeology: You find a dinosaur bone and start digging. The more you find, the more you figure out about what this "critter" must have looked like. Or, to carry it over to the history of screen printing: Now we can follow the "thread" of how the process originated. But there are some things that will probably remain a mystery forever. My research started in Switzerland and soon expanded to England and America. The starting point was Serico, a company that was founded in 1926 and still exists today. When I was working for Fred Birchler as a screen printer, he often talked about his apprenticeship—at Serico in 1949, with Hans Caspar Ulrich, who was the owner then. I was interested in that period, so I got in touch with the current owner of Serico, Alfred Eich. And he had records from Ulrich's time. Then Alfred put me in touch with Ulrich's son (Ulrich died in 1950). The family, it turned out, had these handwritten notes by Ulrich, which were unique accounts of the early years of screen printing. With funding from the Swiss bolting cloth manufacturers, Ulrich spent three months traveling around the United States to study the process in 1927. He visited the most important screen printing businesses in the country—from New York to California—and he took notes. So then my research moved on to America. It all involved coincidences and luck.

Textile screen printing, Alsace, 1940s

Another lucky thing was that I could get copies of Signs of the Times from 1919 to 1950 from antiquarian booksellers in the United States. It's an American journal for the advertising trade and screen printing, and the early issues are very rare. So I bought them for just under 5,000 francs—and nearly passed out when the Basel customs office called up and asked where they should deliver my 300 pounds of books! Then it took me about two years to read through that huge amount of material.

SIP: What were the biggest challenges in pulling together the material and creating the book?

Guido Lengwiler: The difficult thing was seeing the historical thread, the way things fit together—a lot of the clues scattered through Signs of the Times are just fragmentary. But the accounts from the pioneers in the field are basically consistent. For example, various writers mention the same pioneering American firms over and over. And those were exactly the ones that Ulrich visited in 1927, and he took detailed notes on the printing facilities and formulas for making stencils and the inks they used.

SIP: As part of your research, you contacted many of the descendants of the pioneers in various countries. How did they react in general? Were there any special or particularly moving responses?

Screen printing training in the US Army, World War II

Guido Lengwiler: Locating the descendants of the American pioneers wasn't all that simple. It sounds kind of morbid, but I had to buy copies of their death certificates—more than a hundred of them. And they list a witness, along with their address—usually it was the dead person's wife or a child. For example, it took two years to find the descendants of Jacob Steinman, who died in 1933. His daughter had changed her name twice over the years, and the official sources had the wrong birthdate for her. But for the simpler cases it only took three to six months.

The families were very helpful, even though they didn't know me at all—to this day, I've never been to America. Some of the families had very extensive records, others just had a few photos. Or sometimes it was even the other way around: I knew more than the family did, and of course I was happy to share my documents with them. This led to some very kind interactions, and even friendships.

SIP: In the course of your research, did you ever come across things about the history of screen printing that surprised even you?

Guido Lengwiler: Yes, what surprised me the most was that when graphic screen printing was being developed around 1915 in San Francisco, the lithography industry there invested in the new process and supported it. So screen printing was incorporated into the graphics industry early on.

It was also interesting to see that the development of the process can't be separated from general political and economic history. The disastrous effects of the First World War were felt much more strongly in Europe than in the United States. America recovered quickly, and in the 1920s the economy soon got back up to speed, up until the stock market crash in 1929. The Great Depression hit screen printing while it was in its infancy in Europe, but in America the process was already fully developed and didn't suffer as much. And it even spread into new fields during the Depression—just because it was cheap and flexible. In the textile industry, for example, or in fine art.

SIP: Are there certain parts of the book that you're particularly proud of?

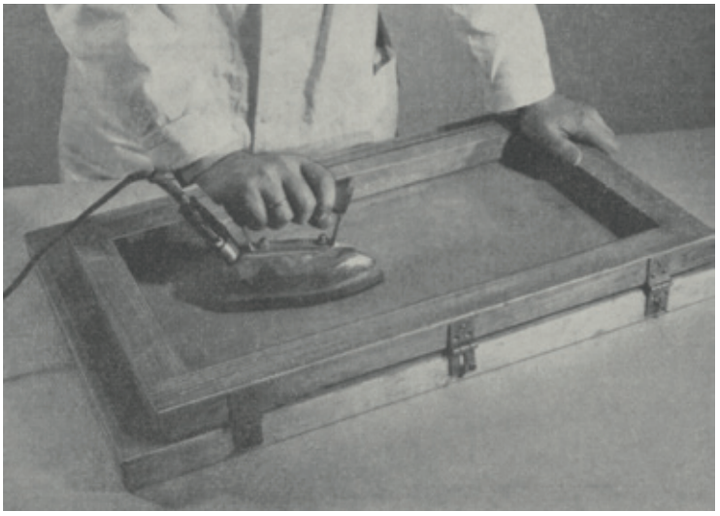
Guido Lengwiler: Not really. But the initial reactions from America were about the section on Europe, which people found really striking. That section includes Hans Caspar Ulrich's notebook entries, and obviously those make a very direct impact on the reader. Ulrich wrestled with the process, but it just refused to work out the way it was supposed to. Times were just rough.

SIP: This will be a tough question, but: Could you name three to five important events, people, developments, etc. in America, without which screen printing could not have become the universal process that it is today? And who or what paved the way for the spread of the process in Europe?

The technique was introduced in Australia and Canada after World War I, and then in England and the European continent starting in the mid-1920s—and the pioneers there would be the bolting cloth manufacturers and Serico. The textile industry adopted screen printing in the late 1920s, and the ceramics industry followed about five years later, then the electronics industry during World War II.

SIP: How do you feel now after all those years of working on the book? Are you relieved that it's finished, or do you feel as though there's something missing now?

Guido Lengwiler: I always tried to keep a certain emotional distance from the book while it was in progress. But then, once all the work was finished, I did fall into a bit of a "pit." It was probably unavoidable, maybe a bit of exhaustion. But it was that way for everyone who put so much effort into getting it published.



Making stencils with shellac-coated paper, Germany, ca. 1950

Guido Lengwiler: It isn't tough, the various stages in the process are easy to identify. The origin of the process was clearly in the United States with printing on felt pennants in the early 20th century. Between 1912 and 1916 the "pennant process" was adapted for printing multicolor displays in California. The pioneering companies there were Velvetone, Selectasine and Vitachrome. Selectasine patented a special stencil technology, developed the first screen printing presses, and acquired licensees in the graphics industry all over the world.

SIP: How do you see the future of the screen process in the fields of graphics, industry, and technology?

Guido Lengwiler: Hmmm...that's really hard for me to judge, since I

don't have as detailed a knowledge of the industrial field as they do in the supply industry. But from what I've heard, the process is used in an incredible variety of ways in industry all over the world, and there are some areas where we couldn't do without it. A few weeks ago, a colleague in North America visited the screen printing shop at Boeing in Seattle. He summed up his impressions in one word: "Massive!" I'm sure you would see the same kind of thing in Asia.

As far as graphic screen printing is concerned, I can tell you that in Switzerland the number of employers offering apprenticeships and the number of trainees have definitely dropped by some two thirds in the last ten or fifteen years—which practically amounts to a collapse in our little country.

But now on a different subject: Mr. Heinisch, I'd like to give you and SIP my most heartfelt thanks for all the support you've given to this strange project of mine over the last few years. I never expected so much help.

Calendar by Vitachrome, from its "Arabia series," printed around 1931

SIP: And our sincere thanks to you, Mr. Lengwiler, for bringing the history of screen printing to life for us and for screen printers all over the world! ⌟

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A History of Screen Printing

Until recently, we have had only a fragmentary record of the evolution and spread of the screen printing process. That situation has been radically altered with the publication of A History of Screen Printing: How an Art Evolved into an Industry. Guido Lengwiler, who teaches screen printing at the Bern and Biel School of Design in Switzerland, spent 15 years researching sources in Europe and America. Along the way, he brought to light documents, pictures and information that were believed lost for years. The bulk of the book is devoted to the origins of the screen printing process in the United States and its spread across Europe beginning in the early 20th century. However, the author also examines stenciling techniques of the 19th and 20th centuries and goes into the technical development of the screen process—all of it richly illustrated with original images, photos of historical documents, patents, serigraphs, and outdoor and print advertising, including pictures of the screen printing pioneers and their shops in the early 20th century.

With this book, Guido Lengwiler has accomplished something that has evaded many other authors: Injecting life into complex cultural and historical subject matter and presenting it in such a way that it never makes for dry or difficult reading.

Anyone with a serious interest in the screen printing process and how it evolved needs to read this book. The content and the quality of the presentation make it worth every penny of the price. Highly recommended!

Guido Lengwiler: A History of Screen Printing: How an Art Evolved into an Industry.
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