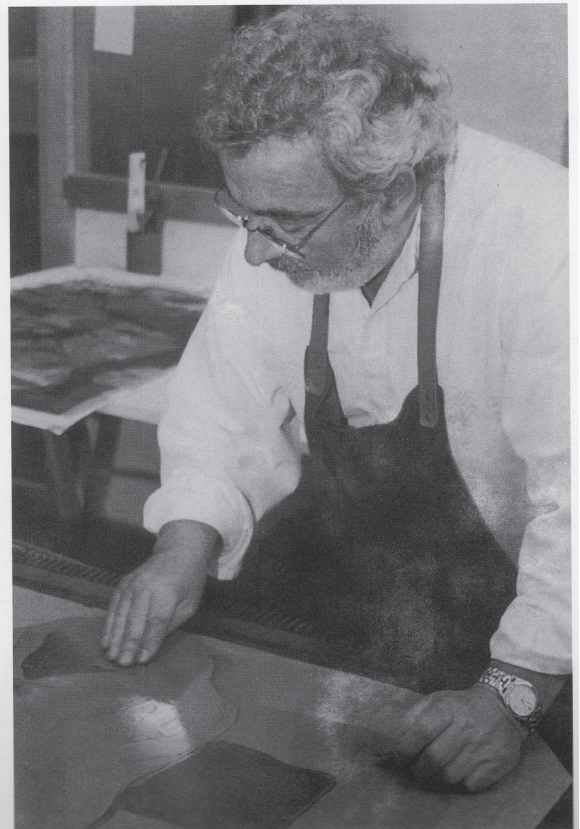


# Reproduced from *Alvar: Thirty Years of Lithography*

Lithography, which literally means drawing or writing on stone, was invented in the late eighteenth century by Alois Senefelder, an aspiring young German playwright who discovered the printing technique accidentally while seeking inexpensive ways to reproduce his plays.<sup>19</sup> Lithography quickly became an effective means to disseminate images of daily life to a broad audience. In the nineteenth century photography began to take over this purpose, but Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, and a few other skilled painters and draftsmen adopted lithography as a new and different art form. It is the artist's engagement in the production of the lithograph that Alvar wants to keep alive. To him, that is what the term original lithograph indicates. Lithographic art is indeed a production of multiple images, but it differs significantly from the mechanical reproduction executed by technicians doing offset lithography.

For twenty-five years Alvar has worked with Juan Rodríguez, master printer and owner of the atelier ArtLitho in the town of Rubí some forty kilometers or so northwest of Barcelona. There Alvar transfers onto the zinc plates the picture in his mind, adding the colors successively to the evolving image by using a separate zinc plate for each color. Like many of his contemporaries, Alvar uses large zinc plates instead of stone, because the size of his prints and the number of his colors would make stone prohibitively expensive. For his recent lithographs Alvar has used as many as fourteen colors, each of which requires its own zinc plate, its own drawing.

The process Alvar uses is standard for lithographic artists. Alvar draws his initial image on the zinc plate with a black grease crayon or a greasy liquid called *tusche*, after which he or Rodríguez, or another master printer at the atelier, bathes the zinc plate in nitric acid and then in gum arabic to prepare it for printing. The acid makes the surface around the image more receptive to water, and the gum arabic fixes the greasy image so that it will not spread under repeated inkings from the roller. Alvar or the printer sponges turpentine onto the zinc to wash off the black, leaving the image barely visible, and then sponges off the zinc plate with water, which penetrates all but the greasy image area of

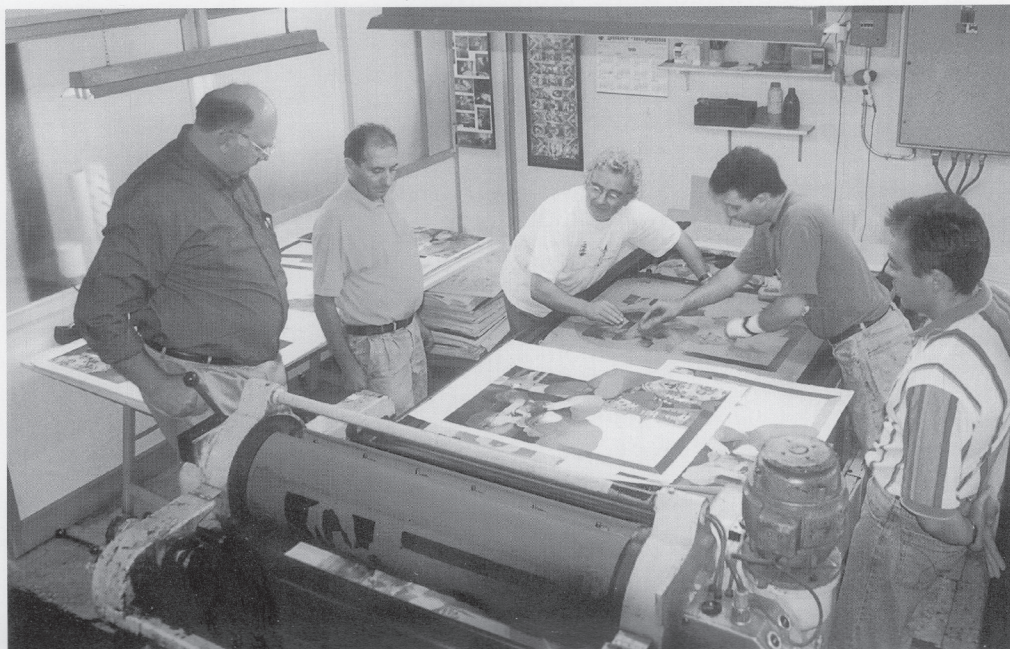


Alvar working in Art-Litho

the surface. With a roller the printer spreads a greasy ink, in the color of Alvar's choosing, over the zinc. Because grease and water do not mix, the greasy ink will adhere to the greasy image, but not to the wet part of the zinc. The image suddenly appears in color. At this stage Alvar manipulates the image, etching portions of the image on the zinc plate or placing lace, for example, or crumpled paper, or drops of water upon the plate. Finally, the roller press, by picking up the image from the zinc plate, transfers the image to paper. If Alvar finds the print to his liking, he has the printer make the number of copies that will constitute the edition. He repeats the process for each color he adds to the lithograph.<sup>20</sup>

Alvar will usually take an entire afternoon to print a single color, experimenting with the ink to get the results he desires. Although he generally uses French Arches paper for his editions, in the 1980s he often made an additional edition of the same image on *Japon nacré*, a more expensive, more fragile, translucent mulberry-bark Japanese paper that is more difficult to print and therefore more time-consuming for each color laid down. If a lithograph has fourteen colors, Alvar will have taken the paper through the press fourteen times and will have spent two or three weeks in the piece's creation. Upon completion of the lithograph Alvar takes the edition, which may be as large as 250, to another workshop where he designs and oversees the embossing. Finally he signs each piece.

Lithography is an art, says Alvar, that is both cerebral and emotional. The artist must be able to imagine the completed work, know well the materials, determine what colors to use and in what order to apply them, understand the consequences of applying colors on top of each other, reserve white space as desired, and be ready to modify plans according to what occurs in the process. At each stage the artist is making artistic decisions.



Alvar working with *Pintora Mexicana*, Art Litho (2000)