Time Traveling in Black and White

The masterful sporting-dog art of Marguerite Kirmse.

by Brooke Chilvers

THE SUREST WAY to annoy an art critic is to admit you prefer old-fashioned representational art, the kind you experience with your eyes, to abstract art whose intellectual theories fire other parts of the brain.

Standing before a grandiose Frederic Church landscape or going backstage with Degas is to experience, as closely as metaphysically possible, another time and place. It's great when art can do that, especially if you believe this is the essence of the artistic process. The best sporting art transports you from the stuffy office to the pulsing air of the autumn forest. Music does that, too. A little Jimmy Buffett, and you're in Margaritaville.

It doesn't take a lot to travel a long way. Recently, in a gallery full of first-class dog paintings, a tiny 2⅞-inch x 3⅞-inch black and white drypoint (a type of printing) by Marguerite Kirmse transported me from Madison Avenue to the piney woods of the Carolinas, kicking up quail in the saw grass behind two quivering bird dogs seized up on point.

If you haven't heard of Marguerite Kirmse (1885–1954), she is the British-born canine artist from the 1930s and 1940s whose myriad drypoints portray several dozen breeds in every possible circumstance. Her 110 Scottish terrier works are by far her most popular and collectible (and expensive), but she also produced some fine images of spaniels and pointers and English setters working the characteristic landscapes of her husband's South Carolina plantation and their Connecticut farm.

Kirmse was both an artist and a gifted musician, but after her arrival in America in 1910, at age 25, the scale tipped decidedly towards the palette. In her heyday she was the horsey set's favorite canine artist during the "golden era of sport" that flourished on Long Island's Gold Coast. She worked during the height of the Great Depression, when paper was so dear she purchased it by the sheet rather than in reams. As the orders trickled in, she "pulled" small batches of two or three drypoints at a time. Yet many of her works still became top sellers.

Her *bona fides* as a sporting artist stem from two books devoted to hunting dogs published by Derrydale Press. She also illustrated Rudyard Kipling's *Collected Dogs* as well as *Lassie Come Home* and many others. Her dogs even decorated a set of Wedgwood plates, and her eight limited-edition miniature bronzes are highly sought by collectors. Foxhunters are familiar with her famous aquatint set, "The Fox," and later, "The Hound."

People love her work because it displays a tremendous emotional understanding of dogs, their expressions and behaviors. Which isn't surprising, as Kirmse was practically drowning in dogs. Her breeding kennels in Connecticut housed 60 to 70 airedales, wire-haired fox and Irish terriers, English setters, pointers, various spaniels, *and* her adored Scotties (her husband was president of the Scottish Terrier Club of America). She expertly showed her dogs, participated avidly in field trials and proficiently shot over them.

Kirmse's masterful work is unmatched by today's sporting artists; it gracefully evokes a past when artists didn't calculate the hours invested in producing a work, when painting hunting dogs was inspired by something you did and not by a trip you'd booked.

Why is she unmatched? Three reasons: because she perfectly understood animal anatomy, both academically and face-to-face; because her dogs' body language and clean simple lines are flawless from head to tail; and because she is one of very few artists who expressed herself through the exacting technical demands of drypoint.

What, exactly, is drypoint? Like etching, whose history is long and limited but includes Dürer, Piranesi,

Rembrandt, Gauguin, Picasso and Chagall, drypoint is not for everyone. It is a printing technique called intaglio—or incised/carved printing—the opposite of bas-relief or raised printing. Kirmse used a diamond-pointed needle to inscribe her drawings directly on unblemished copper plates. (The major difference between etching and drypoint is that etching requires acid to burn the lines; a drypoint does not.) She worked with the ease of a pencil on paper, and her loose drawing style shows the rare gift of a hand both confident and spontaneous.

In drypoint, the depth of the line controls the depth of color: the deeper the line, the more ink it holds and the darker the line when printed. Because the carving process leaves a nearly invisible ragged edge called a burr, a softness and subtlety of line distinguishes drypoint from etching, although both processes can be used in the same work. Because burrs are fragile and wear down, the earliest proofs—usually 30 at most—have the highest print quality. But numbering prints was uncommon until World War II, so none of Kirmse's work is numbered, and some of it is much rarer than the rest.

Kirmse fully participated in the entire printing process, controlling the wide spectrum of tonal values from light to dark by playing with the ink itself. Each year, in spring and fall, she generated two collections of five to six images. Altogether, from her first dog etching in 1922 until her death in 1954, she published more than 150 drypoints, as well as oils, watercolors, pencil works and bronzes.

It's curious how the black and white lines of drypoint render the past more real than color; it's as if the past really happened in black and white. The book, *Color*, recounts the thoughtful tale of the 11th-century Chinese artist who was criticized for his unrealistic work because he painted his yellow-green bamboo trees in red. "What color should I have used?" he asked his masters. "Black, of course."

Kirmse's bird dogs are very different from her more endearing domestic doggies. With the latter, she sticks to the essential details of their settings. With her pointers, setters and spaniels, she embraces the landscapes most identified with their unique temperaments and specific abilities. Only two hunters and the occasional gamebird appear; the subject is always the dog at his best.

Her sporting art is direct and matter-of-fact, appreciated both for what it says and for what it leaves out—compared, for example, with contemporary artists Bert Cobb or Morgan Dennis. Unlike an overwrought etching by Goya or Rembrandt with their darkly suggestive shadows, Kirmse's work doesn't bother with the spiritual implications of light and dark. She simply captures the texture and shine of each dog's coat, its tense muscles, its special expression, the glint in its eyes. The result is miraculously full of sentiment without oozing sentimentality, unlike far too much dog art today.

And it's fun to observe how this master of composition organizes and balances elements of a landscape on the page, its contours, vegetation and most of all its *dogs*. Kirmse's own nature must have been perfectly suited to drypoint. There is a rigorous order and harmony between the lines. The verticals of hayfields, the trunks of winter trees or the furrows of a field stretching into the distance are interrupted by the moving horizontals (mostly diagonals in her rarer foxhunting works) of hardworking dogs catching the telltale scent in the chilly breeze.

Unfortunately, we probably won't see the likes of Kirmse again, because, like the monumental black and white photography in the pages of *Life* magazine that forever froze a past devoid of color, drypoint as a medium for sporting art has practically disappeared.

It's a shame drypoint's out of demand. But then again, so are watercolors, pastels and etchings in these days of ever-larger oils and ever-brighter acrylics. Even if few artists are willing to completely master both animal anatomy and the time-consuming skills required by drypoint, even fewer galleries are willing to hang unsung modern prints. The return per square foot of hanging space just isn't there.

We should be grateful that Marguerite Kirmse's easy-to-live-with art is still available (and affordable) in a number of fine galleries. Even better, in the time it takes to crack a shotgun, it still delivers us to the edge of an autumn hayfield with our dogs.

Abstract art promises to bring us closer to the true nature of things. It would have us experience all those marvelous visions with the mind, not the eye.

Well, leave me to enjoy a simple optical journey that, in the middle of the city, whisks me away. ■

Writing about Airedales and retrievers, fantasies of dachshunds and schnauzers began spinning in Brooke's head, along with great doggie names like Clovis and Kaspar. Then she sneezed, dug out her handkerchief, swallowed a Zyrtec and returned to reality.

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