



Nature of the Genii: An Exploration of the Classical and Contemporary Genius Loci

Senior Project

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By

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aly Horn".

12/9/2022

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "B. Sanderson".

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Acknowledgements

2 Horn

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Abstract

Genius Loci are the epitome of the soul within a place, person, or object. They have a strong presence in the atmosphere. These ideas have been around since ancient Roman times. They would not only see these genii (the plural form for genius) within places. But also consider them when building their homes and other structures to create a harmonious essence to the landscape. In more modern times, Genii would become additions to science fiction and create depictions of places that would be supernatural. Sometimes giving way to horror-based story plots.

With this series, Nature of the Genii, there is an exploration of classical and contemporary interpretations of these genius loci. Many can appear to people as real human beings, while some are more of the feeling in place, the aura. When I look at many landscapes, I feel a sense of peace, and there is that genius lying within nature who exudes that feeling. Through that, I wanted to transform those emotions and experiences into something visual for others to experience the same thing. However, the interpretations can be vastly different because of how others view certain scenes and landscapes. Therefore, I do not wish to have a concrete sense of space and atmosphere, only aspects that can be interpreted uniquely by the viewer.

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During ancient Rome, the Romans would have had the renowned mythological gods they would pray to and live by, but another piece of their lives would also have been in their day-to-day lives. This figure or these figures would be noted as the genius loci or genii (when plural). The genius loci, as defined by Berens in *"The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome,"* is a protecting spirit that pushes individuals to act as good members of society. However, there was thought to be a second genius for the eviler-natured actions one could enact. Genii would bleed into the Romans' everyday life because the citizens would devote time to pray and provide offerings to these mythological figures. As towns, states, or even cities would have their very own genius.

Like in modern times, humans relate a sense of spirit or soul to landscapes or towns like the Romans once did. Architecture, especially, has played a significant role in keeping the idea of the genius of an area alive because they considered the harmony between the nature surrounding these buildings being erected. Others will find it slipping into their musings through poetry or writing, much like what is discussed in Linda Lappin's book *"The Soul of Place A Creative Writing Workbook: Ideas and Exercises for Conjuring the Genius Loci."* Many works of art were created during the Roman era with a utilitarian approach to solidify the creative use of these genii further. That means that their pottery pieces, or even plates they eat off, could have stories and mythological gods depicted on these everyday household items. This would beg to ask where it is used in later portions of history and whether this idea of the genius loci can be used in a contemporary art form. For the created series of *Nature of Genii*, exploration is done to exhibit the ideas followed long ago. Inspiration is taken from ancient times but has a contemporary and personal addition. However, when creating the series, I intended it to be something other than something I, as the artist, could connect to; I wanted viewers to see these works and experience their interpretation of the artwork.

Starting the whole series, thumbnail sketches were created to visualize my ideas from what I had researched last semester. Thumbnail sketches are brief outlines that help artists understand the overall concept of the image they would like to create. For example, for my first sketch (fig. 4), there was a central idea of how significant the work would be in the end and what elements would be implemented to work the best for the work. It was done for the three works created in this project. Next, there are a series of notes that I will write on the sides of the page to see what medium the work will be used to achieve the desired outcome. Going off of the first example, there are certain features that I would like to achieve. For example, clouds are a massive part of the composition, meaning I would not use something that has me doing small intricate details to make the broad and soft marks evoke a cloud.

Napping Clouds (fig. 1) and *The Swamp Calls Me...* (fig. 10) were created using copper plate intaglio, a form of printmaking performed by creating wells on the matrix for the ink to set in before it is printed onto paper. A few things in that

5 Horn

previous sentence might be confusing and need much further explanation. Firstly, a matrix is as simple as the surface to put the original image into for printing later. The copper plate used would be considered the matrix when looking at the two works mentioned before. For both artworks, I used the mezzotint technique, which includes using a mezzotint rocker across the plate until it has many furrows to create a solid dark color. The mezzotint rocker does this by having hundreds of teeth on the blade which will pierce the copper's smooth surface to create the furrows that will hold the ink later.

The biggest thing I had to remember was adding the highlights when creating the image. In traditional art mediums, when the artist makes a mark, it is a darker line than the surface, which means they add the dark to the light to build the image. However, in mezzotint, the technique requires the exact opposite, achieved with tools such as the burnisher and scraper. The burnisher works by smoothing back out the furrows created with the mezzotint rocker, attempting to restore that beginning surface that the copper plate had before. The scraper helps to make the softer changes in values by not ultimately making a smooth surface but by shaving the furrows shorter so there is less ink held there, making it lighter.

During the process, it can be hard to know where the image will go and how to compose the work's vision. To counteract that, I followed what Carol Wax had mentioned in her book *The Mezzotint: History and Technique* with etching. As Wax writes, old masters using mezzotint would also run into the issue of where everything would be laid out without harming the rocked plate. The solution was to treat the copper plate as if it were an etching piece of work but dial back the depth of the etch. With copper plates, to etch them, the use of an acid resist is painted onto the plate, and in areas that one would like to be etched, the resist would be lightly scraped off. That exposes the copper and has the ferric chloride acid that the plate is put in to do all the work. For *Napping Clouds* (fig. 2) print, I did that exact thing, leaving the matrix in the acid bath for only two minutes to get the image etched in, but not too deep that the mezzotint would be greatly interfered.

As for the second work in the series, *The Swamp Calls Me...*, the mezzotint I had done was not finished and made the matrix lighter than it should have been. To help make it have a darker tone over the whole plate, I would do another etching process called aquatint. Traditionally this would have been done by dusting purified sap from trees, known as rosin, pulverized into a powder form. However, this method cannot be used due to the lack of resources and time to do such testing. So it was done with spray paint instead. The spray can help disperse the acrylic paint across an even field and create a similar dusting look that will help to create that same block on the plate as the acid resist would. Like other line etchings, the aquatint will sit in the acid bath, although this one does not need to be there for quite as long to achieve the desired effect and tone.

After explaining the techniques of etching in copper, it is time to discuss the two works completed on the plates. First, I would like to begin with the work *Napping Clouds*. This artwork was done using the mezzotint method of intaglio, and my reasoning for choosing it was sole because I believed I could achieve a better result with the softness of the clouds with it than I could etch the plate. My initial

6 Horn

sketch (fig. 4) is derived from the personal feeling I had when I gazed upon a full moon, comfort, and peace from the bed of fluffy clouds surrounding the rock in the sky when it shines brightly on a night sky. The way the moon shines through the clouds has that sense of protection from the night, which connects to my fear of the dark. Essentially, the genius within the landscape is that of the moon itself but has a human figure within the clouds to aid in representing personified notions I had given it.

When working in visual arts, there are two main factors to consider when creating a work; one is that of composition. Composition depends on the subject of the piece, what dynamics the artist is attempting to evoke here and how to achieve it successfully. The second thing to consider is the color. It is often considered alongside the composition because it can change how it will change. With that in mind, I kept the idea of what colors I would like to use as a leading forefront in creating the print. Due to the nature of the scene occurring on a dark cloudy night, I wanted to have the ink I used to be a dark blue to attempt to evoke that night sky look. After that, the paper was a simple choice because I wanted to keep the blue theme then I should use blue-toned paper. Why not a white paper? One might ask if that is because even though the moon does shine bright white, no true whites reflect into the clouds at night. Therefore, using a different toned paper would be best. A bright blue would have been too bright and detracted from the image, but a light grey blue could unify the work.

In theory, thinking of these things can only be done so much, while there will always be mistakes in practice. It introduces the idea of a proof, an impression of the matrix before it is done, to see how the image looks. Figure three, there is the first proof of the print shown. Alongside it are notes written on the page to note what needs to be changed. Notes can include needing to rework an area more with the tools (scraper and burnisher), changing the color of the ink, or wiping the plate differently before printing. These proofs are done before printing the whole edition, a series of prints made in one go with the same plate. It helps to ensure that the print will be the best it can be once editioning begins. For *Napping Clouds*, there was only an edition of fifteen done, along with an artist's proof, which is a print I do to keep for my collection.

Similarly, for *The Swamp Calls Me...* (fig. 8), the plate was rocked with a mezzotint rocker, and then the image was scraped and burnished. The imagery used here comes from inspiration after reading Clark Smith Ashton's short story *Genius Loci*. In summary, there is a man who has a painter companion visit him to paint some of the beautiful landscapes around his estate. There is one that enchants his artist friend to the point of exhaustion and concern due to the time spent going out the description of the area. The narrator, the man who invited his friend to paint, asks for the fiancé of his friend to attempt to clear his strange feelings towards the marshy area he visits every day. She is, unfortunately, unable to help, and both she and her fiancé end up dead in the marsh later in the night. Clark's narrator discovers the body and describes the scene as a misty night with the faces of those he knew in the water now transformed into the large willow tree in the middle of the area with an immense longing to follow them lingering in his mind.

7 Horn

The short story is about a science fiction view with a genius representative of the tree in the marsh. It even evokes horror from the death of the narrator's friends and the inferred cliffhanger that the same fate befell him. With that, I wanted to create a scene that could reflect that same sentiment in the short story. My sketch (fig. 7) focuses on the foreground, where a figure faces away from the viewer with smoke in the shape of hands wrapping behind it. Then when the viewer continues to look up at the image, there is the willow tree with faces now embedded into the bark. I wanted to try and keep that hazy atmosphere all around the environment because it would provide a sense of uneasiness and confusion on what is happening, in a good way. Also, placing the focal point behind the person looking at the scene gives the viewer the illusion of seeing what the person is seeing alongside them, which I wanted when creating the composition.

For the color choices, I wanted to stay within the realm of swampy and green, which would mean lots of muted and gray-toned greens in figure nine. Most of the green comes from another sheet of rice paper that I printed a thin layer of color onto and attached to the finished print with the technique called chine colle, when the image is printed onto a delicate paper that is bonded to a heavier one for support. Although it was used for that purpose, in this case, there are other times when chine colle is more for emphasis rather than color. Like the first work, *Napping Clouds*, in my proof print, the ink's color was too bright and would not reveal the matrix's details. To counteract this, I added black to the ink to darken it, which would help bring out the result of figure ten.

Although it seemed to be finished, after a moment of letting the image rest in my mind, an apparent issue, the image needed to have the depth I wanted, and I might have accidentally scraped or burnished too much of it. This is where the aquatint comes in because I did a simple two-minute etching of it to help me start all over. It was a problem to overcome with this work, and I hope to be able to finish an edition of it in the future.

Unlike the two previous works, the last one in this small series was done with a different technique in printmaking called lithography. Lithography is when printing is done by etching an image onto a stone. The image that comes out of it has an appearance comparable to graphite or pencil drawings and has much more labor put into it, unlike other methods of printing. To start, the stone will need to be grained, which means taking various numbers of grit (like sandpaper but in sand form) and carefully removing that previous image from the last print. The reason to do this is that there is a delicate balance between grease and chemicals in the whole process. The graining process helps to clear that top layer and get to the unprocessed stone underneath.

After the graining process, there will be an addition of gum arabic to add as a border of the image. It protects the stone it covers so as not to have any grease or extraneous scratches affect the image. To create the image the use of grease pencils is used. The bigger the number, the less grease there is in pencil. For *Home is Where the Comfort is*, the number four and five grease pencils are used the most, giving the piece light and softness. Next comes the actual work of etching the image into the

8 Horn

stone, where nitric acid is involved but is mixed with more gum arabic to help lower the strength of the acid and not burn the stone too much.

I chose to make *Home is Where the Comfort* using stone lithography because it has that soft pencil texture when done correctly. When I think of something nostalgic or at home and comforting, it is like the peaceful landscape around the home. There is a sense of peace outside, no matter what is happening inside. Furthermore, many of my drawings were done in pencil as a child. That is why I have a small connection to the essence of the print's graphite pencil texture and color. In the sketch (fig. 11), I wanted to capture it and possibly add a similar theme of a person or human figure into the work.

Sadly, I do not have any images from the process of the stone and the printing, but the proof in figure twelve is how one of the first prints came out. From there, I decided where to go by ensuring there was more ink on the image or less. Unfortunately, the human figure that would have been in the middle was lost in the image because of the need to use a lower number of grease pencils for the image to burn through properly. Although that was lost, I intend later to add layers of screen print to add some color to work and help darken the lines of the initial print. The paper that I will edition (fig. 13) has these additional leaves, and I liked how they interacted with the composition and added a touch of their color.

I compiled my research and studio work into a display case (fig. 14) within the Livermore Library at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. The ability to present work like mine is an honor and something that should be done more because the humanistic and visual arts side of human society should be celebrated and discussed as much as scientific discoveries are. In the future, I can present this work at other conferences or symposia to continue the discussion and do more research on the subject.

I hope to further the research of genius loci and perhaps experiment with other art mediums to recreate or be inspired by others' depictions of the genii. Within the Italian renaissance, I found a few works that depicted a genius within the composition. Michelangelo's *Genius of Victory* certainly has an intriguing composition, and I would like to look further into that for the specific contextual purpose of the sculpture. Overall, the project was an exciting look into the classical idea of genius loci, and in the future, I hope to continue this research. From that research, I would like to take what I found and create more works that can reflect those ideas directly or help me gain inspiration in my work to further the tradition of genii and their place in the world.

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9 Horn

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Images Figure

1:



Figure 2:

10 Horn



11 Horn

Figure 3:

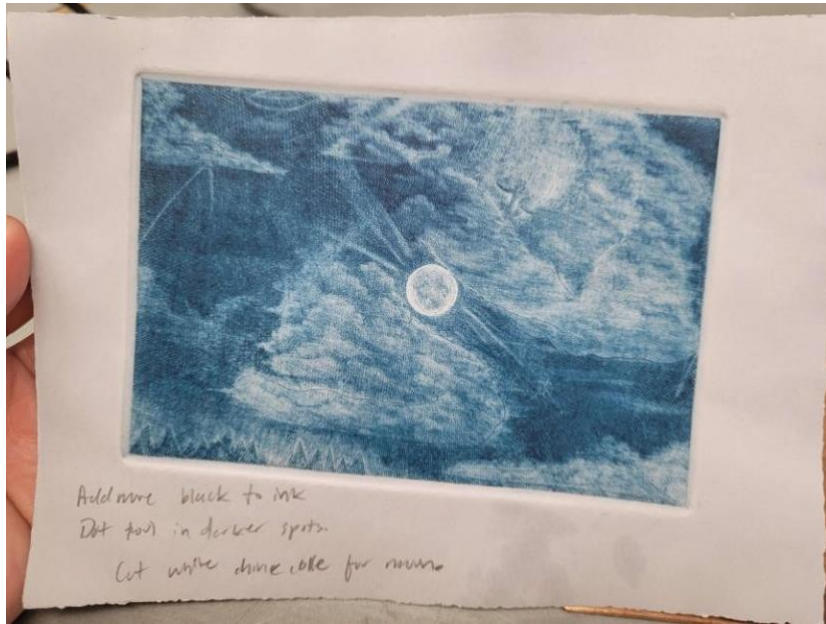
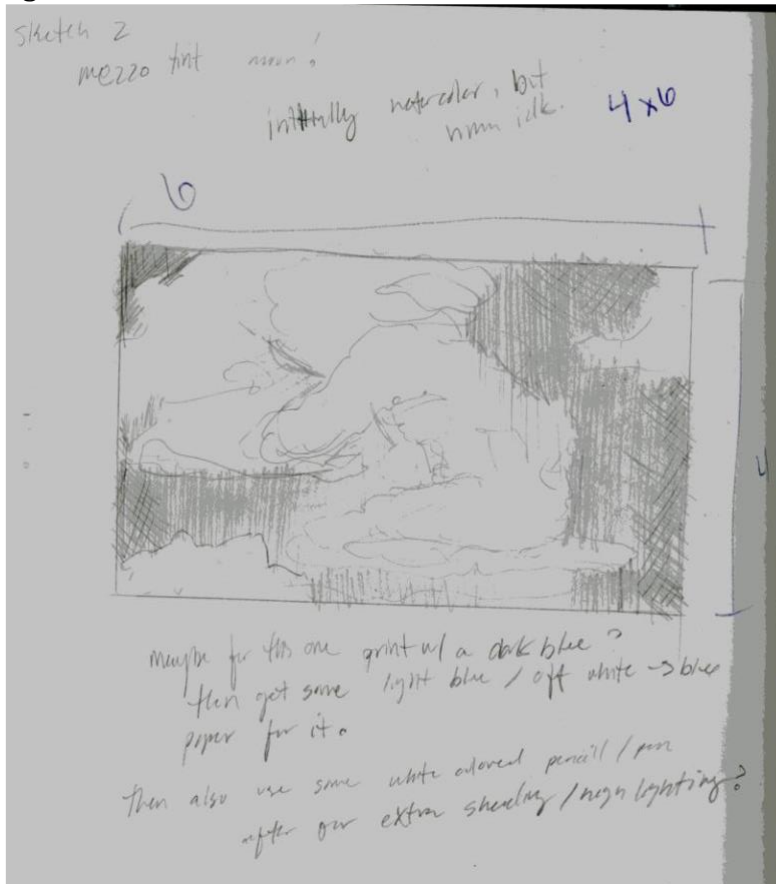


Figure 4:



12 Horn

Figure

7:

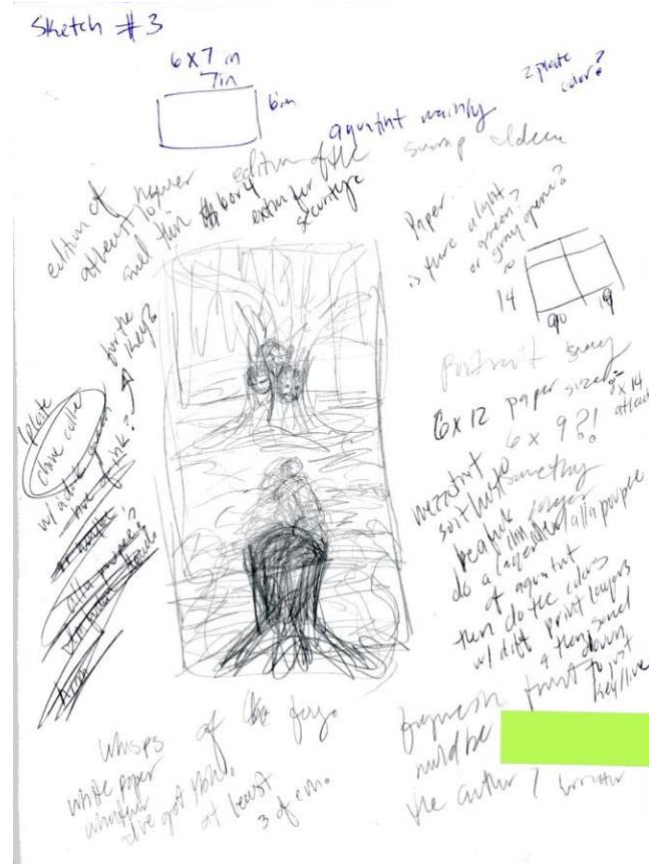


Figure 8:

13 Horn

Figure



9:



Figure 10:

14 Horn

Figure



11:

15 Horn

Figure



Figure 12:



16 Horn

Figure

Figure 13:



Figure 14:

