

# VailDaily

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## Woodblock artist Leon Loughridge in Vail

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VAIL, Colorado ” Leon Loughridge uses one of the most laborious techniques in the art world. He’s a woodblock printer.

Often the Denver artist spends two weeks creating a single print.

On a recent afternoon, a collector who owns three Loughridge prints stopped by the Vail International Gallery to see his latest work.

She marveled at the intricately layered prints of the Gore Range that hung on the gallery walls.

“I think it’s a dying art, isn’t it?” the woman mused.

“There’s very few artists who want to put the time in to do things like this,” gallery co-owner Marc LeVarn agreed.

A show at the gallery this afternoon will double as the release of Loughridge’s latest book, “Spring Thaw in the Gore Range.” Thirty copies of the book will be for sale, along with several of the artist’s oil paintings.

The book contains 10 prints chronicling the Gore Range’s emergence from the snowiest winter in recent history.

Loughridge said he was unsure what the focus of his new book would be when he started talking to gallery owners about it nine months ago.

The idea came to him during a road trip.

“I was trying to get over Vail Pass,” he said. “We went over to Minturn and it just dawned on me exactly what I wanted to do: This all has to be about the spring thaw in the Gore Range, so that’s when I really started traveling and hiking and going up to Shrine Pass, skiing the mountain with my big backpack with all my paints in it.”

Each page in the book started with an oil painting or watercolor. From the painting, Loughridge made a sketch. He dissected each scene into several layers of color. He then carved each layer onto a 9-by-7-inch woodblock, covered the woodblock in ink, and printed the ink onto Japanese paper. He solidified the image using an old, steel press. Loughridge can do just one color run per

day, and some of his prints contain up to 16 sets of colors. Each image comes with a hand-printed caption Loughridge created using an old letter press.

The book has a poetic feel. Loughridge includes his own snowshoe tracks in a print of Shrine Pass. Beside an image of orange flowers blooming by a tree trunk, the artist writes “With the snowmelt, come bogs of saturated soil decorated with Marsh marigolds.” Japanese stab bindings fasten the pages of the books. Each 14-inch-by-14-inch books cost \$900.

LeVarn said he’s been collecting Loughridge’s work since the ’90s. The artist was one of the first he called when he opened the gallery.

“The reduction woodblock method of printing is one of the most demanding printing techniques in the world,” LeVarn said. “Leon is a recognized master in this format.”

Loughridge, 56, traces his artistic ability back to childhood. He attended The Art Institute of Colorado in Denver, and then headed to Germany to serve as a graphic artist for the Army.

He eventually moved back to Denver, where he started a gold leaf studio in 1987. He also developed a passion for massive printing presses. Loughridge owns three steel presses dating back to 1885, 1895 and 1934. The heaviest of those presses is 1,500 pounds.

Loughridge made his first book of wood prints in 2000. It chronicled the demolition of the McNichols stadium in Denver. “They were tearing it down and there was a big hoopla,” the artist recalled. “I went there every day and sketched and recorded the demolition.”

Looking into the future, Loughridge plans a book on a remote area of Utah. He plans to travel there with several other artists and spend two weeks painting and exploring Anasazi ruins.

Thanks to Loughridge, woodblock printing shows no signs of dying out any time soon.

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