

Printmaking 101 by John D. Gall

In the early part of 2008 I was asked to curate a national printmaking show for The Theatre Art Galleries located in High Point, NC, a city probably known more for its furniture than its visual arts. In conjunction with this exhibition I took the opportunity to develop a lecture focused on introducing basic printmaking methods and terms to an audience that was potentially unfamiliar with original printmaking. For some time I have overheard patrons at art functions make comments like: “what is a serigraph” or “what does intaglio mean?” I began to realize the usefulness of a talk in this area could include not only patrons of the arts but even a segment of art students, non-art faculty at schools, and many senior citizens. Thus was the inspiration for *Printmaking 101*.

I begin by sharing with you some of the content of this presentation by answering some common questions I am frequently asked. First, “what is the difference between an original print and a reproduction print?” Well simply put, an original print is the actual finished artwork that comes from the printing of a completed plate(s), generally printed by the artist but sometimes in collaboration with a “master printer.” In contrast, a reproduction print is made from a photograph of some type of finished artwork such as a painting, drawing, or even an original print. For years offset lithography was primarily used for making a reproduction print, but with the coming of extremely high quality digital printing technology, that method is more and more less used. It is worth noting that because an original is generally inked and printed by hand there can be some very, very slight differences between prints, hence “original”. Some artists do use photo-transfer methods when creating an original print which is perfectly acceptable and quite different than producing a reproduction print. Another frequent question is “what does the numbering mean and why are prints numbered?” First, 1/25 on a print would mean print one of an edition of 25, 25/25 would mean print 25 of an edition of 25. As for why prints are numbered, this may surprise you, but the main reason prints are numbered and editioned is simply a marketing scheme. This practice is fairly modern, beginning the end of the nineteenth century. An effort is made to present a concept that there is only a certain “limited” number available and then there will be no more, making the print more valuable. This can be taken further by also implying when there are just a few prints left in an edition they are even more valuable. A related question asks “is 1/25 more valuable than 25/25”? If the printer has successfully done his/her job the prints are identical (within human capabilities) and the prints are equal in quality. Again, marketing by some individuals will elude that the lower the print numbers the more valuable. The finite number of quality prints pulled from a plate can be very high except in a few instances, and usually does not dictate the edition size, with most original print editions rarely above 200 by choice. You will find reproduction print “editions” (to mimic original prints) commonly in the thousands, and theoretically almost unlimited if desired. In any event, the numbering of prints is probably here to stay.

I would like to make a couple more points about prints in general. Why do artists make original prints anyway? To start with, the print allows an artist to make multiple copies of an image, allowing many more persons to have and own the image, which is traditionally priced much less than an original painting or drawing. Could this be another example of marketing? Perhaps to some degree, but in our time of today the crafts and skills involved in printmaking are truly a medium in itself and stands alone, being cherished and embraced by the artists creating prints. Most artists who make them love the process. One last point, what artists made or make prints? Again I think you would be surprised. Many, many artists whose names fill our art history books made prints (provided the printmaking technique was known at their time). If you could compile a list of the top10 most popular names in art I would not be surprised that all

made original prints sometime in their life. I often like to mention Whistler. Most school children have heard of his painting, *Whistler's Mother*, but how many of us know he was one of the most prolific printmakers of all time [etching]? Rembrandt, Goya, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Degas, Munch, De Chirico, Picasso, Miro, Kandinsky...the tradition goes on and on and continues today. Printmaking is very much alive in the twenty-first century. I would create an etching for an edition of 1.

It is essential to talk about some of the printmaking methods in order to have a better understanding when viewing prints. There are four main methods of printmaking done today: **relief, intaglio, lithography, and screen-print**. As simply as I can, I want to explain each of these methods so you can better enjoy and appreciate original prints when you see them.

Relief methods are comprised of woodcuts (the oldest printmaking method) and linoleum cuts. Occasionally, artists do use some newer man made products to create relief prints. In relief printmaking, areas of the block you do not want to print are cut away. The remaining area (the actual images, which is the surface of the block) is then inked using a roller called a brayer, and then printed by hand or with a press. Many woodcut artists embrace the graining pattern in the wood and allow this to show in the print. Woodcuts are traditionally cut into a wood plank and wood engravings are cut into the end grain (a harder, denser surface, allowing for very detailed work). Linoleum is the other common material used for relief prints. It is easily cut in any direction and can produce very crisp, clean edged graphic images.

Intaglio prints are created by incising a line or mark into a plate (generally copper or zinc about one-sixteenth inch thick). The word intaglio (Italian) loosely paraphrased means "inking below the surface." There are four types of intaglio methods: etching, engraving, mezzotint, and drypoint. **Etching** is a chemical process. In its simplest form, the image is created by first applying a protective covering, called a ground, on the surface of a metal plate. A pointed tool is then used to draw into the ground, removing the ground as one draws, which expose bare metal that has created the image. The plate is then etched chemically in an acid bath creating incised lines in the plate. The ground is removed and ink pushed into the lines, wiping the surface clean. The plate is then printed using an etching press. An etching, as well as all the intaglio methods, are inked and printed basically the same way (there are some exceptions in more advanced practices). The plate can be re-grounded and more lines drawn as many times as the artist desires. All the remaining methods of intaglio are done by hand, making lines and marks on the plate. **Engraving** (the oldest intaglio method) is done by cutting a line into the plate using a sharp tool called a burin. The entire image is created this way by a variety of drawing methods. The time and effort required producing an engraving led to the invention of etching, but while a complicated drawing can be done easier or quicker, the look of an engraving cannot be replaced. **Mezzotints** are made by using a special tool called a "rocker" to cut lines into a plate by rocking the tool back and forth in many directions. When fully rocked the plate would feel rough and the surface scratched up completely. If printed in this condition it would be entirely a solid mass of saturated ink color. At this point the artist uses other tools to smooth down areas producing the image by working from dark to light in value. The last intaglio method is **drypoint** and is done by drawing or scratching directly on a plate with a sharp metal needle. The metal is not actually removed but pushed out of the line forming a burr along the line. When the plate is inked, not only is ink wiped into the incised lines, but it also pools around this burr producing an intense, velvety dark line or area. Because this burr will begin to wear away in the printing process, the number of quality impressions from a drypoint is limited. Intaglio prints will have an embossed edge around them from the plate being printed under pressure which helps to identify this technique. The exception to this is if the image is cut out of the paper or if the paper does not completely cover the plate when printed (rarely).

Lithography is a method of printmaking based on the principle that oil and water do not mix. Traditional lithography uses a leveled limestone block as the plate. A simple lithograph is created by drawing the image on the stone with a greasy crayon. This drawing is then “fixed” on the stone. The stone is carefully inked by first dampening the stone with a sponge then applying the ink by rolling the ink onto the stone using a large inking brayer. This procedure is repeated several times producing an image by the ink sticking to the crayoned lines and not sticking to the dampened stone. When the image area is ready the stone is printed on a special lithography press. The stone can be used over and over again by removing the past image and starting over.

Screen-print, also called serigraphy or silk-screen, is the final major method of printmaking. This method has its roots in the stenciling tradition. A very fine meshed screen mounted onto a frame is used as the stencil. The image is created by blocking or filling in parts of the screen and leaving the remaining areas porous. The screen is laid on the printmaking paper and ink is pulled across the screen with a squeegee like tool. The ink passes through the screen onto the paper through the areas left open (not blocked or filled in). Extremely fine- edged images can be produced with screen-print.

Those are the four major printmaking methods briefly explained. There are a few other methods worth mentioning: the **monotype** (a unique image made by painting or drawing on a non-absorbent plate such as plastic or metal and then printing the plate with a press), and the **monoprint** (a unique image printed from a plate that uses a repeatable matrix of some sort, either on it or in it). The guidelines and methods used in the “mono” processes are very general and open to all kinds of possibilities. The final method I feel merits mentioning is called a **collagraph**. This image is created by collaging various thinly textured or shaped materials onto a thin base plate. Often thick paint is applied to the plate for a textured effect. Generally this type of print is inked and printed like an intaglio print.

I hope this brief essay has been helpful to those that are new to the genre of original printmaking. It has been my pleasure to attempt the task! You may have noticed the frequent use of the word “generally.” There are exceptions to many statements made and I felt it was beyond the scope of this writing to go into such detail. One area of contemporary printmaking I have intentionally avoided and I pose it to you as a question to ponder. Is the computer (and its software) a viable “printing plate” for creating original prints? That is a good subject to explore in *Printmaking 102*.