



Printmaking: An Overview

OVERVIEW

Printmaking is a way of image-making that involves transferring ink from a prepared surface to paper. There are many ways to make prints, and they all have different names and techniques. So why not just paint or draw an image? Printmaking was developed as a way to illustrate the printed word and was all the rage in the 1400s. It was developed so that more than one image of something could be distributed, and began with relief wood carvings. Modern ideas of printmaking are used for artist books, layering within a single image to create depth, and to create **editions** (a numbered set) of an image.

There are a few basic “umbrella” terms for the major types of printmaking. Sometimes artists avoid the umbrella term and use a more specific term.

INTAGLIO

Intaglio (**In – tal- ee- o**) is a term for printing with a metal (zinc or copper) plate. Intaglio prints are created by creating indentations and textures on the surface of a metal plate where ink may settle. The use of acid, and acid-resistant coatings, allow the artist to manipulate where the acid “bites” the plate. After the ink is placed in the grooves, an intaglio/etching press pushes the paper down into these indentations to pull the ink out to create an image on the paper. Intaglio has specific techniques that you will see on museum identification cards instead of “intaglio.”

These include:

- **Aquatint**- using varying degrees of texture on the plate with acid to create diverse gray areas. (“sugar lifts” and “spit biting” are very similar to

this technique)

- **Etching**- images made by scratching directly onto the plate (“dry point”) or by using acid to etch lines into the plate.
- **Dry point**- besides being an etching term, this technique is often used on softer non- metal plates (such as Plexiglas) when acid and metal are either unavailable or undesired for creating the print. These images tend to be less stable and edition sizes are smaller, but give similar line qualities and surface as other intaglio processes.
- **Engraving** – similar to etching this process uses sharp tools to create grooves in a flat surface. This can be done on many different surfaces such as wood or metal. The difference between engraving and etching has to do with the line quality that comes from the processes.

MONOPRINT

Monoprint literally means “one print.” “Monotype” is also a term used for a print of this kind. A smooth surface, such as Plexiglas, which is most commonly used today, is used to hold the ink, which may be smeared, rolled or painted on the surface to create an image. Once the image is complete, paper is put on top of the ink and it is printed, most commonly through a press. The reason it is called a Monoprint is because once you print the original image that was on the Plexiglas, you can’t print it again. Replicating the image the same way is impossible, therefore, “one print.”

- **Ghost Prints**- this is a second run of a monotype print. Sometimes there is enough ink left over from the first pull of a print to print a

lighter “ghost” of the first image. These prints will often serve as the base to which paints are applied or multiple layers of ink are added.

MEZZOTINT

Mezzotint - This process is done usually on copper plates because the metal is softer. A plate is prepared with a mezzotint rocker, which is a metal tool with a curved edge with a serrated edge. (the teeth are very small) the rocker is held at about a 45 angle to the plate and rocked back and forth over and over across the entire plate.

This is done on the length, width and two diagonals of the plate. This provides an even roughed up surface that will hold ink. The artist then goes to the plate and smooths out the surface, in essence, “erasing the black” much like is done in charcoal drawings. The plate is then inked up like an intaglio plate and run through an intaglio press.

RELIEF

Relief printing is the same concept as a rubber stamp. Wood is the traditional material used for carving images, but now there are many linoleum carvings and other materials available to carve. The carvings are completed, inked up and printed either by hand or by press, making it a very universal means of printmaking.

SERIGRAPHS

Serigraphs (“silk screens” or “screen prints”) are screen prints, just like the process for screen printing tee shirts, except that the printing is done onto paper, typically. It is a stencil process in which ink is forced onto paper through the meshes of a silk screen that is prepared to have pervious printing areas and impervious nonprinting areas.

COLLAGRAPHY

Collagraphy is the process of gluing down different materials to a rigid surface, much like a collage. This resulting image is then inked using an intaglio method or with rollers and paintbrushes. They are then printed either by hand or run through a printing press.

LITHOGRAPHY

Lithography is a complex process where an image is printed off of a limestone slab. First, the stone must be sanded smooth. An image is drawn on the perfectly flat stone surface with an oily substance, like a crayon or painted with an oily liquid. The oil is then set into the stone chemically so it won't wipe off. Think of “Oil and Water Don't Mix” now. The stone is dampened with a sponge, and then a large roller with ink on it is rolled over the oily drawing. The ink sticks to the drawing, but not the wet stone. The paper to be printed is put over the inked drawing and is run through a special lithography press. This is the same process that many newspapers use today, but with aluminum sheets and different chemistry.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR AUDIENCES LOOKING AT PRINTS:

Q: Do you notice how prints are signed differently than paintings?

A: Prints are traditionally signed with the title in the left bottom margin, edition number in the center of the bottom margin (if applicable), and the artist's name in the right bottom margin. Paintings are typically signed on the bottom right, sometimes the bottom left. Typically you won't find paintings with the title painted on the front, and editions don't apply to original paintings.

Q: How can you tell if a piece of art is an **edition**?
Or what is an **edition**?

A: Artworks that are editions have a number found traditionally in the center of the bottom margin of the image. The bottom number states the total number of identical images; the top number identifies the number of this specific image. 4/25 means the image you're looking at is number 4 of 25 total prints made of that specific image. They are all original works; they just look identical to each other.

Q: What does it mean when "AP" is written in place of an edition number? (Not all prints will have an edition number or an AP in them.)

A: AP stands for "artist's proof." An artist's proof is, at least in theory, an impression of a print taken in the printmaking process to see the current printing state of a plate while the plate (or stone, or woodblock...) is being worked on by the artist. It is likely one of the 'practice' prints that lead up to the final edition, and so may be unique. Some artists will sign AP to monoprints as well, signifying the print to be one of a kind.

Q: So what does it mean if there is no edition number or "AP" written on the print?

A: It means it is one of a kind, that the artist likely only made one copy of this print.

Q: How can you tell if a print is an Intaglio print?

A: Intaglio prints usually leave an impression of the plate on the edges of the image, called a "plate bite" where the pressure of the plate going through the press with the paper leaves an indentation on the corners of the image.

Q: Why don't we use printmaking techniques for mass media any more?

A: Computers are much more efficient at making images and printing them out. There is a current heated discussion in the printmaking world as to whether or not to allow digital computer artists into the printmaking realm of art making (invited to conferences, etc.). It is an interesting discussion - should computer artists consider themselves printmakers?

Q: When you make a plate or carving for an image, why do you have to create it backwards?

A: When you make an image that is to be printed onto paper, the original has to be backwards because the image is automatically reversed during printing.