What Is a Print?

Pamphlet prepared by The Museum of Modern Art New York

A print is a work of art made up of ink on paper and existing in multiple examples. It is created not by drawing on paper with an ink-filled pen or other instrument but through an indirect transfer process. The artist begins by drawing a composition on another surface. The transfer occurs when a sheet of paper, placed in contact with the drawn surface, is run through a printing press.

Among the advantages of making an artwork in this way is that numerous “impressions" can be made, since new pieces of paper can be sent through the press in the same way. The artist decides how many to make and that total number of impressions is called an “edition.” They are then signed and numbered by the artist. Since more than one example exists, many people can own these prints.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. French (1864-1901). Cover for the portfolio *L’Estampe originale* (*The Original Print*). 22 ¼ x 25 11/36”. Grace M. Mayer Collection, Museum of Modern Art, NY.

Various printing methods have evolved over the long history of the medium. The four best-known techniques are woodcut, etching, lithography, and screenprint. Depending on what an artist wants to express in a particular work, one or another technique is chosen for its distinct visual effects. Since these techniques are sometimes complicated to perform, the assistance of an expert printer is often required. In this lithograph by Toulouse-Lautrec, the printer is shown working the press while one of the artist's friends, the celebrated dancer Jane Avril, examines a new print.

Emil Nolde. Danish, worked in Germany (1867-1956). *Prophet.* 1912. 12 5/8” x 8 3/4".

Woodcut

The earliest print technique was woodcut, which first appeared in China in the ninth century. The process, originally used for stamping designs onto fabrics and textiles, was also employed in the Middle Ages to make functional items like playing cards. Western artists have made woodcut prints intermittently for hundreds of years, with the sixteenth century marking a high point and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessing another major revival. Painters like Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch, Emil Nolde, and the German - Expressionists embraced woodcut as a primary artistic vehicle. The modern woodcut most typically has a distinctly rough-hewn appearance that incorporates into the composition the slashed edges of shapes, the coarsely gouged-out areas, and even the grain of the wood itself.

The making of a woodcut is a straightforward process. An artist sketches a composition on a plank of wood and then, using gouges, chisels, and knives, cuts away pieces from the block. Ink is applied to the surface of the block with a roller. Paper is placed over the block, which is then run through a press. Woodcuts can also be printed by hand, using a spoon or similar instrument to rub the back of the paper and transfer the image from the wood.

The recessed, cutaway areas do not receive ink and appear white on the printed image.

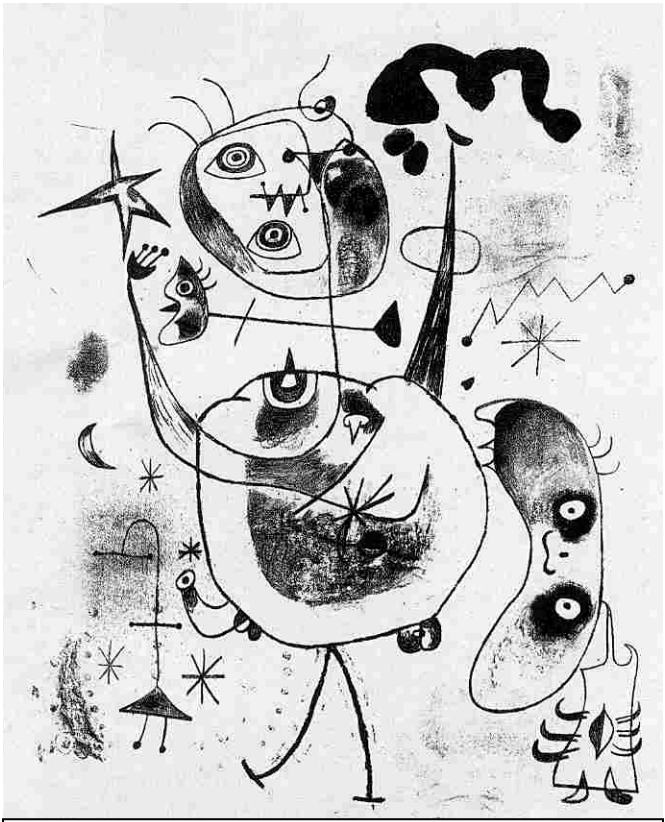
For *Prophet*, Nolde carved away large areas which, in the print, read as light hitting the face. The areas of the block that were not cut away and received the black ink denote burrowed eyes, along nose, sunken cheeks, a mustached mouth, a beard, and hair. The strong vertical wood graining and the overall presence of jagged gouges both contribute to the sense of emotion and immediacy emanating from this Expressionist image, created in a period when artists were reacting against the aesthetic refinements taught in the established art academies.

Etching

Etching is one of the intaglio techniques (along with engraving, drypoint, and aquatint). Intaglio comes from the Italian word *intagliare*, meaning "to incise." In etching, acid is used to "bite" or etch an image into a metal plate. It is the print technique that has been favored by artists since the Renaissance, in large part because of the ease with which a composition can be rendered. Rembrandt and Goya, among others, created some of their most important works in etching.

To make an etching, the artist starts with a metal plate (usually copper) that has been coated with a waxy substance called a "ground." In Pablo Picasso's print seen here, the curving lines of the figures' hair, the flowing vines, and the detailed pattern of the flooring demonstrate the freedom with which the artist was able to create this delicate composition by drawing through the penetrable ground with a pointed metal tool called an etching needle. He did not need to dig directly into the metal itself. Next, the plate is immersed in acid. Since the ground covering the plate provides protection, the acid goes only into the drawn lines and eats away the exposed metal.

Pablo Picasso. Spanish (1881-1973). Sculptor with His Model, His Sculpture and a Bowl of Anemones. 1933. 10 ½ x 7 5/8". Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund.



Joan Miro, Spanish (1893 – 1983). Plate XXIII from the *Barcelona Series.* 1944. 24 3/8 x 18 9/16" Purchase Fund, MOMA

Etchings are inked very differently from woodcuts or lithographs. After removing the ground covering the plate, ink is "beaten" into the incised lines with a tool called a dabber. The surface of the plate is then wiped clean. Dampened paper is placed over the plate and run through a printing press, where very weighty pressure is needed to force the malleable paper into the etched lines. In this way, the paper "picks up" ink. Characteristically, the printed lines of etchings are slightly raised on the paper. In addition, since the sheet of paper is usually larger than the copper plate, an indentation made by the plate's edges forms a border around the composition, and is referred to as a "plate mark."

Lithography

Invented in 1798 by Aloys Senefelder and employed in the nineteenth century by painters including Francisco Goya, Honore Daumier, and Edouard Manet lithography came into its full artistic fruition in the 1890s with the color prints of Pierre Bonnard, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and others. It can be one of the most direct printmaking mediums, since images are executed on a flat surface in much the same manner as watercolors or drawings on paper.

The printing of lithographs is based on the resistance between grease and water. The artist must utilize greasy substances (lithographic crayons or tusche, a liquid applied with a brush) to create an image on a stone or plate, surfaces that have a slight texture to catch and hold the crayon or tusche markings. Traditionally, heavy stones were used, but now specially prepared metal plates are more common because they are lighter and less cumbersome to handle.

When a lithograph is ready to be printed, a chemical mixture is applied across the composition in order to securely bond the greasy drawn image to the surface. The stone or plate is then dampened with water, which adheres only to the non-greasy areas. With a roller, oily printer's ink is applied and sticks only to the non-greasy areas. With a roller, oily printer's ink is applied and sticks only to the greasy drawn sections, with blank areas being protected by a film of water. Paper is then laid on the stone and run through a printing press to transfer the image.

Screenprint

Screenprinting is a form of stenciling, a common procedure used to apply words or images to paper and other materials, including signs. During the 1930s, a number of American artists began making artworks in screenprint and by the end of that decade the term "serigraph" was devised to distinguish artists' screenprints from commercial examples. During the 1960s, screenprinting came into greater prominence, particularly due to the Pop artists, who were attracted to its bold areas of unmodulated color, its flat surfaces, and its generally commercial "look." Andy Warhol used this printmaking technique even when he was creating images on canvas.

For screenprints, mesh (originally silk) is stretched tautly across a frame. An image is glued or otherwise affixed onto the mesh to mask out compositional areas. This image can be created from a variety of materials: cut paper, a hardening form of glue, or a special gelatin (for photographic imagery). Unlike procedures for the techniques of woodcut etching, and lithography, no printing press is required to transfer this image from screen to paper. Rather, paper is placed directly beneath the screen, and a tool with a flat rubber edge, called a squeegee, is used to push ink through the mesh. Areas masked out by compositional shapes are nonporous and obstruct the ink, reading as white shapes after printing. When more than one color is needed, as here, separate screens are used for each color.

Andy Warhol, American (1928 – 1987). *Tomato Soup* from the portfolio *Campbell's Soup I*. 31 7/8 x 18 ¾". Gift of Philip Johnson. MOMA.