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The history of printmaking

In the beginning, before the printing press, printmaking was not considered an art form, rather a medium of communication. It was not till the 18th century that art prints began to be considered originals and not till the 19th that artists began to produce limited editions and to sign their prints along with the technical information necessary to authenticate the work. Engraving goes back to cave art, executed on stones, bones and cave walls. The duplication of engraved images goes back some 3,000 years to the Sumerians who engraved designs on stone cylinder seals. Academics think that the Chinese produced a primitive form of print, the rubbing, as far back as the 2nd century AD. The Japanese made the first authenticated prints, wood-block rubbings of of Buddhist charms, in the late-middle eighth century. Printmaking in Europe European printmaking began with textile printing as early as the sixth century, while printing on paper had to wait a bit longer for the arrival of paper technology from the Far East. The first paper produced in Europe was in Játiva in Spain in 1151. The first woodcuts printed on paper were playing cards produced in Germany at the beginning of the 15th century. It was only slightly before this that the first royal seals and stamps appeared in the England of Henry VI. Printing from a metal engraving was introduced a few decades after the woodcut, and greatly refined the results. Restricted at first to goldsmiths and armorer's, it soon became the most popular form of serial reproduction. The earliest dated printed engraving is a German print dated 1446, "The Flagellation," and it was in Germany that early intaglio printing developed before passing to Italy (Mantegna, Raimondi, Ghisi) and the Low Countries (Lucas van Leyden, Goltzius, Claesz, Matsys). From makers of playing cards the metal engraving technique passed to artists where it probably reached its apex in the hands of Albrecht Dürer in the 16th century. Dürer represented a watershed in the history of printmaking, and, since he travelled to Italy, his influence was felt there in a direct way. The seventeenth century saw a flowering of ornamental and portrait work all over Europe, with Rubens and Van Dyck leading the way in Flanders. By this time most intaglio work was acid etched, as contemporary artists considered this a less commercial, more creative, nobler technique. Though Italy was a hotbed of etching, ironically the leading etchers there were foreigners: Jacques Callot and Claude Lorrain from France and the Spaniard, José de la Ribera. The leading figure in the Netherlands at this time was, of course, Rembrandt, who left to posterity a monumental benchmark both in terms of quantity and quality. His approximately 300 plates represent virtually every aspect of human endeavor. Europe's printmaking center of gravity moved to Italy in the 18th century, beginning with Tiepolo who, it is said, exercised a significant influence on Goya. Then came Canaletto, the chronicler of Venice and Piranesi, allegedly the most important architectural printmaker of all time with some 3,000 large architectural etchings. The tradition of distinguished English printmaking dates only from Hogarth in the 18th century, but he was quickly followed by the satirical Rowlandson and then William Blake, the crown jewel among British printmakers. Blake's contemporary in Spain was Francisco Goya, who stretched the limits of printmaking to new heights and depths. The nineteenth-century saw printmaking follow the same turbulent trail as the rest of the visual arts. In France the active printmakers at this time included Ingres, Delacroix, the Barbizon School (Daubigny, Theodore Rousseau and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot) and the political satirist Honoré Daumier, who made more than 4,000 lithographs, mainly for newspaper illustrations. The most important printmakers among the Impressionists were Manet and Degas, the former mainly in lithographs. Though we have barely touched upon Japanese printmaking here, special mention must be made of the master of woodcut, Katsushika Hokusai, who in the last half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th produced some 35,000 drawings and prints, many of them recognized masterpieces, many of which were to exert an important influences on European printmakers. Nineteenth century English printmaking highlights an Englishman, Francis Seymour Hayden, and an American, James McNeil Whistler. The other notable American printmaker at this time, though more in terms of natural science than art, was James Audubon. Twentieth Century Printmaking Printmaking, like everything else in the art world, exploded in the first half of the 20th century. First and foremost was Pablo Picasso, the Spanish lad from Málaga who made more than 1,000 prints including etchings, engravings, drypoints, woodcuts, lithographs and lino cuts. Picasso almost single handedly returned printmaking's center of gravity to France. Then came Braque, Matisse, Rouault, Chagal, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Jan Arp, Salvador Dali and others. In Germany it was the time of the Expressionists, Emil Nolde, Max Beckmann (who taught in the U.S.A. after the Second World War), George Grosz, Ernst Barlach, Erich Heckel, Oskar Kokoschka and others. Hot on the heels of Expressionism in Germany came the Bauhaus, where artists like Kandinsky and Paul Klee produced seminal work. In England Henry Moore, besides working in sculpture, also created a powerful series of lithographs, and Graham Sutherland did noteworthy work as well, along with Anthony Gross. In the United States in the 20th century the tradition of distinguished printmakers includes George Wesley Bellows in lithography, John Sloan and Reginald Marsh in etching and Milton Avery in drypoint. But perhaps the most noteworthy of American painter/printmakers of this period are Edward Hopper with his excellent and highly personal work and Ben Shahn, who excelled in a variety of print media. report this ad report this ad Jean Arp Darren Almond Carlo Carra Paul Klee Pablo Picasso report this ad Printmaking is a unique art form that blends creativity and technical skill. Through the centuries, printmaking has required incredible handwork and the ingenuity to create visually interesting and evocative artwork. Soon after the art form was invented, the importance of printmaking became realized. It offered immense value to society as an art form that allowed images and text to be reproduced. Prints could be distributed to everyday people who couldn't necessarily afford one-of-a-kind oil paintings. Printmaking allowed societies to disseminate information through mass-produced books, religious illustrations and maps. As printmaking has served many practical purposes through its storied past, it is highly valued as an art form. Today, an original print from a talented artist is a thing of beauty and holds much value to art collectors and enthusiasts. About Printmaking Through the Ages Printmaking is an art form that involves transferring images from a matrix, or template, onto another surface, usually paper or fabric. A printmaker creates the matrix out of wood, metal, glass or other material, using tools or chemicals to work the surface into an image. The artist then inks the template and transfers it onto another surface. Traditional printmaking methods, including woodcut, etching, engraving and lithography, require a printing press to provide even pressure. The printmaking process lets artists create many iterations of the same image. Throughout history, it's served as an affordable way to communicate and share art. The history of printmaking began in Han Dynasty China. The earliest known example, a woodblock print on silk, has been dated sometime during the Han Dynasty from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D. The first print on paper was made during the seventh century. The original form of printmaking used a small wooden board as the matrix. Carving away from the wood would create negative space on the print after the ink was transferred onto fabric or paper. When the Chinese introduced movable type sometime between 1041 and 1048 and improved on the design over the coming centuries, bookmaking became much more possible and versatile. Since then, printmaking has spread throughout the world, serving many purposes and artists over the centuries. The 15th Century The earliest European prints date back to the beginning of the 15th century when woodcut prints were used to make paper playing cards in Germany. The technique soon passed down to artists, who used it to render bold figures against blank backgrounds. As the practice evolved, artists began creating more complicated designs, with architecture and landscapes in the background and elaborate borders. Metal engraving, the first intaglio printing form, arrived a few decades later and soon became the most popular printmaking technique for its refined results. The images combined tiny dots and short cuts punched into the surface. Unlike woodcuts, the metal matrix's sunken areas held the ink, which was transferred onto paper. The earliest known intaglio print is the 1446 German print, "The Flagellation." The technique soon traveled to Italy and throughout Europe. Perhaps the most significant contribution to printmaking from the 15th century, Johannes Gutenberg's printing press revolutionized the art form and the culture. While not the original inventor, Gutenberg perfected the movable type printing press around 1450 and popularized it in Europe. His most famous works, the 1,300-page Gutenberg Bibles, were masterful prints that used printed gothic type designed to look like hand calligraphy. The 16th Century In the early 16th century, printmaking masters emerged. The most notable was Albrecht Dürer, a German artist whose travels in Italy let him influence the printmaking world across Europe. His work brought great detail to his subject matter, including religion, history, folklore, mythology, and portraiture. He worked in woodcuts, etchings, drypoints, and metal engravings. Another notable master from the era, Albrecht Altdorfer, was the first to print landscapes as subjects rather than as backgrounds. The Flemish engraver, Hendrik Goltzius, used his cuts to imitate different surfaces and textures. In Italy, Marcantonio Raimondi's rise marked a turning point in the printmaking art form. A technical master rivaling Dürer, he became the engraver to Raphael. He printed reproductions of the famous painter's work and was influential in reducing printmaking from an original art form to the craft of reproducing famous works. During the later half of the 16th century, publishing houses and skilled artisans took over the printing world. Printed maps became increasingly popular as people began traveling more frequently. Publishers would also buy plates from their original artists and print them in massive quantities, sometimes ruining the original plates in the process. The 17th Century As engraving became increasingly commercialized and reproductive, artists in the 17th century turned to etching. Acid etching was seen as more creative, flexible and honorable. 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