

DCA

Dundee Contemporary Arts

"Not only do the best artists of our time make prints, some of the best artworks of our time are prints" Susan Tallman "The Contemporary Print"

What is Printmaking? – A brief explanation.

Printmaking loosely refers to a wide assortment of processes. It is not a discipline as such but a variety of media used in different ways by fine artists, designers and illustrators, or craftspeople. At one time printmaking was known as 'the graphic arts', revealing its early kinship with drawing. Susan Hiller argues that video art is also printmaking, inheriting its tradition of multiplicity.

*Many people would also consider film and video as prints, by virtue of their repeatable multiplicity, and the use of print processes to reproduce them from an original matrix. (See Susan Hiller 'The Idea of Multiplicity in Art')

Printing in art is derived from industry - even before books were printed as text, woodcuts were used as a means of creating many copies of images. These were often produced by religious institutions to allow as many people as possible to have a copy of a sacred image. In China silkscreen printing was devised for the same purpose, to disseminate images of Buddha.

Over the centuries as new inventions and developments were made in the printing industry, artists have been quick to appropriate and experiment with the processes for making works of art. As a result we now have an enormous variety of techniques being used by artists, including all the latest digital and electronic forms.

One of the attractions has undoubtedly been the democratic nature of the print, where multiple copies mean wider accessibility to an artist's works. To many artists however, it is the possibilities offered by each technique for a unique effect or result that is important, with the potential to create multiple copies or variations as a secondary benefit. Many prints are 'one-offs' or monoprints; unique, original works hand printed by the artist, and should not be confused with reproductions, posters or copies. In these terms a print, like a painting, is the original and not a copy of anything else.

Scotland has a strong tradition of encouraging print as an art, supporting print workshops in all its major cities, including Dundee, where the printing industry has been and continues to be so important.

Relief (or block) printing

Originally woodcuts were the main way of mass-producing images, and involves gouging marks with carving tools into the surface of a flat piece of wood. This surface can then be inked with a roller and the uncut areas retain the ink. When pressed onto paper, either in a printing press or by hand the ink is transferred to the paper. The process was used in many different ways from the bold and graphic by the German Expressionists, and in highly complex and subtle colour by the Japanese printers. Images became more detailed and refined as wood engraving was developed, where the polished end-grain of wood was incised by much sharper, more delicate tools or 'burins'. This reached a climax in the nineteenth century, with a massive industry of wood- and plate-engravers illustrating newspapers and books, before photographic processes replaced it.

Later linoleum was used by many artists – notably Picasso - for its softness and ease of cutting. Linocut enjoyed a hey-day in the early twentieth century among British artists.

Another way relief blocks can be made is by building up the surface by gluing textured materials to a card plate. This is known as a collagraph (from 'collage').

Etching

Etching was originally used to decorate armour, and only later for making prints from etched plates.

Rembrandt was one of the first artists to exploit the medium. Only as stronger concentrations of chemicals became available however, was etching developed in order to take the labour out of engraving by using a chemical process instead of cutting by hand – a slow and difficult art. In etching the metal plate is coated with a wax layer that can be scratched away like scraperboard, to expose the metal. When the plate is then submerged in acid, the exposed areas are removed by chemical corrosion.

Alongside this was developed the method of Intaglio printing, where the ink is rubbed into the cut or etched lines and the top surface polished clean, so that when pressed into softened paper the lines print rather like pen-and-ink lines, but embossed on to the paper. This is the negative or opposite of the relief print.

Lithography

This process prints from the flat surface of a particular kind of limestone. The stone is first drawn and painted on with greasy crayons and inks, then processed or etched with an acidic gum. Without going too deeply into the chemistry, this results in a surface where the drawn areas hold the printing ink and the open areas repel it. Pressure is again applied to transfer the image to paper. The medium gives subtle wash and line effects. Again for many years of the nineteenth and twentieth century, it was one of the main commercial processes, with mechanically-grained metal plates taking the place of stones in later years. Toulouse-Lautrec is one of the best known users of lithography historically. Lithography is still widely used commercially, although only artists use stones these days.

Screen printing

Developed centuries ago in China, this is basically a way of supporting a complex stencil by attaching it to a mesh. The very first techniques used a web of human hair, followed by loose woven silk stretched on a frame. Now nylon fabric or metal meshes are used, but the basic principle is the same. The ink is pushed through the mesh using a rubber blade or 'squeegee' and prints onto the paper or fabric where it is not blocked by the stencil. Still a major form of commercial printmaking, it was much used by the pop artists in the 1960s, especially Andy Warhol, who was also commenting on the predominance of printed images and their iconic power.

Digital imaging

All the main print media can be used with photomechanical processes to give, for example, photo-screen printing, photo-etching and photo-lithography. For the artist these processes therefore offer the best opportunity for translating images created or manipulated on computer into a usable form in the real world. Digital imagery can be printed in all the ways described above on a huge range of papers and fabrics at almost any scale. It can then be mixed with more traditionally created imagery if required.

At the same time computers offer the artist access to commercial processes, which were once too technical or expensive – for example four colour separations, which can be produced at the touch of a button on any p.c. Computer software is often written for the printing industry, so the terminology is familiar to the printmaker. Needless to say artists are once again appropriating the developments of commercial digital printing, and also driving that development, and printmaking is where this interface is most immediate.

Dundee Contemporary Arts Print Studio runs an extensive Education Programme devoted to raising the profile of Print in Contemporary Art.

You can learn how to make prints and more about the history and theory of Printmaking. We run beginners and advanced classes in:

- Etching and engraving
- Screen printing
- Relief printing
- Japanese woodblock printing
- Lithography

- Papermaking
- Bookbinding
- Black and White Photography
- Digital imaging

We offer world class print facilities to the artist and run a professional level programme in Creative and Technical skills Training.

For more information about printmaking at DCA contact the Print Studio on 01382 909242