

Print | *A Brief History*

Printmaking | The process of making artworks by printing, normally on paper, but also on other substrates such as fabric, wood, etc. Printmaking normally covers only the process of creating prints with an element of originality, rather than being a photographic reproduction of an artwork. Each print produced is not considered a "copy" but rather is considered an "original". This is because typically each print varies to an extent due to variables intrinsic to the printmaking process, and also because the imagery of a print is typically not simply a reproduction of another work but rather is often a unique image designed from the start to be expressed in a particular printmaking technique. Prints are created by transferring ink from a matrix to paper or other material. Common types of matrices include: metal plates, stone, blocks of wood, linoleum or screens. Multiple impressions printed from the same matrix form an edition. The matrix is then destroyed so that no more prints can be produced.



In an environment permeated by almost infinitely multiplied images—in newspapers and magazines, on billboards and computer screens—it is hard to imagine a world in which every image was unique. Yet prior to the 15th century, images were not only one-of-a-kind but rare, generally found locked away in palaces, to which few had access, or affixed to the wall of a church.

Before the printing press, printmaking was not considered an art form, rather a medium of communication. It was not until the 18th century that art prints began to be considered originals and not until the 19th century that artists began to produce limited editions and to sign their prints along with the technical information necessary to authenticate the work.

The technology of printmaking, which first fell into place around 1400, suddenly made it possible for hundreds or even thousands of essentially identical images to be produced from a single matrix of carved wood or metal. When this invention was followed in the mid-15th century by the introduction of movable type and the widespread availability of paper, so that the first printed books could be produced, the possibilities for the spread of knowledge and ideas expanded in an unprecedented manner.

Yet for all the far-reaching results of the capacity to multiply images, the initial demand driving the early print market was the desire for playing cards and inexpensive devotional images. Prints provided a means of mass-producing these objects that brought them within the reach of even the poorest members of society.

The first relief stamps were seals and brands used to mark animals and prisoners as property. The first actual “prints,” however are from China, where early Buddhists used text and images printed on paper to disseminate religious ideas via the *sutra* or, text.

In Europe, textile makers were using block prints to decorate cloth before the widespread use of paper in their part of the world. In about 1400 C.E., paper milling became a widespread phenomenon in Europe, making the printing and dissemination of their own type of religious images possible.



Medieval Christians used the printed image to spread their religion across the continent via fetish and sacred objects that the masses could utilize in daily religious practices. Prints of saints were often pasted into boxes, to protect the contents from theft and damage.

The first European books were printed from woodblocks in Germany in the mid-15th century. Artists of the late 15th and 16th century in Europe used woodcuts to depict religious objects, illustrate books and reproduce one-of-a-kind imagery, such as paintings, making the images accessible outside of the homes of the wealthy.

The intaglio print, a process utilizing a metal plate, first developed among goldsmiths and engravers, but was soon put to use to print images of saints, moral tales and tarot and playing cards! The first printmakers were considered more craftsmen than artists, employed in creating copies of another artist’s image. Printmakers worked collectively in workshops, transferring the original images of artists onto plates and then printing an edition of them for sale. The terms Artist’s proof (AP) and Printer’s Proof (PP) emerged from this process.

The lithographic process, which is the only printmaking process whose origin is traceable, was stumbled upon by Alois Senefelder during the late 16th century. Literally meaning “stone writing,”



Lithographs are produced by drawing with a greasy pencil on limestone and are then produced based on the idea that oil and water don't mix. Lithography reached commercial success soon after its discovery and became popular with artists due to its integrity to the original image. A lithographic print is the exact replica of the drawing the artist places upon the stone.



In Japan, Printmaking developed through contact with China. By the early 18th century, Japanese printmakers were developing methods of color printing (ukiye-o), painting woodblocks by hand using water-based inks. Japanese printmaking dealt mostly with popular imagery such as the latest fashions in theater and clothing, but some artists used the woodcut to

create landscapes and images of ideal feminine beauty.



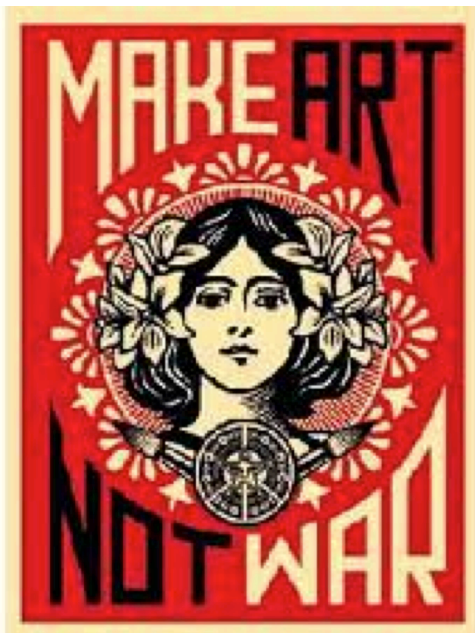
Printmaking is the most common process utilized by artists in all cultures in creating and spreading ideas and quotidian images. In Mexico, Jose Guadalupe Posada used metal cuts to illustrate publications sold mainly to the poor. Artists have utilized printmaking to disseminate a wide range of social and political issues.

Guadalupe Posada

Printmaking has successfully developed into an equally aesthetic and commercial process due to its accessibility. The widespread use of screenprinting in the 1960's—another planographic process utilizing stencils, a nylon screen and commercial printing ink—made the production of both commercial and political posters accessible to anyone with a screen and a squeegee.



Ed Ruscha, "Standard Station", 1960



During the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, screenprinting was used to create beautiful and informative posters that called for equal rights, an end to war and the unity of all people who desired peace and justice. The Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Los Angeles has an archive of both modern and contemporary posters with this aim.

The art of printmaking is alive and well today. Whether practicing relief, intaglio, lithography, screenprinting or an expanded print practice, printmakers are united under one aim: to make work that can be reproduced in order to reach a wide audience. Contemporary print presses such as Self-help Graphics, La Mano Press and The Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop continue to offer young artists the opportunity to apprentice in and then practice the art of Printmaking.