

Aquatint and Lithography

Although line is an important element of art, tone is at least as fundamental for creating images. Prints excel in reproducing lines; tones, which are more difficult, are often accomplished by placing lines closer together or by crosshatching. Before the nineteenth century, mezzotint was the only tonal printmaking technique. However, during the nineteenth century two more techniques gained prominence: aquatint, which created tone by the very exacting exposure of a copper plate to acid, and lithography, which substituted a limestone block for the copper plate.

Lithography is chemically much more complex than aquatint, and the stone that the artist draws on is quite unwieldy compared to a copper plate. Yet, it can be much easier for the artist to work with if the processing and printing of the stone is left to specialists. Then all the artist needs to do is draw or paint an image on the stone, creating line and tone in the same way as in a drawing. Once fixed into the stone by the printer, the images can be printed hundreds of times with very little damage to the image. Lithography rapidly became the process of choice for commercial printers and today is still the most common method of printing color images. Artists, too, take advantage of its potential.

Original Printmakers and Copyists

Printmaking has always been a creative medium, that is, one that artists use to produce original works of art. However, before the nineteenth century, many printmakers filled another necessary role by copying works of art, making it possible to distribute famous images widely. This created a hierarchy among printmakers; those who copied paintings and other works of art were looked down on by artists who created “original prints,” that is, prints which were not copies of other works.

As photography developed through the nineteenth century, printmaking was both threatened and liberated. Printmakers were liberated from slavishly copying other artists’ work as the nineteenth century wore on, and photography took over more and more of this task. Although this freed printmakers from mechanical copy work, it also threatened their livelihood, since highly skilled printmakers were no longer needed to do the exacting work of reproduction. Original printmaking was never as sure an income as skillful copy work. The invention of the limited edition during this century attempted to improve the market for original prints.

The Invention of the Edition

Our contemporary idea of the print edition was invented in the nineteenth century. The edition was defined by a careful control of the number and quality of prints that were taken from, for instance, a copper plate. In order to create a limited edition, once the edition is completed, the plate is destroyed, so that no more can be made. Some artists started placing edition information on the prints in the code we still use today: 7/45 meaning that this is number 7 out of a total of 45 prints that were made from this plate. More commonly, publishers would produce varied special editions of prints, some on better quality paper, or earlier in the printing process; these special editions commanded a higher price.

Not all artists adhered to the notion of the edition. Artists and publishers who had a ready market for their prints could not see the value of destroying carefully produced plates; poster publishers, for instance, usually produced unlimited editions. Other artists simply preferred not to limit editions, printing images as demand arose, and often changing them over the years.

The Search for New Styles

The industrial revolution provided the technical know-how and steam power that made large-run commercial lithography possible in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But many Europeans were ambivalent towards the rise of technology. They saw the workforce in the industrial cities as victimized and impoverished, while the countryside itself was being despoiled by “dark satanic mills.” A profound distrust of the rising industrialized society led some artists to look to the past to find worthwhile values to champion in their art. Other artists looked to exotic, “unspoiled” cultures to rediscover an authenticity found wanting in their own surroundings.

Academic painting often insisted that artists develop a transparent technique that would hide the traces of a work’s creation. However, during the nineteenth, there was a growing interest in the particular qualities of the marks made by the various media, and printmakers began to explore the textures and visual qualities inherent in older techniques such as woodcut and etching, as well as the lithography.

The Influence of Japanese Printmaking

An openness to novelty also supported the rise of interest in exotic art forms such as Japanese printmaking. During the middle of the nineteenth century Europeans began to see the prints of Japan. In the last half of the nineteenth century Japanese prints became more readily available, and their deftly drawn designs and bright, flat colors influenced many artists.