

Block, Ink, and Pressure

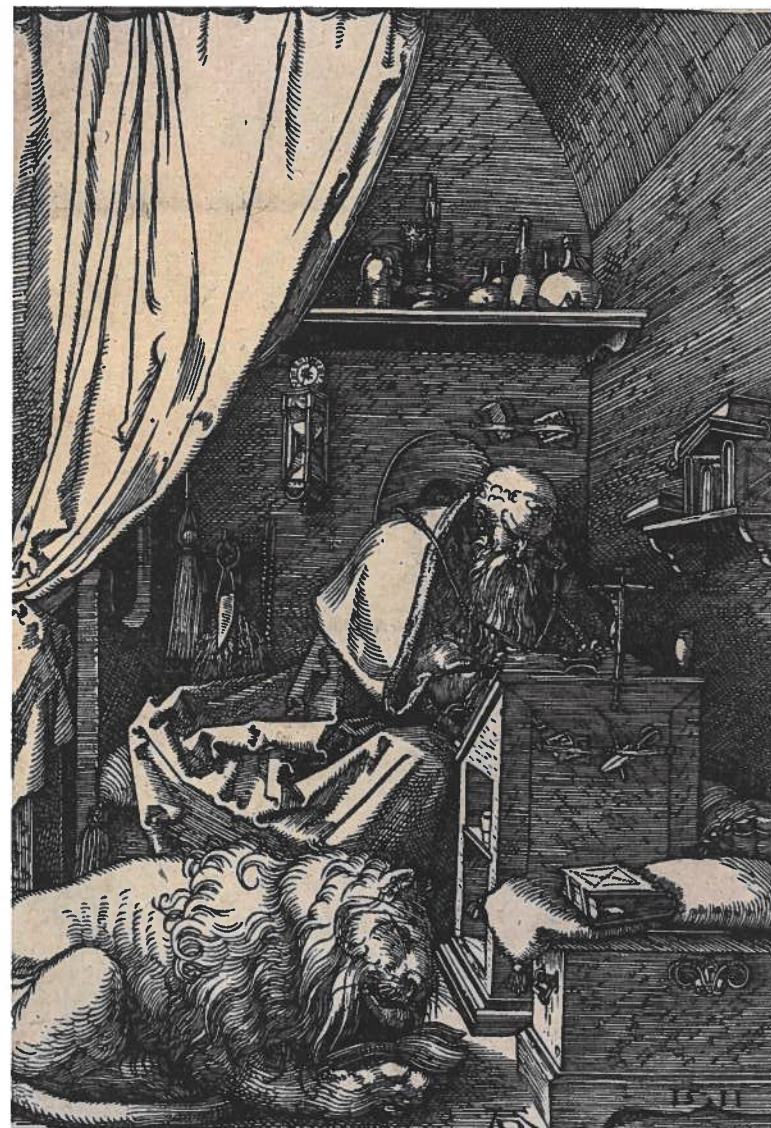
How do these artists carve new paths through block printmaking?

What do posters, graphic T-shirts, and greeting cards have in common? They're all made using **printmaking** techniques. Printmaking is a **medium**

in which an image is **transferred** from one surface to another using **pigment**. The image, or **print**, is reproduced, and when it is reproduced more than once, the collected works are called an **edition**. Each version is an artwork on its own—even if the artist makes hundreds!

Historians aren't sure when humans started printmaking. But some believe that tens of thousands of years ago, prehistoric people used **stenciling** methods, a technique used in printmaking, to record the shapes of hands on cave walls. They likely achieved this by placing a hand against a cave wall and blowing paint around it through a tube.

Today there are many types of printmaking. One of the oldest is **woodcut printing**, a type of **relief printing**. To make a woodcut print, an artist **carves** an image's **negative space** into a block of wood. He or she adds pigment to the **positive space** using a **brayer**. Then pressure is applied



using a **press** or another tool to transfer the inked image onto paper.

At the turn of the 20th century, some **contemporary** printmakers started using **linoleum** for their relief prints instead of wood. Today linoleum block prints, or **linocuts**, are common, but many artists still carve their images into wood.

Master of Detail

People started practicing woodcut printing in Europe in the late 1300s. Albrecht Dürer (AL-brekt DUR-er), born in 1471, is one of the most famous printmakers. He worked during the Renaissance. Printmaking would influence his work across mediums.

Earlier woodcut artists used thick lines and basic shapes in their designs. Dürer

How did Dürer revolutionize printmaking?

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), *Saint Jerome in his Cell*, 1511. Woodcut, 6x9in. (16x23cm). Gift of Sir John Hott, 1984. The Paper (1984-0001-2).

WRITE ABOUT ART

Choose one of these prints. Write a paragraph discussing what makes it innovative.

brought a level of detail to printmaking that was completely new. He carved fine lines to create **shadows** and **highlights** in his 1511 woodcut on page 4. Back then, refined images like this one often appeared only in luxurious places, like churches and palaces. But with the development of the printing press that century, common people soon had access to more images than ever before.

Space and Shadows

About 500 years later, at the start of the 21st century, contemporary artist Caledonia Curry was in art school when she started creating **street art** in New York City. Curry, whose work appears under the name Swoon, also explores relief prints.

In her 2018 ABA, below, Swoon uses multiple **media** to render a **portrait** of

a young woman who appears to play the drums. To make the **background**, Swoon paints a colorful **grid** on paper. She works with dark ink and linocut printing to render the subject in the **foreground**. She carves deeply into the block and uses **cross-hatching** to create **depth** and **textured** detail. Swoon uses this image in other works, recreating a **motif** that viewers can recognize.

Today, artists like Swoon prove that printmaking can take many forms. They combine traditional processes and contemporary techniques to make prints the world won't soon forget. How do you think Swoon's work is similar to Dürer's? How is it different?

How does Swoon create depth in her portrait?

SWOON (b. 1977), ABA, 2018. Block print, cut paper and acrylic gouache on paper and found object, mixed media (wood), 76x96in. (193x244cm). Courtesy SWOON Studio.



Getty Images (Step 1); Vietnam Stock Images/Shutterstock (Step 2).



Step 1

HOW TO MAKE A RELIEF/BLOCK PRINT

1 Carve a block of wood or linoleum, removing the negative space.

2 Apply paint or ink onto the remaining areas, or the positive space that hasn't been carved away.

3 Use a press or other tool to create pressure to transfer the paint or ink from the block onto paper.

4 Repeat to make an edition!



Step 2