Introduction to the artistic printing techniques

Introduction to the artistic printing techniques of relief, intaglio, planographic and screen printing

The techniques of artistic printing are as diverse as the techniques of graphic art itself. To be able to make well-founded assessments of original prints, however, it is essential to be familiar with the different techniques and to be able to distinguish between them. The specialised literature and the reference collections of original prints have until recently provided the basis for informed discussion on the different practices. Unfortunately, most of these works are no longer easily accessible. This situation is unsatisfactory for art historians, collectors and curators alike, as well as for anyone who wants or needs to gain a deeper understanding of printmaking techniques and to be able to identify them and make precise distinctions between them.

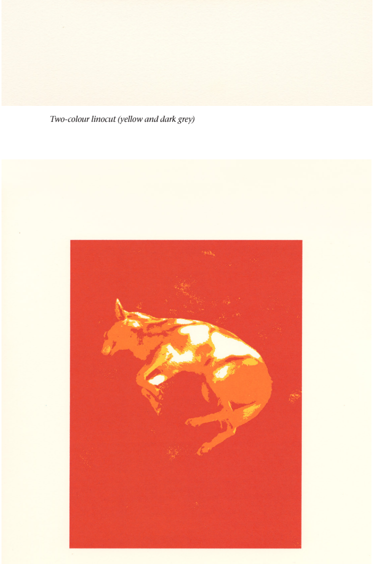
Introduction to artistic printing techniques consists of two high-quality boxes containing original prints and explanatory texts. Together they provide a descriptive basis for studying the subject and identifying the most important printmaking techniques. The artist, Marcel Gähler, created this collection of original prints using the same subject of a dog lying down to illustrate 19 different techniques. The graphic arts specialist, Hildegard Homburger, contributes a written commentary on the prints, explaining the characteristics and distinguishing features of the different processes involved.

Two boxes containing 45 original prints or intermediate states with explanatory texts

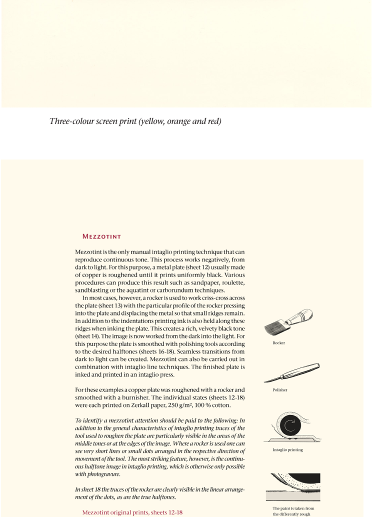
Each box contains a general introduction to the relief, intaglio, planographic and screen- printing techniques, as well as detailed texts explaining the processes employed to produce each individual print.

Box I:
Soft-ground etching
Chalk lithograph
Transfer lithograph
Screen print
Mezzotint
Photogravure, dust grain
Photogravure, screen
Aquatint, dust-ground
Aquatint, spirit-ground
Total
24 original prints
and intermediate states,
9 accompanying texts

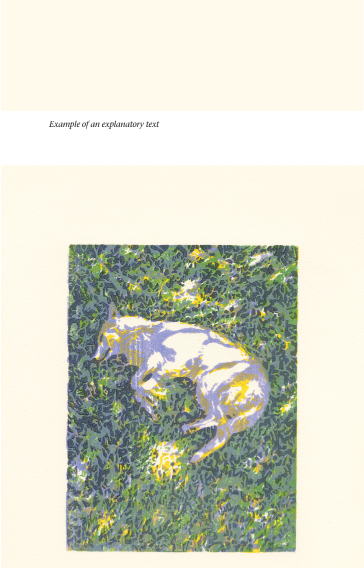
Box II:
Hard-ground etching
Copper engraving
Drypoint
Punch or stipple engraving
Monotype
Colour woodcut
Linocut
Wood engraving
Pen lithograph
Brush lithograph
Total
21 original prints
and intermediate states,
11 explanatory texts



Two-colour linocut (yellow and dark grey)



Three-colour screen print (yellow, orange and red)



Mezzotint

Mezzotint is the only manual intaglio printing technique that can reproduce continuous tone. This process works negatively, from dark to light. For this purpose, a metal plate (sheet 12) usually made of copper is roughened until it prints uniformly black. Various procedures can produce this result such as sandpaper, roulette, sandblasting or the aquatint or carborundum techniques.

In most cases, however, a rocker is used to work criss-cross across the plate (sheet 13) with the particular profile of the rocker pressing into the plate and displacing the metal so that small ridges remain. In addition to the indentations printing ink is also held along these ridges when inking the plate. This creates a rich, velvety black tone (sheet 14). The image is now worked from the dark into the light. For this purpose the plate is smoothed with polishing tools according to the desired halftones (sheets 16-18). Seamless transitions from dark to light can be created. Mezzotint can also be carried out in combination with intaglio line techniques. The finished plate is inked and printed in an intaglio press.

For these examples a copper plate was roughened with a rocker and smoothed with a burnisher. The individual states (sheets 12-18) were each printed on Zerkall paper, 250 g/m², 100 % cotton.

To identify a mezzotint attention should be paid to the following: In addition to the general characteristics of intaglio printing traces of the tool used to roughen the plate are particularly visible in the areas of the middle tones or at the edges of the image. Where a rocker is used one can see very short lines or small dots arranged in the respective direction of movement of the tool. The most striking feature, however, is the continuous halftone image in intaglio printing, which is otherwise only possible with photogravure.

In sheet 18 the traces of the rocker are clearly visible in the linear arrangement of the dots, as are the true halftones.

Mezzotint original prints, sheets 12-18

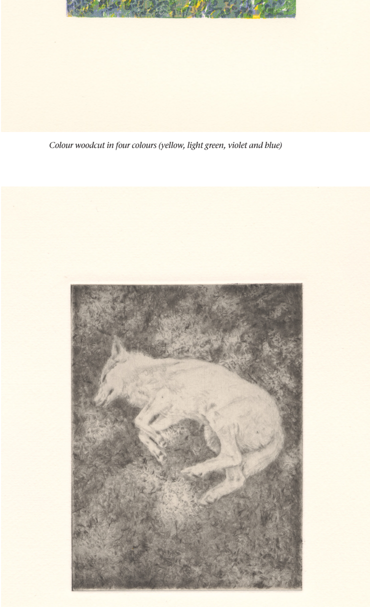
Rocker

Polisher

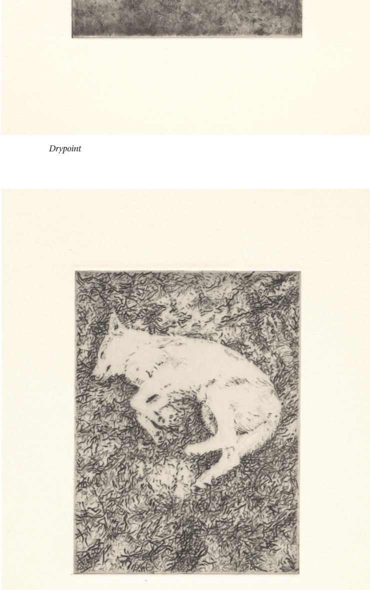
Intaglio printing

The paint is taken from the differently rough areas of the plate.

Example of an explanatory text



Colour woodcut in four colours (yellow, light green, violet and blue)



Drypoint

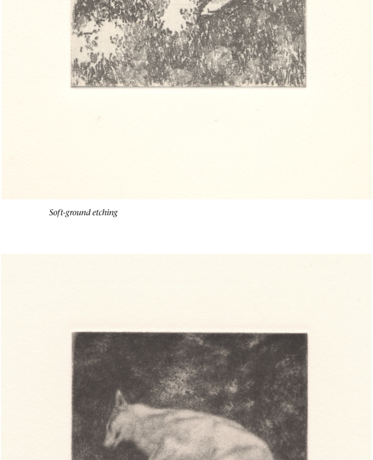
Copper engraving

The artist, the author and the editor

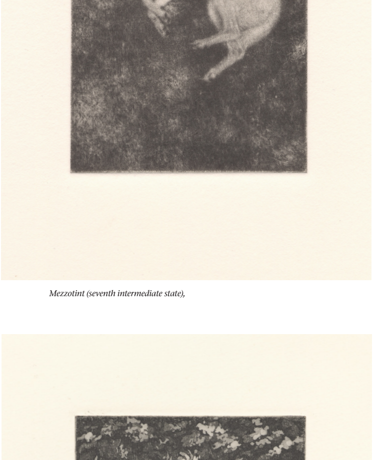
Marcel Gähler is a free-lance artist, living and working in Winterthur, Switzerland. His work has been exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including in Berlin, Bern, Shanghai, Philadelphia, Singapore, Paris, Brussels and Zurich. For a number of years, he has been represented by galleries in Berlin, Shanghai and Zurich. *Marcel Gähler, Frohbergstrasse 3, 8400 Winterthur, Switzerland. Email: kontakt@marcelgaehler.ch*

Hildegard Homburger is a graphic arts specialist based in Berlin where she has been working from her own art conservation studio since 1986. She is also a visiting lecturer in art conservation and the identification of print making techniques at fine arts academies in Vienna, Berlin and Stuttgart, and gives professional training seminars in these fields. *Hildegard Homburger, Krefelder Strasse 17, 10555 Berlin, Germany. Email: h.homburger@t-online.de*

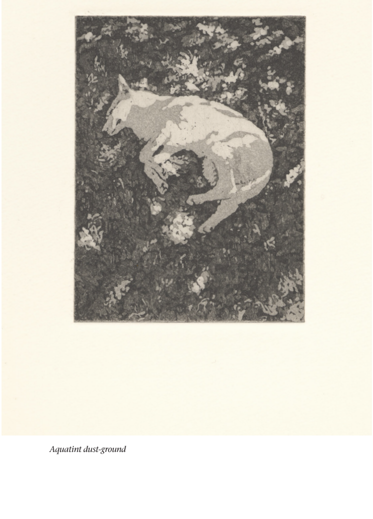
Michael Rothe is a qualified art conservator based in Bern, where he ran his own studio until 2023. He has carried out major restoration projects in Switzerland and Germany, including that of the fire-damaged contents of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek in Weimar. His publishing house, Verlag Rothe Drucke, publishes numerous art books and graphics editions every year. *Michael Rothe, Verlag Rothe Drucke, Wolfackerstrasse 19, 3210 Kerzers, Switzerland. Email: mail@rothe-drucke.ch*



Soft-ground etching



Mezzotint (seventh intermediate state),



Aquatint dust-ground

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