

GLOSSARY OF PRINTMAKING TERMS

Lithograph

Lithography is a printmaking technique: the word means 'written on stone'. An image is created on a smooth flat piece of limestone using wax or a similar greasy substance. A weak solution of gum arabic containing a small quantity of nitric acid is painted over the surface but is rejected by the greasy image which is then gently wiped away. Oily ink is rolled onto the stone but stays only where the original image was. The stone is passed through a press and leaves a copy of the image on the paper. A multi-coloured image can be created by using more than one stone per print. 'Plates' of zinc, aluminium or modern polyesters can be used instead of traditional limestone.

Spatter lithograph

The spatter technique uses fine dots of greasy wax sprayed onto the stone to create areas of tone. An even (or modulated) tone can be achieved by drawing a blade across a stiff-haired brush (like a toothbrush) charged with the wax. Stencils are used to limit the sprayed areas.

Brush lithograph or colour brush lithograph

A brush lithograph is created by applying greasy wax to a stone using a brush. This creates a fluid line, a block of tone or colour or a series of brush marks.

Spatter zincograph

A zincograph is a print made from zinc plate instead of stone. The Bavarian limestone traditionally used for lithography was heavy, fragile and in limited supply for most of the nineteenth century, which made it expensive. Zinc plate was developed as a cheap alternative. Zincography developed into 'photozincography', an early technique for producing photographs.

Edition

This term is used to refer to all the prints created at one time from one plate or stone in the same colour or colours. An edition is usually signed and numbered to let you know how many identical prints there are in the edition.

Etching

Etching is a widely used printmaking technique. First a sheet of metal (or 'plate') is covered with a waxy layer. This layer, or 'resist' as it is known, is scratched into by the artist to create a design. The plate is immersed in a bath of strong acid, which eats into the metal where the wax resist has been removed. The plate is taken out of the bath and the wax taken off. Oil based ink is applied all over the plate and pushed into the lines scratched in it before the surface is wiped clean. The plate is then put through a high-pressure printing press with dampened paper and the design prints onto the paper. The plate can be re-inked many times to produce multiple copies. Etching is one of the 'intaglio' printing techniques where the surface of the plate is 'cut away' to create the image.

Aquatint

Aquatint is another intaglio print making process. Aquatint uses powdered resin as the resist. The resin is fired onto the metal plate. The artist protects areas of the resist before putting the plate in acid to create different tonal effects. Short etches produce pale tones and longer etches produce darker tones. The method can be used to give a simple etching a more interesting image.

Impression

Impression is another word for print. This term is also used to mean all the copies of a publication printed at the same time or a single copy of such a print.

Frontispiece

A frontispiece is the decorative illustration facing a book's title page.

Portfolio or folio

This term is used to describe a collection of loose prints or other artworks. The collection can represent an over-view of the artworks of one artist or a series of works designed to be viewed together.

Motif

A motif in writing or in the visual arts means a recurring theme or image.