Printmaking Processes:  
A Description and Activity

Grade level: elementary or secondary, with adaptations  
Works of art:  
Bloody Massacre (slide 4)  
Roof, Summer Night (slide 13)  
Tanks #2 (slide 15)  
Miner Joe (slide 17)  
Sharecropper (slide 23)

Descriptions:

ETCHING
Examples: Bloody Massacre (slide 4) and Roof, Summer Night (slide 13)

An etching is an intaglio print: the areas that hold the ink are below the surface of the plate. Other intaglio techniques include engraving, drypoint, aquatint, and mezzotint.

1. The printmaker covers a metal plate with a waxy coating (the ground), then draws an image in the ground with a sharp needle. The needle scrapes through the ground and exposes the metal, but the needle does not scrape into the plate. Wherever a line is drawn with the needle there will be a line in the final print.

2. The plate is placed in a pan of dilute acid. The acid eats into the exposed metal and makes a groove. The acid-resistant ground protects the other areas. The printmaker removes the plate from the acid when the grooves are deep enough. The ground is removed.

3. The printmaker covers the plate with thick, sticky ink, rubbing ink into all the grooves.

4. The printmaker wipes the surface of the plate clean, so only the ink in the grooves is left. Printmakers often use the side of their hand to wipe off the last traces of ink.

5. A sheet of damp paper is placed on top of the plate and padded with a blanket. They are rolled through the press. The paper picks up the ink in the grooves in the plate. When the paper is pulled away from the plate, the image has been printed on it in reverse.

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LITHOGRAPHY
Examples: *Tanks #2* (slide 15) and *Miner Joe* (slide 17)

A lithograph is a planographic print; the surface from which it is printed is flat.

1. The printmaker draws or paints an image on a special slab of smooth limestone or a metal plate. Greasy crayons are used or a greasy ink called tusche.

2. The surface of the stone is treated with a mild mixture of gum arabic and nitric acid. As a result the image will attract greasy ink and the blank areas will attract water. Grease and water do not mix. The printmaker dissolves the ink of the original drawing with turpentine. However, a ghostlike image of the drawing remains on the stone.

3. The surface of the stone is kept wet during printing. Water collects on the blank areas.

4. Greasy ink is rolled on with a roller. It is repelled by the wet areas. The ink sticks only where the marks of the drawing were.

5. A sheet of paper is placed on top of the stone and is covered with a backing sheet and a stiff, slick-surfaced board called a tympan. A scraper bar creates pressure as they pass through the press. When the paper is pulled away from the stone, the image has been printed on it in reverse.

WOODCUT
Example: *Sharecropper* (slide 23)

A woodcut is a relief print; the raised areas hold the ink. A rubber stamp is an everyday example of a relief print.

1. The printmaker cuts an image on a block of wood.

2. The printmaker uses sharp tools to cut away areas that will not print. The raised shapes will print.

3. The printmaker rolls thick, sticky ink over the surface of the block with a roller.

4. The printmaker places a sheet of paper on the block and rubs the back of the paper. The ink transfers from the block to the paper. A press can also be used for this step.

5. The printmaker carefully pulls the paper away from the block. The image has been printed on it in reverse.

continued

143
Activity:

RELIEF PRINTING

Materials needed:
foam plate (from meat packaging)
drawing paper (same size as foam plate)
printmaking paper
pencils
waterbase inks
rollers (brayers)
glass or plexiglass (surface for inking)
newspaper
paper towels
spoons or burnishing tools
drying rack or clotheslines and clothespins
smocks

Instructions:

1. Students will begin by drawing, with pencil on drawing paper, a graphic print design of their choice. It is important that the drawing be bold, linear, and simple for this project. Remind students that written words need to be executed backwards on the drawing to appear correct on the finished print.

2. To transfer the design to the foam plate, place the drawing on top of the plate and with a pencil, trace the drawing. Pencil pressure alone is enough to incise the plate.

3. Prepare the printmaking paper by signing, dating, and numbering each sheet in the lower right corner. Set printmaking paper near glass plate, with sheet #1 on top.

4. Place a couple of tablespoons of ink on the glass plate and use a roller to spread ink evenly over the surface. When the roller is evenly inked, roll it over the foam plate covering the whole design. A correct amount of ink will leave the incised lines ink-free and a solid coating of color over the rest of the plate.

5. Carefully invert the plate onto sheet #1 and apply pressure by rubbing a spoon over the back of the plate. Then lift the plate off the paper. Repeat the process for the other signed sheets, applying more ink to the foam plate when necessary.

6. Dry the prints on a drying rack or clothesline.

Printmaking descriptions from "Introduction to Printmaking Processes," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1984

Activity from "To Please Every Taste: Eighteenth Century Prints from the Winterthur Museum" teacher packet, Terra Museum of American Art