

# **HISTORY OF PRINTMAKING**

## **BLOCK RELIEF METHOD**

Grade 7 and up



### **Objectives**

Students will:

- Develop basic background knowledge of the development of printmaking.
- Enhance their ability to think abstractly.
- Gain an understanding of the printing process through creating a print.

### **Vocabulary**

Relief Printing  
Single Block Method  
Multi-Block Method  
Positive and Negative

Parallel Lines  
Curves  
Halftones  
Clearing

# Introduction

Relief printing is the most ancient method of taking an impression from one object and putting it onto another. It is also the most exciting method used by printmakers today.

From early times, people have endeavored to establish a graphic record of achievements. The invention of paper and printing took place in China. The northern Chinese first took rubbings from carved stones, and then developed printing some thousand years before any other civilization. They first pressed a carved seal onto some colour and then onto a document written on silk. The seal was a prototype of a relief-printing block, in which the nonprinting parts were carved away, leaving only the design to take colour and be impressed. It was not until about the late 1400s that the basic processes of printing, as known today, were actually practiced. However, movable type with ceramic, wooden, or metal letters was an Asian invention. What we now possess of the great art of printing is a gradual development of crude beginnings, through slow successive stages, over many centuries, as people sought to preserve records and ideas. Famous artists as well as anonymous illustrators have used relief printing; it can be delicate and subtle, or bold and colourful. It was the method of printing used for all books and newspapers until the 20th century.

Printing developed over the centuries in response to new inventions, improvements in materials, and demands from the user. There are four basic methods of printing (in historical order): relief, intaglio, lithography, and screen-printing. Printmakers use all of these methods, and each creates a different result. However, the use of relief block method has survived over 2,000 years because of its versatility.

Relief printing is also known as surface printing — where all nonprinting surfaces are cut away and ink is applied to the remaining surfaces. The earliest material used for relief printing was a block of rare wood, but many other materials are now used, providing a wide choice in both price and availability. Relief printing in simple forms has been used since early civilization. Examples are seals, rubber stamps, woodcuts, linocuts, potato prints, etc.



## The Method of Making a Relief Print

The sequence begins with a visual idea that will be transformed into a print. The plate simply holds the image to be reproduced. The image on the plate is the essence of the print. As the idea is worked out in a drawing, it needs to be analyzed in terms of blocks to be cut and colours to be printed. A successful print is a balanced arrangement of positive-negative areas with interesting contrast and a center of interest, with the full use of the block. Bold, straightforward cutting and a well-planned drawing produce the best results. Visualize dark and light areas, as all the white areas are cut away while the areas of colour are left to print. In the process of planning a print, considerations must be given to whether a single block method or multiple block method will be used.

**Single Block Methods** — The majority of single block prints are monochromatic, but multicolour inking on one block extends the range of possibilities. Multicolour inking on a single block requires planning in advance. The most common method is to cut the block so that each colour area is sufficiently separated to avoid colours mixing during application. A second method is to cut all the nonprinting areas away and to cut one or more masks (stencils) from stiff paper or acetate sheet. The mask can be placed on the block and the ink rolled through any apertures on the block beneath.

**Multi-Block Methods** — Traditionally each separate colour has always been printed from its own block. It is a faster way of printing because the inking of the block is straightforward and there is no laborious painting of colours in different areas.



1.



2.



3.

## Directions

1. Create a design — this is the first and most important step. Avoid trite, overworked themes. As you sketch your design, allow the image to bleed. Draw it naturally shading or darkening the positive areas.
2. Trace the design and create the negative of the design. In this way you will see how your design will work for composition and interest.
3. Transfer the design to the Nasco Safety-Kut™ block. Pencil the reverse side of the design, then place the design side up on top of the block and trace or burnish.
4. Cut the design into the block by working slowly and carefully, while cutting away from the body. Cut the solid white areas first, then the gray areas. Use variety in your cuts to create an interesting composition. However, too much variety may produce confusion. So think and plan ahead carefully. Remember that every cut, large or small, will show up on the print.
5. Print a test copy of your design to see how the cutting is working. Examine it carefully to see what areas have to be fixed or changed. This may have to be done several times before the final print is satisfactory (picture not shown).



4.



1.



2.



4.



5.

## Printing Directions

1. Place ink on a palette and, with a brayer, roll ink out until it has a tacky quality.
2. With the charged brayer, carefully roll ink onto the Nasco Safety-Kut™ plate.
3. Label paper with a name on the right side and print number on the left side, then carefully place paper on the plate — it can not be moved or it will smudge (picture not shown).
4. Rub back of paper with a baren — cover back entirely with even pressure — again, be careful not to move the paper while rubbing.
5. Remove print carefully.
6. Hang up to dry (picture not shown).
7. Save all proofs and prints — the last five prints should look identical (picture not shown).



# Cutting Techniques and Effects

**Positive and Negative** — Compose a negative outline with free-form cutting using a small V-tool. Cutting the surrounding area with a medium U-gouge and edging with a V-tool can make a positive print. Or depict positive and negative images by using a flat gouge to remove the unwanted areas of the print.

**Parallel Lines** — Parallel lines and cross-hatching can be cut with a small V-tool. By moving the lines further apart or closer together, the tone of the print changes. A U-gouge will create flowing cross-hatching and parallel lines. Achieve contrast by using different sized U-gouges.

**Line Variations** — A variety of lines can be achieved using small and large V-tools. To create grass-like effects, wiggle the tool back and forth while holding it vertically.

**Curves** — Sharp curves and flowing lines can be produced using a small and medium U-gouge. Or curves can be created using a free-cutting approach.

**Creating Halftones** — A wide, flat gouge can be used to carefully shave soft, undefined areas. This is useful in creating landscape prints. Printed results will vary with the buildup of ink.

**Depth of Cut** — Create depth by cutting and shaping with a V-tool, then clear with a flat gouge. Obtain a more shaded appearance by only partially shaving.

**Clearing** — Make a stand-alone image by clearing around it with a U-gouge and shaving with a flat, wide U-gouge.

**Broad Cuts** — Use an art knife to achieve positive and negative broad cuts. Use a flat gouge to clear the large negative area.

## Materials List

- Nasco Safety-Kut™ Block Printing Classroom Pack (Cat. No. **9727164**)

Pack includes: 4" brayer; 2½" soft brayer; two bamboo barens; 36 liners; 36 large gouges; 34 lino cutter handles; ten ink mixing trays; 50 Nasco Sketchables™ Postcards; 100 sheets of 9" x 12" white paper; 80 sheets of 9" x 12" coloured paper (eight assorted colours); one 8-oz. jar each of black, white, red, green, yellow, and blue Nasco water-soluble ink, and 34 Nasco Safety-Kut™ blocks (4" x 6")

- Nasco Safety-Kut™ Printmaking Blocks:

- 4" x 6" (Cat. No. **9704655**)
- 6" x 12" (Cat. No. **9705051**)
- 9" x 12" (Cat. No. **9714659**)
- 12" x 12" (Cat. No. **9705052**)

- Nasco Water-Soluble Block Printing Ink Set of Eight 16-oz. Jars. Includes two jars of black and one jar each of white, red, brown, yellow, blue, and green (Cat. No. **9718149**)



**1-800-668-0600**

**www.education.spectrum-nasco.ca**