M. C. Escher's artwork continues to resonate in the century after it was created because his pictures illustrate themes that are fundamental to our consciousness. The patterns Escher composed give us a path along which we can discover even more than the artist himself may have been aware of, for the doors he opened ultimately reveal what we find reflected in the mirrors of our own perception.

Jeffrey Price, from the essay which accompanies this exhibition
"I think I have never yet done any work with the aim of symbolizing a particular idea, but the fact that a symbol is sometimes discovered or remarked upon is valuable for me because it makes it easier to accept the inexplicable nature of my hobbies, which constantly preoccupy me.” – M. C. Escher

To express the deepest mysteries or fundamental truths of creation and consciousness is a quest worthy of the highest arts. To understand even a small piece of the puzzle of perception is a task to fill a lifetime. When we begin to see the patterns that underlie the paradoxes of existence, then we catch a glimpse of revelations we may never fully comprehend.

M. C. Escher said little about the meaning of his artwork and the attraction of his images was a great mystery to him. Nevertheless, he was compelled by what he described as ‘a hopeless mania’ to create pictures of objects both perfect and impossible, of scenes quite fantastic and yet completely believable, and to describe in great detail things we might not otherwise be aware of. I believe that Escher’s artwork continues to resonate in the century after it was created because his pictures illustrate themes that are fundamental to our consciousness. This essay will explore three of Escher’s prints which hold keys to understanding why the artist was intrigued by such unusual imagery and why they continue to fascinate such a wide audience today.

In M. C. Escher’s first great illusionary lithograph, “Cycle” from 1938, we see a boy running from a tower and down some steps. His arms are raised in a somewhat awkward salutation, and he is smiling, perhaps in secret reverie. His journey is short and yet this passage encompasses his entire world. As he descends the stairs a transformation occurs that is as miraculous as any myth. In a few steps he metamorphosizes into marble and what was once an actor becomes his stage. Beyond the tower is a serene landscape, perhaps part of the Tuscan countryside or maybe a small portion of paradise. This is the setting for Escher’s story: an extraordinary adventure in a miraculous world.

“Cycle” can be seen as an archetypal image of the universe created from our own being. Is everything our imagining? Where does our interior landscape end and the countryside begin? What is the essential difference between body and stone, and why can we find soul in one and not the other? By illustrating such fascinating questions, perhaps Escher proposes that everything from the distant hills to our outstretched hands is a part of a complex, ever-changing and often invisible cycle.
Perhaps one might ask whether this storyteller Escher actually meant for his pictures to have such plots and for philosophical connections to be drawn from artworks that are personal, often rather technical, and only occasionally overtly picturesque. I propose that this is the essence of great art, and the very nature of revelation. The artist can be a messenger bringing each viewer a looking-glass through which one may discover things unknown to either the author or his audience.

![Image of M. C. Escher's "Spirals" wood engraving](image)

The artist can give substance to that which is visible to him alone. To express the complex beauty of a perfect shape might be seen as the function of mathematics more readily than the task of a printmaker. An equation, after all, is a way of understanding the relationship between things, and geometry is the most precise way to describe the fundamental structure of forms. In his 1953 wood engraving “Spirals” Escher has illustrated the evolution of a perfect and complex object, an unwinding banded cone floating against a grey background. We see similar shapes within a nautilus shell and in the spirals of distant galaxies, but it is a difficult task indeed to make all of this visible by carving channels in a block of wood. Undoubtedly, these spirals are a somewhat surprising subject for an artwork, requiring months of planning and tedious exacting woodcarving and printing. This is a design intensely challenging in both concept and execution, and it is this complexity which may be at the heart of “Spirals” beauty. Escher’s inspiration may well have been his desire simply to make this difficult object exist, and to undertake the task of actualization with his chisels, ink and paper, guided by his imagination, experience, and craftsmanship. Creating such perfection is a sublime art and understanding it fully challenges our senses and our intellect.

Escher’s spiral cornucopia is constructed of four parallel bands, each shaded with a subtle and systematic arrangement of lines and lozenges. Escher’s technique is deceptively simple, since the print is created by pressing two inked woodblocks onto a sheet of paper. How these two blocks create the three shades in the print – black, grey, and white – is a surprisingly complex and highly technical puzzle, as is the precise geometric arrangement of spiraling lines and shapes. Escher’s inks make visible simultaneously the inside and the outside of the bands which lead us toward infinity. If we search for the very beginning of this growing form,
we can find the tip of the spiral placed precisely between two bands at the right, its extreme apex exquisitely visible just before our view is blocked by the circling outer rind. The curves both wrap around and spring out of loops which we can imagine having no beginning and no end; this is clearly part of a growing and evolving thing, somehow both organic and mechanical, an illustration of an object as well as of a creative idea. It is as if an ever-evolving spiral has been frozen for a moment so that we may observe it close-up. We witness here a small piece of the infinite created from two blocks of wood, cut with chisels, covered with ink and pressed to paper by Escher in his studio. Lines and spaces of black, grey and white create something impossibly perfect and fantastically dimensioned on a white sheet of paper within a picture frame.

Fundamental forms such as these are known to us and yet often lie beyond our sight. The search for harmony, logic, and the universal rules of order is both alluring and terrifying. As Faust found, there are some secrets which are better left unknown, and mysteries best left behind the shadows. And so we find serpents weaving through perfect interlocking rings in Escher’s final creation, his 1969 woodcut “Ringsnakes.” After a lifetime spent making things visible that we see with our minds as well as our eyes, Escher faced a monumental struggle to bring his last artwork to completion. His health failing, he feared he would not live long enough to carve and print the three woodblocks that were required to create this masterpiece. “Ringsnakes” is complex in structure, execution, and meaning; expressing the duality of natural and perfect forms, the unity of all creation, and a sublime realization of the infinite.

Escher frequently expressed the infinite in his art. His woodcut ‘Smaller and Smaller,’ for example, presents us with ever-diminishing lizards as we approach the center of the design. Traveling in the other direction, the figures in Escher’s series of ‘Circle Limit’ woodcuts reduce in size towards their edges. “Ringsnakes” combines and completes these transformations, creating a cycle that is unified and universal. Whether we begin at the center of the figure or approach from its outer edge, first we find the smallest rings. These may be seen as the seeds of creation. Escher, empowered with the wisdom of experience, did not have to carve impossibly tiny rings to give us the sense of the infinite, the smallest circles serve as symbolic links of a never-ending chain. Each ring intertwines with others, both larger and smaller. It is the nature of many things to be both growing and shrinking simultaneously. As we advance in wisdom and age, so also we may decline in innocence and lose the possibilities of youth. Mists rise from the seas and fall as rain. In mythology, a phoenix can be reborn from its ashes and a serpent might swallow its own tail and regenerate. In the universe of rings which Escher
creates we can watch evolution unfold. We might see this as an allegory of creation from the first dust of atoms at the edge of space to the complexities of a living planet. As it happens, only where Escher’s rings reach their largest size can they be inhabited by living creatures. And so, when the world is ripe, there are snakes.

From the serpent in the Garden of Eden to the cobra on Cleopatra’s crown, the snake has always been a powerful symbol of temptation, wisdom, and duality. It is said that Moses turned his staff into a snake to overpower Pharaoh, and the Egyptian replicated his magic producing snakes on both sides of their epic struggle. Snakes can have wondrous powers. Related to the phoenix, the mythological ouroboros was a serpent which swallowed its tail to be continually re-born from its own essence. The shape of the ouroboros is closely related to the never-ending patterns Escher describes in “Cycle,” “Spirals,” and in “Ringsnakes.” Escher’s snakes circle endlessly, seeming to carry with them the gift and burden of wisdom as well as the contradictory powers of our desires. If the snake can be seen as a symbol for all that is conscious and alive, both wonderful and terrifying, then it is appropriate that in this print they weave in and out of such perfect and conceptualized rings. We can see the universe as composed of both the essential formulas which govern molecules and of our cryptic consciousness which struggles to understand itself. We are rather chaotic humans within a universe where perfection is invisible yet pervasive. The linked chains of “Ringsnakes” illustrate a pathway to and from infinity, interwoven with serpentine creatures whose writhing undulations unite them as they circumnavigate the cosmos and weave together perfection with the ever-changing power of life.

To create this circular woodcut with maximum symmetry and a minimum of wood-carving, Escher carved wedge-shaped printing blocks that completed the print with three impressions. Since “Ringsnakes” is printed with three colors, each color required three printings covering one-third of the image at a time. The edges of each block were fashioned irregularly so that their seams are hidden by the image’s borderlines. Escher pressed three impressions from each wood block – three times around this wheel of creation – printing nine inked segments making three layers of color into one unified picture which tells a story that Escher worked a lifetime to create.

We can never know how much of this message Escher consciously intended, but we do know that this image inspired him to continue work as the frailties of age crept over him. “Ringsnakes” stands as the triumphant legacy of an artist who labored tirelessly in solitude and with endless diligence to express the wonders our eyes perceive and our mind struggles to comprehend. The patterns Escher composed in “Cycle,” “Spirals” and “Ringsnakes” give us a path along which we can discover even more than the artist himself may have been aware of, for the doors he opened ultimately reveal what we find reflected in the mirrors of our own perception.

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This essay is dedicated to Hans deRijk, who has shared Escher’s magic with the world through his prose and has shared his friendship so very generously with me, and to my wife, Esta, who stayed awake while I wrote this essay in a Venetian palace.
About this exhibition. These are the finest works of M. C. Escher that I have gathered over the past twenty-five years. Many have never been exhibited before, and most have never been offered for sale. I might add that these extraordinary artworks are in some of the most exquisite frames we have ever designed at Artists’ Market. This is a unique opportunity to see and to acquire the very best and rarest of Escher’s masterworks.

Ringsnakes
(B.448) 1969 woodcut in brown, green, and black
Signed and noted ‘eigen druk’ (self-printed)
This is Escher’s last print, his masterpiece. After a lifetime spent making things visible that we see with our minds as well as our eyes, Escher faced a monumental struggle to bring his last artwork to completion. His health failing, he feared he would not live long enough to carve and print the three woodblocks that were required to create this masterpiece. “Ringsnakes” is complex in structure, execution, and meaning; expressing the duality of natural and perfect forms, the unity of all creation, and a sublime realization of the infinite. Each ring intertwines with others, both larger and smaller. Only where Escher’s rings reach their largest size can they be inhabited by living creatures. The linked chains of “Ringsnakes” illustrate a pathway to and from infinity, interwoven with serpentine creatures whose writhing undulations unite them as they circumnavigate the cosmos and weave together perfection with the every-changing power of life. “Ringsnakes” stands as the triumphant legacy of an artist who labored tirelessly in solitude and with endless diligence to express the wonders our eyes perceive and our mind struggles to comprehend.

Study for Ringsnakes
(B.447) 1969 woodcut proof
Cycle
(B.305) 1938 lithograph, signed and numbered 3/12
Here we see a boy running from a tower and down some steps. His arms are raised in a somewhat awkward salutation, and he's smiling, perhaps in secret reverie. His journey is short and yet this passage encompasses his entire world. As he descends the stairs a transformation occurs that is as miraculous as any myth. In a few steps he metamorphosizes into marble and what was once an actor becomes his stage. Beyond the tower is a serene landscape, perhaps part of the Tuscan countryside or maybe a small portion of paradise. “Cycle” can be seen as an archetypal image of the universe created from our own being. Is everything our imagining? Where does our interior landscape end and the countryside begin? What is the essential difference between body and stone, and why can we find soul in one and not the other? By raising such fascinating questions, perhaps Escher proposes that everything from the distant hills to our outstretched hands is a part of a complex, ever-changing and often invisible cycle.
Smaller and Smaller

(B.413) 1966 wood engraving and woodcut
Center proof in grey and black
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland.

This is the most detailed of all Escher prints, the ultimate expression of his craft’s ability to capture the mysterious power of the infinite. We can find connections in this design to Tibetan mandala art, Inuit totems, and Islamic patterning. To achieve the precision needed for this print, Escher used high-powered magnification, special lighting, and minute tools. Escher added a band of surrounding lizards to this center-block design, but it was the intense central block print we see here which Escher reproduced in his book ‘The Graphic Work of M. C. Escher.’
The Second Day of Creation
(B.105) 1926 wood engraving

Of all Escher’s early work, this print is unique in both its concept and the complexity of its patterning. As the ocean separates from the skies before our eyes, a myriad of lines and shapes sweep us up in the power of creation and creativity. The lines show both Asian influences and the power of the woodcut art. This rare edition was commissioned by VAEVO, The Netherlands Society for Education Through Art, whose red insignia stamp can be seen in the upper left corner.
The Four Elements: Water, Drawing and Woodblock Print
(B.345) 1952
Drawing ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland.
This drawing is remarkable in that it is one of the only Escher drawings in private hands which relates to a matching print. Here, Escher has brilliantly designed fish which interlock in a design that visually ripples like water flowing in a rocky stream. Strens was a print connoisseur and collector who commissioned Escher to create a set of four prints representing the ancient elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. These prints were presented to Strens’ circle of friends and colleagues as treasured gifts celebrating the new year from 1953 to 1956.

Scarabs
(B.273) 1935 wood engraving
These curious creatures, sometimes known as dung beetles, gave Escher an opportunity to render the reflections of shiny shells, precise details, and a complex textured background. The artist wrote, “in order to see it well, I had to draw it!” This example was printed in 1940 for a portfolio of Escher’s work published by the arts journal ‘Halcyon’.
Isometric Graph with Interlocking Fish and Flying Envelopes
Pencil drawing, ca. 1955-1956
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland
Escher brought to life three separate symmetry motifs in this most unusual drawing on triangular graph paper. The six birds appeared as a wood engraving vignette in 1954 (B.398), the hexagonal fish were the subject of a wood engraving in 1955 (B. 406), and the little flying envelopes appeared both in a small print commissioned by the Dutch Post Office in 1956 (B.412) and again in Metamorphosis III of 1967 (B.446). This unique frame follows the shape of Escher’s drawing.

The Bookworm
(B. 347) 1946 wood engraving
For Albert Bosman, a mathematician, this bookworm rises from a book, and the pattern on his back echoes the shapes of the text just as his curves follow the folds of the pages.

The Vaulted Window
(B. 341) 1946 wood engraving
A book lies open before us with tiny Escheresque images, balanced by a lily vase on the windowsill. Beyond are rooftops of a Dutch town and radiating sunlight illuminating the scene.

A Reader Banishes Troubles
(B. 325) 1942 wood engraving
A windmill can be a symbol of change, and a vision for this monk. The verses translate “A Reader Banishes Troubles” and on the window frame: “Work and Persistence.”
The Peacock
(B.160) 1931 signed woodcut
Frontispiece for "XXIV Emblemata"
one of only 25 signed examples (there were also 275 unsigned examples)
The peacock's radiating feathered tail follows a pattern quite similar to Escher's much later prints of Circle Limits and Path of Life. To illustrate such symmetry from nature is a strong statement of Escher's perception of beauty and order in the world. Escher combines image, design and typography into a unified and dramatic creation. The patterns in the border are also quite remarkable, with complex geometry and interlocking reversals of black and white. This is a wonderful example of mid-century graphic art, and a classic visualization of art deco design.
Barbarano
(B.129) 1929 lithograph
Signed and numbered 7/24

One of Escher’s first lithographs, ‘Barbarano’ is considered among his most beautiful landscapes. The depth, structure, and shading in this print surround the viewer with a fantastic world seen from several viewpoints simultaneously. One can imagine the structural underpinnings of these rocks, and the river’s gorge through the mountains allows us to see within the rocks as well as around them. The chasm before us is both gentle and alluring as well as monumental and dramatic.
Reptiles
Drawing, ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland
Here we can see the genesis of one of Escher’s most memorable designs. Reptiles inhabited several Escher prints, but we know this drawing relates to the artist’s greatest lithograph since the title of the book in Escher’s print is drawn below the creatures and their geometric underpinnings. This is the very essence of Escher’s craft.

Convex and Concave
(B.399) 1955 signed lithograph, numbered 36/56 IV
This is one of the most complex of all Escher prints. The structure of this building is based on the model of three cubes represented on the flag: to the left a cupola pokes outward while on the right a similar alcove arches inward. In the center the space turns inside out in a dynamic whirl of ambiguities and inversions. At any single point in this scene the perspective and space is entirely logical, but the connections between different areas are ambiguous and constantly changing.
Encounter
(B.331) 1944 signed lithograph, numbered 56/200

White and black figures emerge from a flat gray mist in the background, pattern becomes form, and the figures which are created become so real that they leave the plane and seem to march into the real world. Some see optimists and pessimists meeting at last and finding balance. Unquestionably, this is one of Escher’s masterpieces of graphic storytelling.

Crystal
(B.353) 1947 mezzotint
Signed and numbered 4/25

Escher hand-printed this rare mezzotint in an edition of only 25 examples, creating a complex study of perfection within the natural world. Escher produced only eight mezzotints, each in very small editions. This technique allowed the artist to create the most subtle shading imaginable, and in ‘Crystal’ the rounded rock’s shapes and the crystal’s translucent surfaces are a tour-de-force of the printmaker’s consummate skill. The translucent crystal has flat planes and sharp edges, whilst the rocks show contrasting properties in being rounded, opaque, and irregular. Escher finally abandoned the mezzotint technique since it proved overwhelmingly laborious and only a small number of prints could be created from a mezzotint plate before it showed signs of wear and could no longer print the subtleties and details seen in this print.
Hieronymus Bosch’s “Hell”  
(B.278) 1935 signed lithograph #6/20
This is Escher’s only work copied from another artist, fellow Dutchman Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1561), whom Escher credits in the lower left of the image. Escher was fascinated by Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights,” painted in 1510 (shown at the right, now in the Prado museum). In Bosch’s masterpiece, Paradise is on the left, The Earthly Garden in the center, and Hell is at the right, inhabited by allegorical creatures such as the hollow man Escher depicted as filled with drunkards who revel in the pleasures of the senses. Escher has taken some liberties with Bosch’s composition, not by changing the subject, but simply by moving various elements slightly in order to make a more unified and picturesque scene.
Day and Night
(B.303) 1938 color woodcut printed in grey and black, signed and noted 'eigen druk' ('self-printed')

Often considered Escher’s greatest woodcut, here we see two similar Dutch townscapes joined by curious fields which magically transform into flocks of birds soaring into dissimilar skies. Day and night join together as do the sky and the earth, living birds and plowed fields. A closer reveals that subtle changes occur as the town is illuminated at night and birds raise or lower their tails depending on which way they travel. Escher carved two large woodblocks to print the grey and black of this image, and it was always the print that was most requested and acclaimed when Escher exhibited his prints. This example was acquired directly from the artist in the 1950’s and has been kept in perfect condition for over half a century.
Six Black and White Symmetry Motifs
(B.417) 1957 rare woodcut proof
aside from the edition of 175 included within Escher’s only book, “The Regular Division of the Plane”
Here Escher illustrates the origin and evolution of interlocking creatures. There are three classic symmetry patterns at the top of the woodcut based on Asian and Islamic patterns. Below these we see three variations of three kinds of creatures, each on a white background on one side, on a dark background on the other side, and the two combined effortlessly in the center of the print.
“San Gimignano” is Escher’s very first Italian print, and the intensity of the design and patterning shows the great care and artistry which were brought to bear in this seminal artwork. The central tree swells with an energy reminiscent of van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night,’ whilst the center of the tree is spotted similarly to Australian Aboriginal art. The trees on the hillside are created by voids in white lines, the foreground of this print is filled with remarkable textures and details. Above, the stark towers of San Gimignano stand out brilliantly against the black sky in a celebration of Italian sunlight.
Orvieto, Porta Rocca

1922 ink drawing, signed, titled, and dated May 17, 1922
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland
This dramatic drawing was created by Escher on his first trip to Italy, and it is full of dramatic patterning and repeating shapes. We are confronted by the magnificence of the towering mountain, fantastic plants, and the brilliance of the sun.
Metamorphosis III: Bees and Flowers
(B.446) 1967 woodcut proof in three colors, with pencil notations
Ex collection Vermeulen and Kohga, Japan

This rare woodcut is a motif that was incorporated into Escher’s largest work, his 21-foot scroll Metamorphosis III. This design transitions from the simple tessellation of squares into one of Escher’s most complex designs: irregular pentagonal flowers. Flowers, of course, attract bees, and these life-like insects are one of Escher’s most precise naturalistic renderings.
**The Borger Oak**

(B.29) 1919 signed and dated linoleum cut
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation
and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum,
The Hague, Holland.

This dramatic linocut can be considered Escher’s first landscape print, full of details which characterize the artist’s greatest works. We see dark on light at the bottom of the print, while dark on dark designs are outlined above. The sun radiates its light in concentric circles alternating bands of light and dark. In the foreground, the hills roll in waves of black and white which remind us of ‘Fish and Waves,’ Escher’s last small print created almost fifty years after this rare miniature.

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**Fish and Waves**

*Carved Cancelled Woodblock, Drawing, and Woodcut*

(B.442) 1963 unique set
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland.

This was to be Escher’s final small-format print, and it is certainly one of his most dramatic. The fish and waves combine in surprisingly complex ways, and the artist captures the quintessential harmony of his contrasting subject. Douglas Hofstadter, author of ‘Gödel, Escher, Bach,’ wrote of this print, “this miniature represents what creative genius at its absolute peak is capable of.” Escher’s unique woodblock was cancelled to prevent reprinting at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague at Escher’s request. The two-color drawing shows the complexity of the waves, which taper at both ends and are actually two different wave patterns flawlessly combined by Escher in order to intersect perfectly with the interlocking fish in the center of the print.
The Hilltown of Pontone, above Atrani on the Coast of Amalfi, Italy

Color drawing, signed with monogram, dated May 24, 1931
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland

One of the only signed color drawings in all of Escher’s work, this landscape is one of the finest unique pieces in private hands today. The terraced hillside above Atrani may have been the inspiration for the landscape behind Escher’s “Waterfall”, and similar geometric terraces can be seen in the artist’s woodcut “Tetrahedral Planetoid.” The distant hills are dramatic in their majesty, and stand in startling contrast to the lush hills of the town. Pontone also is the viewpoint from which Escher created his woodcut “Atrani, Seen from Pontone” also in this exhibit.
Atrani (seen from Pontone), The Coast of Amalfi

(B. 211) 1932 woodcut, signed

The variety of dramatic shading in this exceptionally rare woodcut is remarkable, varying from the stark black and white of the fence in the foreground to the subtle shifting from light to dark in the water above. The towered church in the center of this scene was incorporated by Escher into his great scroll ‘Metamorphosis’ and the cubic structure of the buildings and rocks show the geometry underlying Escher’s naturalism.
A man gazes at a lovely picture in a print gallery which contains pictures much like Escher’s work. He admires a view of Malta which Escher recreated from his own 1935 woodcut, but here this view expands to encompass a seaside town in which there is a print gallery where a man gazes at a lovely picture. And so, the world we see around us also contains us within it, and in fact, this may all be our own creation. The artist’s mathematically spiraling grid resolved into a void where Escher both drew and signed his name, thus placing himself in the very center of this remarkable universe. Perhaps the man we see in this picture is actually admiring the artist who created everything we see. Bruno Ernst, the artist’s close friend and author of ‘The Magic Mirror of M. C. Escher,’ considers this to be Escher’s greatest print.
Impossible Cubes

Drawing, ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland. This is the only known drawing by Escher of an impossible object outside of the museum collections of the artist’s work. Here, a seemingly normal cube is composed of bars which must be simultaneously part of adjoining planes. Perhaps this construction was simply too subtle, or too impossible, since this object was never used by Escher in a print, though it has some connections to his 'Cube with Magic Ribbons.' We can see in the top drawing arrows presumably indicating the placement of creatures who might inhabit this space of interlaced horizontal and vertical planes which form a strange endless Möbius pathway.
The Well (WE ARE COMING OUT OF IT!)
(B.345) 1946 wood engraving
This is considered the most powerful and complex of Escher’s small-format prints. The entirely unsigned edition was commissioned by the Nederlandsche Ex Libris Kring (an artists’ and print collectors’ society in the Netherlands) to honor the Dutch underground after the Second World War. We see hands climbing through a twisting octagonal well toward freedom – toward sunlight, birds, miraculous trees - and a home. Of course, the well’s bucket might fall on us at any moment.

The Lion of the Fountain in the Piazza at Ravello
(B.214) 1932 lithograph, signed and numbered 17/24
This was a curious subject for Escher, and we can only imagine that he was drawn to the strange appearance of the lion as well as the wonderful patterning of his coat. Whilst living in Rome, Escher spent many summers in the lovely hilltown of Ravello, and some of his most beautiful Italian prints were created in this vicinity.
Deconstructed Flower
Drawing, dated June, 1947 and annotated “Baarn”
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland
We see a flower fully formed, surrounded by the outlines of its structure. Escher’s intense fascination with the patterns of nature is shown nowhere more beautifully than here in this delicate and powerful study. The positive and negative forms of the flower are surrounded by intricately patterned branches whose leaves reflect brilliantly the symmetry so frequently found around us which is often overlooked and made visible in many of Escher’s finest artworks.
Spirals

(B.390) 1953 wood engraving in black and grey, signed, dated June 7, 1970, and inscribed to Hans de Rijk (Bruno Ernst)
Here Escher has illustrated the evolution of a perfect and complex object, an unwinding banded cone floating against a grey background. Escher’s inspiration may well have been his desire simply to make this difficult object exist, and to undertake the task of actualization with his chisels, ink and paper, guided by his imagination, experience, and craftsmanship. Creating such perfection is a sublime art and understanding it fully challenges our senses and our intellect. Escher’s spiral cornucopia is constructed of four parallel bands, each shaded with a subtle and systematic arrangement of lines and lozenges. Escher’s technique is deceptively simple, since the print is created by pressing two inked woodblocks onto a sheet of paper. How these two blocks create the three shades in the print — black, grey, and white — is a surprisingly complex and highly technical puzzle, as is the precise geometric arrangement of spiraling lines and shapes. Escher’s inks make visible simultaneously the inside and the outside of the bands which lead us toward infinity. The curves both wrap around and spring out of loops which we can imagine having no beginning and no end; this is clearly part of a growing and evolving thing, somehow both organic and mechanical, an illustration of a object as well as of a creative idea. The photo below shows Escher inscribing and signing this example of Spirals in June, 1970 for his friend Hans de Rijk (Bruno Ernst), author of ‘The Magic Mirror of M. C. Escher’.
Father's hands are the feature of him which I most vividly remember. Looking at their precise movements, neatly arranging tools, sharpening gouges and chisels with rhythmic motions, preparing the wood to a smooth, velvety finish, I could sense the pleasure that this activity gave him.

As I became older he explained carefully his preference for planks of parallel-grain pearwood, because of the challenge presented by the tendency to split if improperly cut. He hinted at a feeling of cowardice when he was forced to use end-grain pear or boxwood to create fine details.

How many hours he spent lovingly caressing the grainy surface of lithographic stones with a grease pencil, trying to approach ideal transitions from light to dark grey!

Printing a woodcut, if not repeated too often in a row, was also a pleasure. That ritual, seen over and over again during my life, kept its feeling of magic to the last. It was not only the visual aspect that held me entranced. The delicious strong smell of printing ink, the swishing, slapping sound of the putty-knife spreading ink on a glass plate, the loud crackle of the ink roller, the soft rubbing sound of the ivory spoon pressing the paper down on the wood; they all were essential preliminaries to a spectacular finale. Father would lay down his spoon, grasp carefully a corner of the paper, lift it a little to check if the black surface was uniform; then, after slowly peeling the sheet from the wood, he would triumphantly hold it up in the air for inspection: a sparkling crisp new print.

“Roman Memories” by George Escher was published in 1985: “Mostra Maurits C. Escher,” Istituto Olandese de Roma

The center of M. C. Escher’s 1956 lithograph “Print Gallery” showing the date of completion, Escher’s monogram, his signature, and the numbering of this print from its third edition

M. C. Escher’s studio in Rome, ca. 1931: his wife, Jetta, is seated reading. The woodblock and printing materials for his Emblemata Peacock are in the foreground. This woodcut can also be seen in the photograph of studio tools above and in the 2008 exhibition, ‘Cycle, Spirals, and Snakes.’ Escher’s chair at the left is also in the Artists’ Market collection and in the exhibition.
Escher Editions

by Jeffrey Price

M. C. Escher wrote “I am a printmaker, heart and soul.” His unique visions were generally not expressed in paintings or drawings – these were but his working models, used to develop ideas which he would then bring to life using the traditional printmaking techniques of woodcut, mezzotint, and lithography.

It is critical to understand the difference between an original print and a reproduction if one is to understand why original Escher prints are so rare and so treasured today. It is relatively easy to understand the nature of a reproduction: it is a copy made by photographing an original artwork and reproducing its image in a book or as a poster. But what is an original? That requires a longer answer. The defining characteristic of an original print is that it must be printed directly from the artist’s hand-made printing block or plate. There are many techniques in printmaking, but in every case an original must be printed directly from the block or plate that the artists themselves create. If the artist makes the printing plate, be it by drawing an image on a lithographic stone, cutting into a woodblock, or working directly with a metal plate; and if that plate is then printed, the result is an original print which can have aesthetic and historic significance as well as real value among collectors and in the international art market. A reproduction, no matter how attractive it may be, has no such value, just as a reproduction of currency has no monetary value.

To create a woodblock print Escher carved a smoothed slab of wood with chisels or engraving tools with infinite patience and skills honed over a lifetime of printmaking. Escher’s preferred woodblocks were of cherry, pear, or other dense fruitwood, since these could be carved with the detail and precision the artist desired. Once the block was carved, it could then be carefully inked and pressed against special paper, printing it in somewhat the same way one might print with a rubberstamp. To get the ink rich and even is an art in itself: apply too little ink with the ink roller and you will get unevenly printed areas, too much ink will fill in fine lines. Escher placed a sheet of printing paper on a large flat board and pressed his inked woodblock onto the paper. If multiple blocks were being used to create a multi-color print, there were always places at the edge of the design where Escher could align the inked block with a previously-printed woodblock’s impression. Once the inked block was in place on the paper, a second flat board was placed on top of the paper and woodblock, creating a kind of sandwich. Escher would then carefully flip the boards with his block and paper upside down and remove the top board so that the paper was now on top of his inked block. He would then rub the back of the paper either with a roller or an ivory spoon in order the transfer the ink from the block to the final print. Each example of every M. C. Escher print required separate careful inking, printing and drying before it was ready to be exhibited or sold.

Escher would hand-print a small number of prints from his blocks and keep them in his studio for collectors and exhibitions. If an edition sold out (and if he felt so inclined) he might then print a few more examples of this woodcut. Escher continued to print some of his woodblocks until 1970 when his health deteriorated. This explains why woodcuts were not numbered editions, since Escher could not predict how many examples he would create in the future. Early prints that were very popular such as ‘Day and Night’ and ‘Scarabs,’ ‘The Terrifying Adventures of Scholastica’ and ‘The Regular Division of the Plane’ have larger editions than a later more esoteric woodcut such as ‘Circle Limit II’. Some editions by Escher, such as his 1932 portfolio ‘XXIV Emblemata,’ were printed in a woodcut press, as were his woodcuts in the books ‘Flor de Pascua,’ ‘The Spinner’ and ‘Vaulted Stairway’ were also printed in this way for a portfolio included within the art journal ‘Halcyon’ in 1940. Escher remarked of this printing, “how excellent the prints are: I never succeeded to handprint that print so deep black while retaining the very thin white stripes.”

Lithography is a more mysterious technique, but there are similarities to woodblock printing. Escher drew his designs onto specially prepared blocks of German limestone using artist’s lithographic pencils which are somewhat waxy. Printing these blocks required the assistance of a master lithographer who first wet the stone evenly, then applied ink, and finally printed it slowly under tremendous pressure of a large printmaker’s press. The finished lithographs were inspected by Escher, who destroyed any print not meeting his standards. Each successful print would be signed by Escher and the edition number noted. Escher would decide on the number of prints to create with his lithographer, and it is my belief that since some defective prints were destroyed the editions are often odd numbers (for example, “Print Gallery” has an edition of 43 instead of perhaps fifty examples). All except ten of his lithographic stones were destroyed following printing, most likely they

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were resurfaced and 'erased' in order to create new prints in the lithographer's workshop. If a print was in great demand and the stone had not been destroyed, Escher would sometimes print additional small editions, usually differentiated by a roman numeral following the edition number.

Escher also created just eight mezzotints, and this complex technique requires a lengthy explanation to fully understand its challenges. Suffice to say that Escher laboriously crafted a copper plate incised with his image and then inked this plate and printed it in his studio on a small roller press. The technique to create and print a mezzotint was extraordinarily demanding, unimaginably tedious, and somewhat magical. Escher's final frustration was that very few prints could be created before the mezzotint plate degraded and could no longer be printed with the shading and details his meticulious images demanded.

Escher's general method was to seldom sign smaller and medium-format woodcuts and to almost always sign larger major prints. Lithographs and mezzotints were usually, but not always, signed and numbered, whereas major woodcuts were generally signed but never numbered. Larger woodcut prints frequently bear Escher's notation 'eigen druk,' which roughly translates as 'printed by myself,' or 'self-printed' though the wording is infinitely more elegant in the original Dutch. Virtually all of Escher's prints have his MCE monogram and the date of the print's completion in Roman numerals drawn within the image.

Every example of an original print is necessarily identical in size to every other print created from the same block, stone, or plate. These originals have frequently been photographed and reproduced in books and posters, just as painters' canvases have been photographically reproduced. As we have seen, in Escher's work only the woodblock prints, lithographs, and mezzotints created directly from the artist's blocks, stones, and plates are considered original prints and of value.

Originality has nothing to do with the size of an edition nor whether each print is autographed by the artist. It is the conceptualizing, crafting and printing of a graphic image that is the heart and soul of the creative process, and indeed there is a long history of printmakers creating their works without autographing them. This was certainly the case with the classic prints of Rembrandt and Dürer, and often with modern printmakers such as Picasso as well. The practice of artists signing and numbering their editions was virtually unknown before the twentieth century. The creation of signed and numbered graphics sometimes had as much to do with marketing as it did with printmaking, and editions were often produced at the request of galleries and dealers to increase the sales of the work of their favorite artists. Many artists, including Chagall, Dalí, and Picasso also signed and numbered photographic reproductions of their drawings and paintings. These reproductions are clearly not original prints, and Escher never signed reproductions of his work.

Escher held tenaciously to his roots as a traditional printmaker in technique and temperament, though certainly not stylistically. He was the antithesis of a commercial artist and worked for most of his life without a wide audience or gallery network. The marketing of his work was far less important than its creation. Escher preferred to work alone in his studio and generally sold his work directly to the scholars and collectors who discovered his unique creations. For Escher, it was the concept and creation of his images that was of the utmost importance whereas selling his prints could be an unwelcome distraction from his work as an artist. Escher kept close control over his printmaking materials and created comparatively few original prints during his lifetime, a mere fraction of the output of other famous twentieth-century printmakers such as Miró, Picasso, and Chagall. Virtually all of Escher's printing blocks, lithograph stones, and mezzotint plates were cancelled and made non-reprintable at the Hague Gemeentemuseum pursuant to Escher's instructions at the end of his life, so we know with certainty that all original Escher prints are from his small authentic vintage lifetime editions.

It was extraordinarily challenging for Escher to translate his visions into graphic art. During his sixty years of printmaking he created just 448 different prints, each one a part of the interwoven fabric of images which stands as his life's work. Each and every original print that came from his exquisitely-crafted blocks and plates tells part of an extraordinary story that unfolds within the many layers of our consciousness. As Escher himself once wrote, the story he told is "something that no other graphic artist on earth could tell you. It doesn't sound very modest, but what can I do? That is simply the way it is."

I'd like to offer my special thanks to George Escher for his comments on this essay which gave me first-hand insights into his father's work. And thank you to all the lovers and collectors of Escher's work who have made the past thirty years an extraordinarily rewarding art adventure for me with so many delightfully unexpected discoveries along the way.

– Jeffrey Price
M. C. ESCHER

CERAMIC SCULPTURE BY BRIGIT BEEMSTER  (COUNTY SLIGO, IRELAND)
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFFREY PRICE WITH ESCHER’S FINAL WOODCUT, ‘RINGSNAKES’
ARTISTS’ MARKET COLLECTION