

ESCHER'S 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 (intended for eating soft-boiled eggs) in order to 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 'Sky and Water I' would therefore 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 Terrifying Adventures of Scholastica' and 'The Regular Division of the Plane.' The woodcuts 'Grasshopper,' 'Scarabs,' '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 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 meticulous 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 a 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 Mirò, Picasso, and Chagall. Virtually all of Escher's printing blocks, lithograph stones, and mezzotint plates were cancelled with a small hole and thus made non-reprintable at The Hague Gemeentemuseum pursuant to M. C. 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 that 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