

Dürer and Printmaking

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Albrecht Dürer and printmaking. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, explain the influence of the printing press on printmaking, describe the difference between relief and intaglio printing, and identify examples of each. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

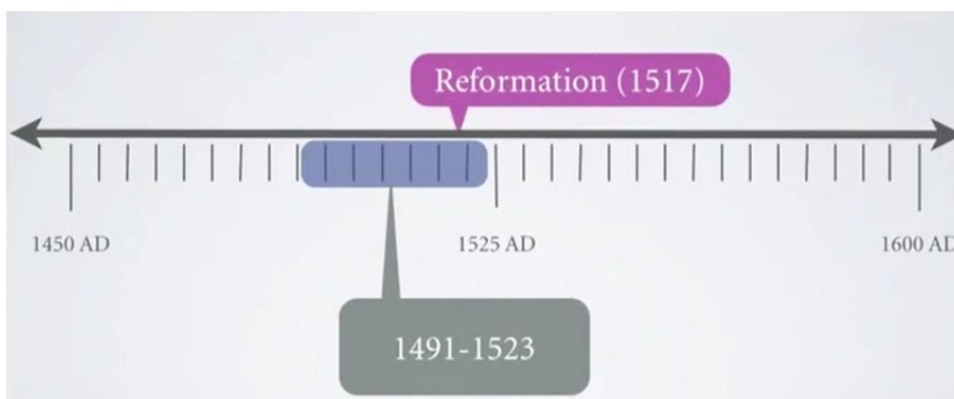


BIG IDEA

The invention of the printing press led to innovations in printmaking and the proliferation of this form of artwork beginning in 15th century Europe.

1. Period and Location: Albrecht Dürer and Printmaking

The period that you will be looking at today is from 1491 to 1523. Note the Reformation on the timeline below as a point of reference.

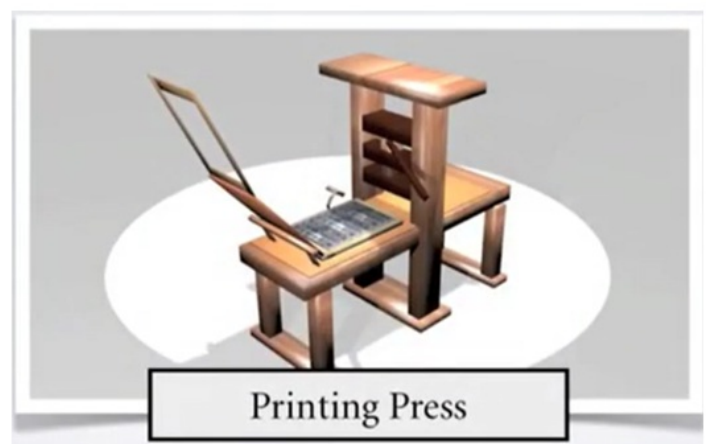


Albrecht Dürer originated from the city of Nuremberg in the Holy Roman Empire (shaded in purple), now the modern-day country of Germany.



2. Printmaking and the Influence of the Printing Press

Printmaking was strongly influenced by arguably the most important invention of the modern era: the printing press with movable type, invented by Johannes Gutenberg.



Although movable type had been invented by the Chinese during the Song dynasty centuries earlier, the

adaptation of wine and olive oil presses into printing presses using movable type was Gutenberg's contribution.

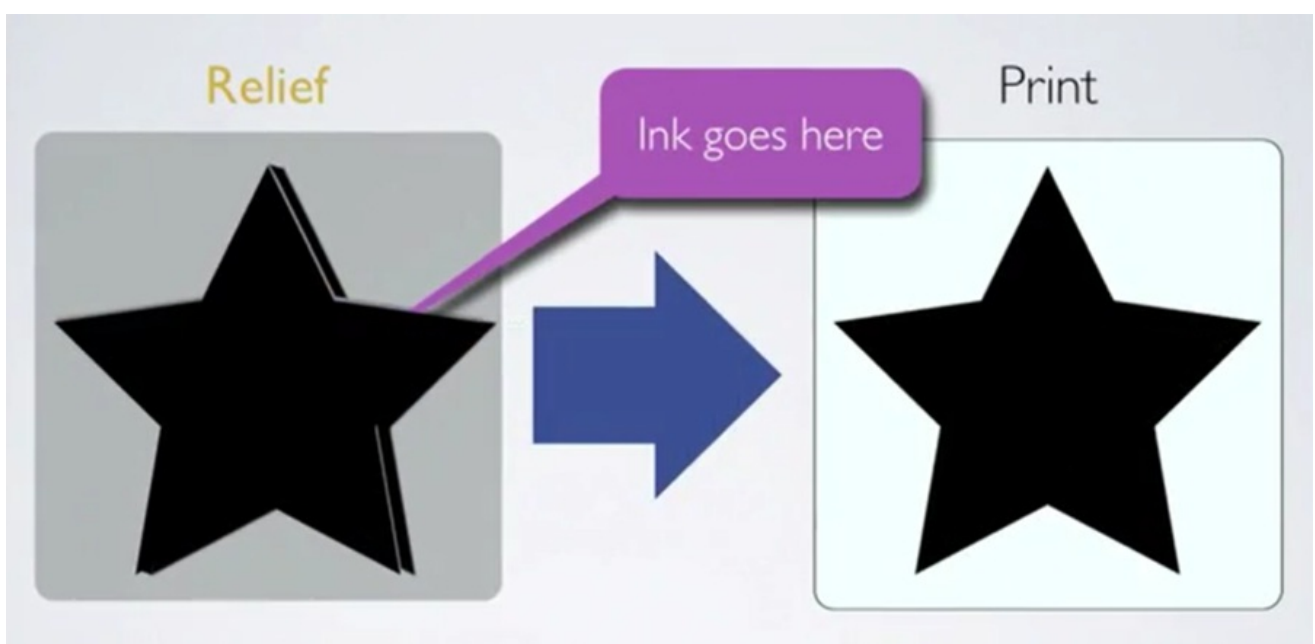


He eventually perfected the design of his invention, an invention that wouldn't have been possible without the development of oil-based inks and the availability of paper from China. This single invention was a catalyst in countless areas of human development, and was integral in the development of the Renaissance, as well as the spread of literacy and ideas throughout Europe and beyond.

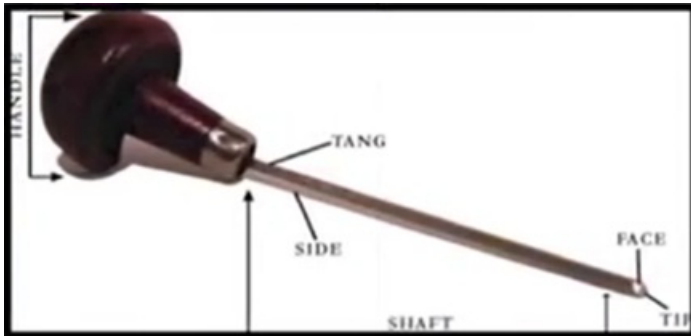


3. Printing Processes: Relief Printing and Intaglio Printing

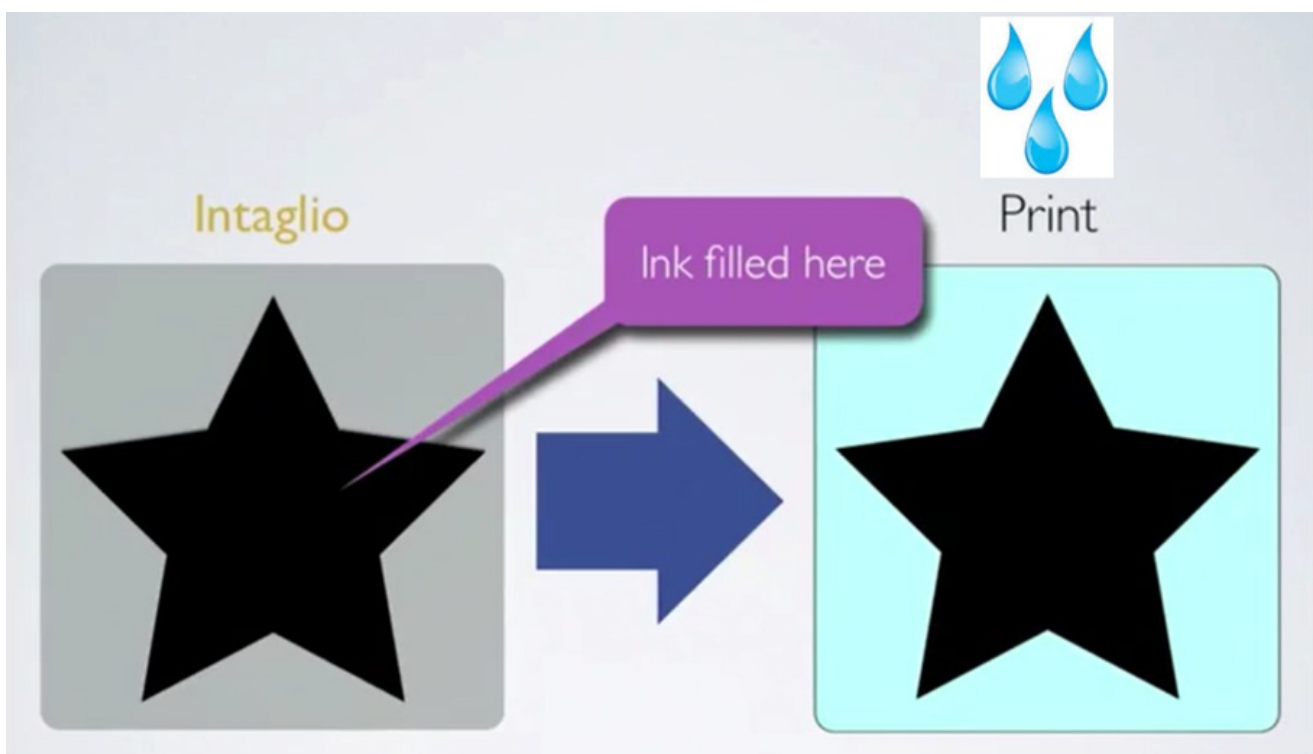
The processes for relief and intaglio printing are similar but have essentially one fundamental difference. In **relief printing**, such as block printing, a raised image is carved out of a block of something, usually wood. Ink is applied to the surface, and the block is then pressed onto a piece of paper, basically identical to the way in which a rubber stamp works.



In **intaglio printing**, which includes the processes of **engraving** and printing, an image is etched into a block of material, such as a zinc or copper plate, with a tool called the burin, which looks similar to an awl used in leatherwork, or an ice pick (see image below).



Ink is then placed on top and is poured into the recesses of the plate. Paper is moistened so that it is flexible enough to be pressed into all the little recesses, then is pressed onto the plate.



TERMS TO KNOW

Relief Printing

A technique used in printmaking where a print is made from the raised images of a surface; includes embossing and letterpress.

Intaglio Printing

A technique used in printmaking where an image is cut into the surface of a copper or zinc plate with a special tool called a burin.

Engraving

An important process in Renaissance printmaking that flourished with the invention of accessible paper and the printing press, where a design is cut onto a flat surface with a tool called a burin.

4. Comparing Relief and Intaglio Printing: Precursors of Albrecht Dürer

Albrecht Dürer, a master artist in both methods of printing, began his career under the tutelage of illustrator Michael Wolgemut in his hometown of Nuremberg. It's under Wolgemut's instruction that Dürer refined his skill in the areas of wood cutting. Dürer was also influenced, though, by the artist Martin Schongauer's work in etching and therefore became a master in both areas.

How do you tell the difference between the two types? The trick is to look at the areas of shadow on the prints. In **woodcut** prints such as this image of the "Tarvisium" page from *The Nuremberg Chronicle*, there are no areas with true halftones, or shades of gray, because of the thickness of the lines in relief printing. It looks simply black and white.



Tarvisium page by Michael Wolgemut

The Nuremberg Chronicle

1493

Woodcut illustrations

A higher level of detail is possible in etching and intaglio printing, in which true **halftones** created by the careful application of thin lines in **hatching** and **cross-hatching** are possible, resulting in the possibility of creating a much more realistic sense of form and depth.

This sense of realism and depth is clearly depicted in this image of “Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons” by Martin Schongauer, in which the hellish creatures are trying to tempt poor Anthony into committing sin. Schongauer, like Dürer, was an accomplished painter as well. Schongauer’s body of print work is considered to be the finest example of etchings before Dürer, etchings where the application of a painter’s skill and eye for detail is clearly evident.



Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons by Martin Schongauer

1491

Engraving



TERMS TO KNOW

Woodcut

A printmaking process where an image is carved onto the surface of a piece of wood removing parts of the wood. The carved raised part of the wood is covered with ink and pressed onto a surface such as a piece of paper or fabric, transferring the image.

Halftones

Gradations of tone (shades of grey) between black and white.

Hatching

The use of parallel straight lines, particularly in printmaking and drawing, to indicate shadow and depth.

Cross-Hatching

The use of lines that cross over, particularly in printmaking and drawing, to indicate shadow and depth.

5. Albrecht Dürer and His Work

Although known primarily for his work in printmaking, Albrecht Dürer was an extremely talented artist, as evident in this painting and self-portrait below.



Self-portrait by Albrecht Dürer

1500

Oil on wood panel



DID YOU KNOW

Dürer is regarded by many to be the greatest artist of the Northern Renaissance.

One of the most enticing aspects of printmaking was the ability to sell numerous prints. The work of art itself was the plate or block that the image was carved into; however, every printing made from the master carving was considered an original. Dürer took full advantage of this and made a very comfortable living selling multiple prints of his work.



DID YOU KNOW

When Dürer died in 1528, his estate was estimated to have been worth around one-and-a-half million dollars.



TRY IT

Look at the following four examples of prints by Dürer to compare and contrast the elements of relief and intaglio prints.

This first image is the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” It is a woodcut, or relief printing, from Dürer’s book on the apocalypse, which is a collection of fourteen woodcuts depicting scenes from the “Book of Revelation.” It was the first book published that was entirely produced by an artist.



Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Albrecht Dürer

1497-1498

Woodcut

Although quite detailed, notice the absence of halftones, or shades of gray—it’s either black or white. This is the consequence of using woodcuts. The resulting lines are thicker, and hold more ink, which in turn creates a darker print. Also notice the signature initials of Dürer located on the bottom of the print—the letter “D” set within a capital “A.”



The second image is this engraving of “Knight, Death, and the Devil,” in which you can see the effects that the finer details and resulting halftones have on the overall image. A sense of depth and form is much more clearly and realistically conveyed, for instance in the musculature of the horse and in the shadows of the foreground. It’s an impressive and masterful example.



Remember, every single line of this print is the result of the artist scraping away material meticulously on the plate of metal.



Knight, Death, and the Devil by Albrecht Dürer

1513

Engraving

This third image, of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, demonstrates the effectiveness of halftones in depicting the musculature and definition of the human body. The scene takes place just before the fall of man. Eve is holding an apple and is being coaxed by the serpent—symbolic of the devil—into taking a bite. It’s yet another impressive example of how refined the art of printmaking had become and how the finest examples

of prints could rival paintings in their ability to effectively depict depth and sense of form.



Adam and Eve by Albrecht Dürer

1504

Engraving

For comparison, take a look at this fourth and final image, an example of a woodcut, so that you can get a sense again of how halftones can strongly impact the overall look of an image. Although the sense of depth and roundness of form are convincing here, it's less realistic looking compared to the previous images of Adam and Eve and the Knight. If you look carefully, you can see why. The image is only black and white and without the subtle shades of gray that convey a sense of shadow and three-dimensionality. The image essentially, for lack of a better term, flattens.



The Last Supper by Albrecht Dürer

1523

Woodcut



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Albrecht Dürer and printmaking**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms, and explain the **influence of the printing press on printmaking**. You also learned about the two **processes of printing: relief printing and intaglio printing**. You learned about the **artists who influenced Albrecht Dürer**, who was a master in both methods of printing. Lastly, as you read about **Albrecht Dürer and his work**, you learned how to identify and distinguish the differences between examples of relief and intaglio printing.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cross Hatching

The use of lines that cross over, particularly in printmaking and drawing, to indicate shadow and depth.

Engraving

An important process in Renaissance printmaking that flourished with the invention of accessible paper and the printing press where a design is cut onto a flat surface with a tool called a burin.

Halftones

Gradations of tone (shades of grey) between black and white.

Hatching

The use of parallel straight lines, particularly in printmaking and drawing, to indicate shadow and depth.

Intaglio Printing

A technique used in printmaking where an image is cut into the surface of a copper or zinc plate with a special tool called a burin.

Relief Printing

A technique used in printmaking where a print is made from the raised images of a surface, includes embossing and letterpress.

Woodcut

A printmaking process where an image is carved onto the surface of a piece of wood removing parts of the wood. The carved raised part of the wood is covered with ink and pressed onto a surface transferring the image onto surfaces such as a piece of paper or fabric.