



A Practical Guide to Etching for Beginners

By
Sharon Brookes

© Backbury House Retreats



Contents

- 1. The Origins of Etching**
- 2. Rembrandt's Drypoint Etchings**
- 3. Tools and Equipment**
- 4. Examples of printed designs**
- 5. How to create a drypoint etching**
- 6. How to print an etching**
- 7. How to develop a design step-by-step**
- 8. Experimenting with backgrounds**
- 9. Further information**

The Origins of Etching

The Process Explained

Traditionally, the printmaking technique of etching is the process of using acid to etch into a metal surface, known as the plate. The plate is first coated with a waxy substance into which the artist scratches in a design. The acid attacks the areas which are unprotected by the wax and creates an incised design. The etched design is then coated with ink and printed.



When did the technique become popular?

The printmaking technique of etching was first attributed to the German artist **Daniel Hopfer** who is thought to have pioneered the process in the 15th century.

He produced some 145 etchings during his artistic career.

(left) Portrait of Kuntz von der Rosen
c.1515
Etching
Daniel Hopfer
The British Museum

The process soon became popular when artists discovered the versatility of the process.

The Swiss artist **Urs Graf** experimented with the technique in 1513 by creating prints from iron plates. His intricately drawn images demonstrate the effectiveness of the technique.



(right) Crippled Devil and Hermit
1512
Etching
Urs Graf
Steemit.com

Rembrandt's Drypoint Etchings

Whenever you think about which great artist mastered the technique of etching, you immediately think of Rembrandt. In fact, during the 1600's, Rembrandt created around 300 etchings, including perfecting the **drypoint etching process**.



The drypoint etching process involves scribing an image directly into a plate rather than through a waxy soft ground. By etching directly into the plate, no acids are required. This makes the process more accessible for artists.

(left) Self-Portrait in a Cap, Wide-Eyed and Open-Mouthed.
1630
Etching and Drypoint on paper
51 x 46 mm

Rembrandt experimented with lots of different subjects in print. These included self-portraits, portraits, religious subjects and landscapes. His ability to use line and tone in order to capture his subjects in great detail and character is second to none.



(right) The Flight into Egypt: A Sketch
Ca. 1628
Etching on paper
79 x 51 mm

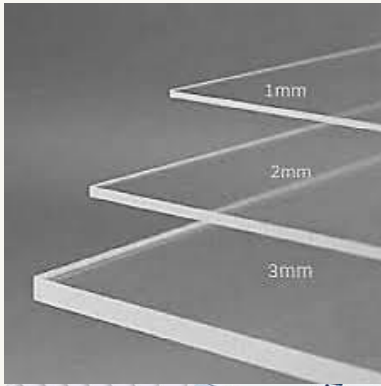


In this landscape etching (left), you can clearly see how Rembrandt has created atmospheric tones. This is achieved by adding more texture to the plate which enables more ink to be printed.

(left) The Three Trees
1643
Etching, engraving and drypoint on paper
213 x 279 mm

Tools and Equipment

As discussed previously, the drypoint etching process is an accessible technique which can be achieved with limited equipment.



Selecting a suitable etching plate

For the drypoint etching process you need an etching plate that can be scratched into. Suitable suggestions include:

- Perspex Sheets. These can be purchased in various sizes from DIY stores. They can be cut down to specific requirements too. Thickness of 1 or 2mm are recommended.
- Acetate sheets. These can be purchased in packs from stationery suppliers or easily purchased online. They are a more budget-friendly option.



Etching Needles

In order to etch your design into the plate, you will need an etching tool.

The traditional tool for drypoint etching is an etching needle. These can be purchased from printmaking suppliers or online.

However, if you would prefer a simpler alternative, a sharp compass makes a good alternative. Be careful to not select the blunt safety types.



Tools and Equipment Cont...



Paper

Prints can be completed on a range of different papers. In fact, experimenting with different types should be encouraged.

However, the paper needs to be strong enough to be able to be soaked in water. This is a necessary stage within the etching process.



Printing Ink

Traditionally, etching ink is oil-based. However, there are great modern alternatives including Cranfield's Caligo Safe Wash. This ink has all of the valuable qualities of oil-based etching ink. In addition, it has the benefits of being able to be washed off with just soap and water.

It can be purchased in many colours and is also blendable.



Pressing

Traditionally, a printing press is used to complete prints. However, these can be expensive. Fortunately, there are now budget options available on the market, like the one illustrated here.

Alternatively, there are other simpler methods available. These include:

- Using a hard inking roller
- Burnishing with the back of a spoon

Examples of Printed Designs



The beauty of the etching process is that drawings can be transformed by print to become vibrant and lively artworks.

In addition, once you have created your etched plate, you can experiment with lots of different print ideas.



The initial designs do not need to be complex. In fact, there should be emphasis on a restricted use of line and tone.

In the Sweetpea design (left), you can see that the initial drawing is simplified and the flowers are arranged in a balanced composition.

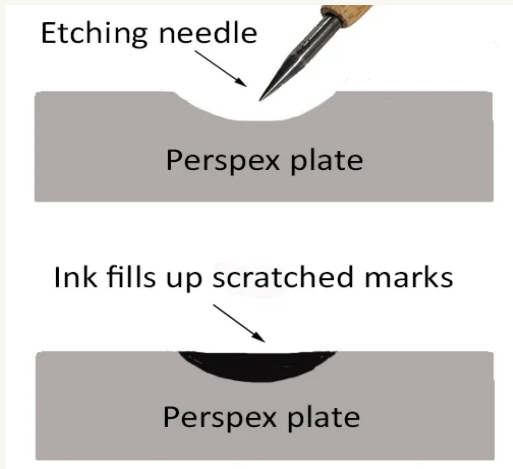


When creating a design, it is important to consider how the images will fill the page.

Ensure that there is plenty of space around the objects that you draw. This will avoid over cluttering the design.



How to create a drypoint etching



Etching involves inscribing a design in to a solid surface (the plate). The indented marks can then be filled with ink and printed.

In the drypoint etching process, an etching needle is used to scratch directly into a plastic sheet, such as Perspex.

In order to create the etching, place the clear Perspex (or other plastic) over your design.

Then, start to scratch out the design following the lines of your drawing which you will see through the clear plastic.

Deeper thicker lines will hold more ink and will therefore print darker. Finer softer scratches will conversely create delicate tonal areas.

Next, apply the printing ink by using a muslin cloth.

Dip the cloth in to the ink and then apply to the plastic plate using a swirling motion. This will drive the ink into all of the directional marks. Applying a firm pressure will ensure that the ink fills all of the inscribed areas evenly.

Lastly, using a flat piece of cloth or paper, wipe off the excess ink from the areas that you don't want to print.



How to print an etching



Etchings have finer marks than other printmaking techniques, so it is necessary to pre-soak your papers prior to printing.

By soaking the paper (for approximately 5 minutes), the fibres in the paper will be more flexible and will ease into the etched designs more easily.

The paper should be patted dry before printing.



Next, if using a printing press, place your etching plate ink side up on to the press bed.

Then, lay your damp paper (with no surface water) over the top.

Now, cover the paper and printing plate with a printing blanket and send it through the press with a firm pressure.



Alternatively, if you don't have a printing press, you can use a metal spoon.

Push down firmly and use a circular motion to transfer the ink on to the paper underneath.

How to develop a design step-by-step



Inspiration can come from a variety of sources. In this example, an image of a hare in a field sparked an idea.

Initially, a drawing was completed (right) of a hare surrounded by foliage. At this stage, it is just about playing with free-flowing ideas rather than accuracy.



Next, it is important to review your work. Ask yourself: what do I like? and what could I develop further?



In this design (left), the background foliage was simplified. A further idea of adding a moon was also introduced.

This idea appeared to have more scope, so a more accurate background design was then developed (right).



Initially, a one colour print was created of the final design on textured Japanese Mulberry paper (left).

After a review, it was decided to add a splash of colour in the background (right). This added more vibrancy and interest to the print.



Although the design has reached a successful conclusion, there is also more scope to explore additional background ideas too.

This is the joy of etching!

Experimenting with Backgrounds



You may wish to experiment with different types of background for your prints.

Background ideas could include: marbled papers, watercolour washes, splashed effects etc.

You could also experiment with layers of transparent papers.



In this example (left), Colourcraft Brusho powders have been sprinkled on to wet paper to create a lively background for the print.

In addition, two layers of paper have been used. The background paper, where Brusho colours have been applied, is Fabriano Printmaking Paper.

The second layer, where the etching print has been applied is Japanese Mulberry Paper. The Japanese paper creates flecked textures to enhance the print.

Further Information



I hope that you have enjoyed reading about the etching process in this informative guide.

If you would like to view more of my etching designs, then please visit my website's [online shop](#).

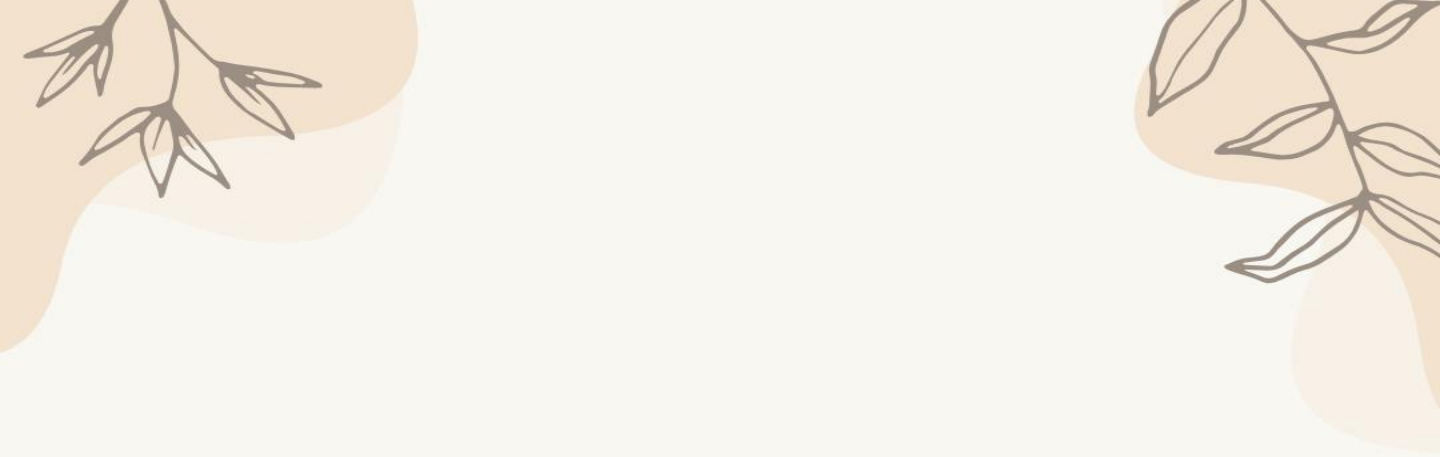
In addition, if you are inspired to have a go at etching, but would like a little more direction, then please come and join me for one of my printmaking courses.

All current courses are listed on my [Events & Bookings](#) page.

Happy printmaking!

Sharon

Sharon Brookes, Proprietor and Lead Tutor
Backbury House Retreats



Backbury House Retreats offers
award-winning art courses
delivered from professional art
studios located in paradisaal
countryside.

www.bhretreats.co.uk

Backbury House Retreats
Hereford HR1 4NA

sbrookes@bhretreats.co.uk

