

The Imp of the Reverse

BRUCE CHANDLER

PART of what I find exciting about a wood engraving or woodcut is the pulling of the first print. Not only is it the first time I am able to see on paper what I have been cutting into the wood, but it is completely in reverse. And now I must reenter and familiarize myself once again with the real dynamic of the image.

A wood engraving begins with a sketch that is either transferred or drawn directly onto the surface of a highly polished piece of end-grain boxwood. In earlier times, when large wood engravings were produced commercially for magazines and newspapers, the image was transferred by hand or photomechanically to a wood-block made up of mortised sections. The sections were then unfastened, and each was given to a different professional engraver who would, usually unerringly, engrave the design on that surface. The sections were gathered and were joined together, proofed, and printed. Today, most artists who use the medium create their own images and cut the blocks themselves.

After the drawing is transferred, the cutting and engraving begins. The block is usually placed on a sand-filled leather pad or 'mound' for mobility in executing curved lines (by spinning the block). The engraver will be looking at his work through magnifiers—either a mounted glass, or jeweller's visor which I prefer.

The usual method of wood engraving is similar to that of a woodcut, in that the wood is cut away from the line that will be

BRUCE CHANDLER is a printmaker, printer, and proprietor of
The Heron Press in Boston.

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positively printed and read. Dürer's woodcuts are excellent examples. Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) in England was the pioneer of white-line wood engraving; Alexander Anderson, who admired Bewick's little prints, introduced the technique in the United States. Timothy Cole was an American virtuoso of the technique. Though it is not used as much today, artists including Thomas Nason and Asa Cheffetz, and later, George Lockwood, have been practitioners as recently as the 1960s. The artist cuts away the wood to make a positive white mark, almost like drawing with white chalk on a blackboard. The beauty of this method can be imagined, with all gradations from pure white to solid black being achieved.

As the engraver works his tools, which have names like lozenge, elliptical tint tool, scorper, and spitsticker, all of them creating their own mark and performing a specific function, he rubs talcum powder into the engraved lines, creating a contrast between the drawn image and the wood, and enabling him to see his work clearly. Finally the point is reached at which, in order to continue the cutting and forming of the image, a reversed image must be seen. A print must be pulled. The surface of the block is rolled up with ink, a piece of soft proofing paper selected, and a proof is made, either by placing the paper over the inked block and carefully burnishing the paper surface with a wooden spoon or tool-handle, or placing the inked block onto the bed of a printing press and pulling a proof mechanically.

And there it is, the newborn image: never quite as originally envisioned, but filled with new expectation and surprise. And now the work begins again.

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