



E

...is for *Etching*.

For most of us of a certain vintage, the Etch-a-Sketch toy was perhaps our first encounter with this term.



*Not what we're referring to in this article!*

Etching is, in fact, a printmaking technique that dates back hundreds of years, with some of the earliest examples of etching being found on European suits of armour. Printmaking, as you may know, is an artistic technique premised on the transfer of images from one surface to another (typically, fabric or paper). More traditional techniques include etching, as well as woodcut, engraving, and lithography.

We spent a morning with Dahlia Osman, Senior Education and Outreach Officer at STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore to find out more about etching as a technique. Dahlia walked us through a simple introduction on how etchings are made and gave us a lovely tour into STPI's backrooms.



Dahlia, who is herself an accomplished printmaker

First, Dahlia explained, one needs a metal plate— typically, one made of copper. The plate is then covered with a kind of acid-resistant varnish or wax (also referred to as 'ground'). The artist scratches through the varnish or wax layer with an etching needle to expose certain parts of the metal below, in his or her desired design. Essentially, a picture is 'drawn' with the etching needle, through the acid-resistant layer. Dahlia shared that as the scratching of a coated plate with an etching needle is similar to the act of drawing, artists trained in painting and drawing sometimes look to etching as a first port of call when attempting to dabble in printmaking.



An etching needle and copper plate

Once this is done, the plate is dipped in acid, which 'bites' or eats away at the exposed parts of the metal, thus creating grooves in the metal plate. Once the plate has been submerged for a sufficiently long period of time, the 'ground' is removed gently, so as not to scratch the plate.



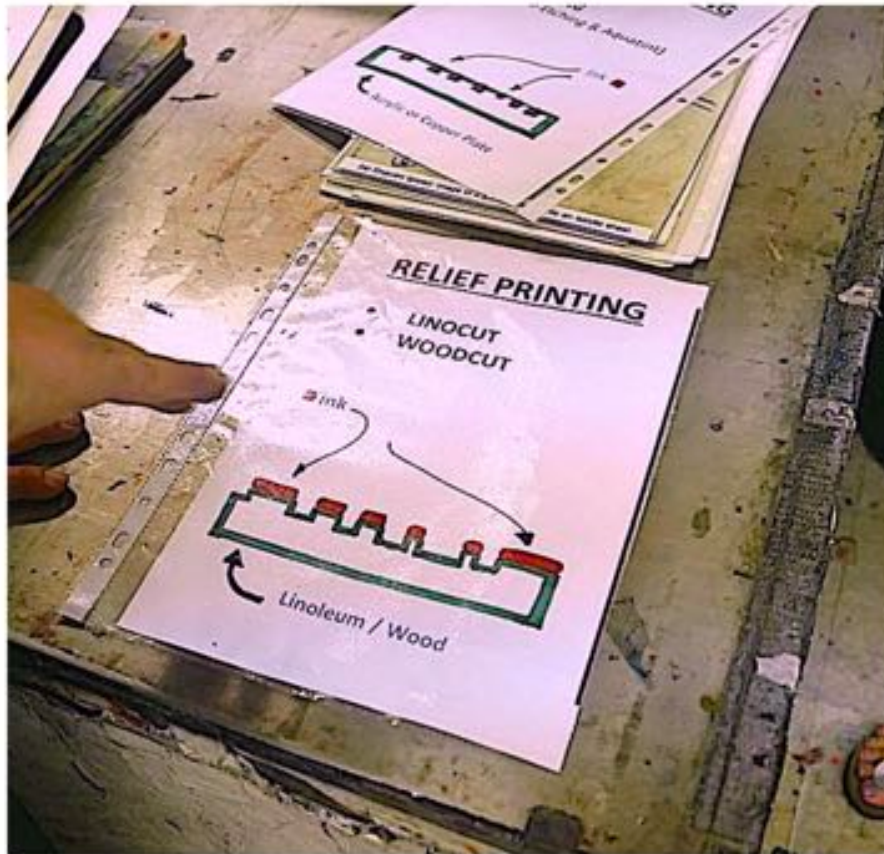


The Acid Room at STPI where the 'biting' takes place



Dahlia shows us an example of what an etched plate might look like (left), as compared with the final print produced (right)

Etching at its most basic form is a kind of 'intaglio' printing. Intaglio involves impressions being made from ink located beneath the surface of the printing plate. This is different for example from relief printing, such as woodcut printing, where ink is placed onto raised surfaces. Think of how you were made in school art classes to create stamps out of cut potatoes – that's a form of relief printing!



Dahlia's helpful explanatory sheet on relief printing. With intaglio techniques like etching, the ink sits inside the grooves instead of on the raised surfaces.

Once the plate is ready, it will need to be inked. Ink is rubbed all over the plate and essentially pushed into the grooves 'bitten out' by the acid in the earlier step. This is a very physical and tiring process as considerable pressure is required to ensure that the ink goes into every groove, no matter how fine it is. Once this is done, the plate will have to be aggressively wiped clean over and over again. The wiping action serves to further push the ink into the grooves.



Dahlia cleans away excess ink

Next, a moistened piece of paper and fabric are placed over the inked plate, which is then pushed through an etching press. The wet paper is pressed against the ink-filled grooves of the plate and what emerges is a printed image, on a piece of paper.





Dahlia readies the press..



...in goes the plate..



...and out comes the finished product!

It's easy enough to think of etching in terms of straight lines being printed onto paper, but etching can also be used to create tones of colour, in the manner of painting, commonly through the 'aquatint' technique.



Dahlia, pictured with one her own works displaying some lovely black and grey tones- can you believe this is a print and not a painting?

Dahlia, who describes herself as being a "very tonal, chromatic person," was personally drawn to etching as a medium because of its ability to achieve a sense of depth with colour tones.

Critics sometimes dismiss printmaking as a lesser form of art that should attract lower pricing because prints can be issued in editions, unlike say paintings which are typically sold as one-off, unique pieces. Dahlia's view, however, is that the making of editions requires great skill too and that we should not make judgments about skill based on whether a person is able to produce one unique piece or many versions of the same piece.

Put another way, she exhorts, "if I print just one thing, it's unique too, and it's an added skill to be able to print more identical versions. People take pride in having that skill."

Indeed, where such prints feature different colours, different coloured inks may be applied to a single plate — but this technique requires great dexterity, to ensure that the colours do not bleed into one another. Another technique involves preparing a fresh plate for each individual colour and printing multiple times on the same piece of paper. As print editions are required to be identical, a mind-boggling amount of skill goes into making sure that the plates are properly aligned at all times. See [here](#) for an example of how this works.

Another commonly – held notion is that etchings which feature colour tones (as opposed to just straight lines) are harder to execute and therefore more valuable. Dahlia mulls over this carefully when we ask her what she thinks.

She starts out with the broad explanation that a "good challenging image" is one which has both tones and lines, "because if it's an image with just lines, it's easier to ink, like a line drawing."

She then digs deeper, leaving us with these contemplative thoughts:

*“(Then again) that’s not quite right, a line drawing can be a boring collection of lines, or a line drawing can be so beautiful surpassing the most complicated and beautiful tonal drawing.*

*Tones are usually supposed to show the ‘three-dimensional’ quality of an object, but what if your one line could show the volume of a figure? Your line could be so loaded that you are able to create form with just one drag of line.”*

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*If this has piqued your interest in printmaking techniques, check out STPI’s public programming [here](#), where a full listing of events and guided tours can be found.*

*(All images were taken with the permission of STPI)*