Printmaking Techniques

Used by artists in the Abe Bailey Collection

Introduction

The prints in the Abe Bailey Collection complement and augment the paintings and drawings in the rest of the Collection. The subject matter is predominantly, as one would expect, of sporting subjects but there is also an array of important British historical figures, mainly military, and anecdotal or narrative prints. All of the prints are intaglio prints. Surprisingly, there are no lithographs nor relief prints and, therefore, no examples of the rich tradition of the Victorian woodblock illustrators and the wood engravings of Thomas Bewick and others.

By its very nature, the collection is a conservative one and there are no prints by contemporary printmakers like Whistler or Legros and none by artists like Muirhead Bone and David Young Cameron, so prominent in the “etching revival” which swept Edwardian Britain, Europe and The United States. Nevertheless, the prints in the collection are of admirable quality with the sporting prints being world class and it is, perhaps, with the sporting genre where Sir Abe Bailey real passion lay. The collection, therefore, reflects the taste and aspirations of an establishment figure such as Sir Abe Bailey, a magnanimous and cultured patron of the arts whose bequest has endowed South Africa with a rich and wonderful legacy.

The printmaking techniques

Intaglio prints

Incisions or lines are made into a metal plate in various ways. The various ways these are made distinguish the different types of
intaglio prints. But, the method of printing is the same for all intaglio prints. Ink is applied to the lines or incisions and the surface of the plate is wiped clean. All the ink lies beneath the surface. Paper is placed over the plate and it is passed through an intaglio press which forces the paper into the lines and incisions under great pressure. This pressure results in the characteristic ‘plate-mark’ of intaglio prints, the indentation in the paper around the edges of the plate. This pressure also results in the fact that the printed lines stand out in relief in intaglio prints.

Intaglio prints can be divided into two broad categories:

engraving, in which lines and incisions are made with special tools, and etching, where lines and incisions are bitten by acid.

The choice of paper is important in creating a fine print and the printer is often the unsung hero in the process. Most of the prints in the Bailey Collection are reproductive prints where the design is copied after an original painting or drawing – note how often the titles of the prints are followed by after...Reproductive printmaking was primarily a commercial undertaking and it was essential that the printer be able to coax as many good prints as possible out of a plate. Because an intaglio print undergoes such pressure in the press, the plate becomes worn after a number of prints have been taken - and reproductive prints can number in the thousands- so these plates were then ‘refreshed’, touched up and re-done, in order to print as many as possible. Reproductive printmaking became a huge industry in the 19th century, an industry in which hundreds of skilled engravers and printers were employed. It was an industry which ended dramatically with the perfection of photo-mechanical methods of reproduction towards the end of the 19th century.
Engraving

This is historically the earliest intaglio technique first used around about 1430. A tool known as a burin or graver is used to cut clean v-shaped grooves into the metal plate. It requires great skill and is a time-consuming process. It was for long periods the favoured technique of reproductive printmakers, eventually developing into that most artificial of styles, known as the dot-and-lozenge style. It was a style, however, that suited the demands of the reproductive engraver and could even be used by more than one engraver working on the same print without any apparent difference.

William Woollett (1735-85)

The rural cott (After Geo. Smith)

Engraving

443x551 mm

Acc. No. 1564:1
Detail of *The rural cott*
William Woollett (1735-85)

_The merry villagers_ (After T. Jones)

Engraving

443x551 mm

Acc. No. 1564:4
Woollett has used a range of lines and flicks in these engravings, from the lightest of ruled lines in the sky to the dense lines of the foliage in the foreground, including the dot-and lozenge technique in certain areas.

**Steel engraving**

In about 1810 steel began to be used instead of copper plates. Steel is much harder than copper and this results in a harder and cleaner line which is capable of much detail. But, as steel was so hard to engrave many ‘steel engravings’ are, in fact, etchings. Whatever technique is used it results in the same ‘look’ as shown in the engravings below. In some cases, it is not absolutely certain that steel was used instead of copper, but the intention is to replicate the appearance of steel engravings. It should also be mentioned that during the 19th and early 20th centuries the term *engraving* was used as a generic term to refer to all intaglio prints and so etchings are often referred to as *engravings*.

Thomas Hellyer (fl. 1783-1824)

*Battle of the Nile* (After Whitcombe)
Engraving

515x762 mm

Acc. no 1773

Detail of *Battle of the Nile*
B. T. Pouncey (18th century)

*The Glorious First of June* (After Clevely)

Engraving

507x768 mm

Acc. no. 1772
Detail of *The Glorious First of June*

John Cousen (1804-80)

*Battle scene* (After Stanfield)

Engraving

134x258 mm
Mezzotint

Mezzotint is a back-to-front process in that the artist works from dark to light. The copper plate is roughened with a spiked tool called a rocker resulting in a network of fine lines. If the plate is inked and printed at this stage it will print as a rich black. The roughening of the plate is a laborious process as the plate has to be of even roughness all over. The design is obtained by the artist smoothing or burnishing selectively certain areas. The smoother the surface the less ink it will hold and, consequently, those areas will print lightly. The technique can very broadly be compared to using an eraser to obtain highlights in a charcoal drawing. The technique is well suited for reproducing the tonalities of 18th and 19th century paintings. It was widely used by British engravers, so much so that it became known as the English manner.
Edward Bell (fl. 1795-1810)

Viscount Nelson (After Sir William Beechey)

Mezzotint

638x434 mm

Acc. no. 1769
John Finlayson (c1730-76)

*The Earl of Buchan* (After Sir Joshua Reynolds)

Mezzotint

382x273

Acc. no. 1572
Detail of *The Earl of Buchan*

We are fortunate in having the original painting by Reynolds in the Bailey Collection and it is instructive to compare the two. One notes, for example, that the tonal gradations are far richer in the print and this points to the fact that there has been some paint loss and wear and tear in the painting. Again, it must be borne in mind that the artist had to draw the design in reverse on the plate. Reproductive engravers devised ingenious methods of facilitating the process of drawing a design so accurately in reverse.
Johann Gottfried Haid (1710-76)

*Mr Garrick in ‘The Farmer’s Return’* (After Zoffany)

Mezzotint

430x512 mm

Acc. no. 1579

Detail of *Mr Garrick in ‘The Farmer’s Return’*
Etching

This is the most popular and widely used intaglio technique. A metal plate is coated with a ground impervious to acid. The ground usually consists of a mixture containing wax. The artist draws through the ground exposing the bare metal. The plate is placed in acid which bites into the exposed metal. The plate is left in the acid for varying lengths of time- a short time results in a thin light line; a longer period results in a thicker darker line. The plate is finally cleaned and inked and printed in the usual intaglio way.

William Henry Boucher (1842-1906)

Old and crusted (After Sadler)

Etching

287x410mm

Acc. no. 1581
Detail of *Old and crusted*

The entire effect is the result of linear work, with a wide range of lines from the very lightest to very dark. Cross-hatching has been used in the dark shadowed areas. The final result is very similar to that of a pen-and-ink drawing.
Frank Paton (1856-1909)

*The good old days*

Etching

203x256 mm

Acc. no 1574:1

Detail of *The good old days*
Frank Paton

A merry Christmas

Etching

192x260 mm

Acc. no. 1574:2

Detail of A merry Christmas
**Soft ground etching**

In soft ground etching the normal ground is softened by the addition of tallow which prevents it from hardening. A piece of paper is laid on top of the plate and the artist draws on to the paper. Where the pencil presses into the ground, it adheres to the paper. Finally when the design is complete, the paper is peeled off with the ground adhering to it exposing the design on the metal. The plate is bitten in the usual way. The end result is a facsimile of the original pencil drawing on the paper. Soft ground etching was widely used by artists in the Bailey Collection because of the ability to reproduce pencil lines so accurately and most of the prints in the Bailey Collection described as ‘etchings’ are, technically, soft ground etchings.

Samuel Alken (1750-1825) and Thomas Rowlandson (156-1827)

*Snipe shooting* (After Morland)

Etching, aquatint, watercolour

455x570 mm

Acc. no. 1559
Soft ground etching has been used for the lines in this print.

Detail of *Snipe shooting*

Detail of *Snipe shooting*
Henry Alken Snr (1774-1850)

*Racing: saddling*

Etching, watercolour

144x219 mm

Acc. no. 1573:1

Detail of *Racing: saddling*
Henry Alken Snr

*Racing: training*

Etching, watercolour

145x220

Acc no. 1573:2

Detail of *Racing: training*
Henry Alken Snr. (1774-1850)

*Shooting: pointers*

Etching, watercolour

158x222 mm

Acc. No. 1575:5

Notice the two borders in this work where the watercolour washes have gone over the borders of the soft ground etching.
Aquatint and mezzotint are the two methods most often used by reproductive printmakers to achieve tonal effects. Aquatint produces an effect similar to a watercolour wash, hence its name. Minute particles of resin are fused onto the metal plate by gently heating the plate. These particles are impervious to acid but there are tiny areas around each particle of bare metal. Acid is able to bite into these areas resulting in tiny spots of depressions which provide a “tooth” for the ink when the surface of the plate is wiped clean. Different tonalities are obtained by allowing the acid to bite for short or long periods. This usually involves the painting of an acid resistant varnish over certain areas- or ‘stopping out’- which have been bitten to the required depth. This is technically difficult to do if the reproductive printmaker needs to replicate the effect of a brush stroke. In order to do so, a variation of the aquatint method known as ‘sugar-lift’ aquatint was commonly used. In this method the artist brushes his design on to a plate with a fluid in which sugar has been dissolved. The entire plate is covered with a varnish and immersed in water. The water is able to penetrate the varnish and as the sugar swells it lifts off the varnish in those areas where the original brush drawing was, exposing the bare metal. These areas are covered with an aquatint ground and bitten in the usual way with the remaining varnish protecting the rest of the plate.

Paul Sandby (c. 1725-1809) was responsible for the popularity of aquatint in Britain, and he also made much use of the sugar-lift technique. Aquatint is never used on its own by the artists in the Bailey Collection. It is always used in conjunction with another technique, more often than not with etching and, in particular, soft ground etching.
John Harris (c. 1795-1857)

*Steeple chase scenes: The starting field* (After H. Alken)

271x374mm

Acc. no. 1556:1

*Detail of Steeple chase scenes: The starting field*
John Harris

*Steeple chase scenes 2: Walle fence with a deep drop* (After H. Alken)

271x378mm

Acc. no. 1556:2
Detail of Steeple chase scenes 2: Walle fence with a deep drop

In these prints Harris combined soft ground etching and aquatint and hand-coloured the print. A distinction is always made between a ‘colour print’- where the colour is applied to the plate and then printed- and a ‘coloured print’- where the colour, usually watercolour, is applied to the print. It is relatively easy to distinguish between the two: in a colour print the colour always has a grain to it, whereas the colour in a hand-coloured print lacks any grain.

Stipple Engraving

This is a method of rendering tones. Dots and short lines are made with special spiked tools involving a mixture of engraving and etching. Although it is referred to as stipple engraving, etching is invariably employed and usually for most of the work. It is a technique closely allied to the crayon manner. The term crayon manner is usually used when the print is obviously intended to
replicate the effect of a crayon drawing. It was very popular in France in the 18th century stimulated by the demand for printed facsimiles of drawings. These drawings were mostly done in chalk on fairly rough paper and the *crayon manner* was devised to reproduce these drawings which it does most faithfully. Stipple engravings and crayon manner prints were often coloured, both by hand and in the printing process. They were particularly suitable for colouring on the plate. Colour was applied to the plate à la poupée, using dabbers, a short length of wood covered at the end with a cloth, resembling a doll. *Poupée* is French for either a doll or a dabber.

James Roberts (fl.1800)

*Lord Nelson*

Stipple engraving

130x115 mm

Acc. No. 1577
Detail of *Lord Nelson*

William Ward (1766-1826)

*Hesitation*

Stipple engraving

214x182 mm

Acc. No. 1570:1
Charles Wilkin (1750-1814)

Lady Charlotte Duncombe (After John Hoppner)

Crayon manner, watercolour

211x172 mm

Acc. No. 1570:3
Detail of Lady Charlotte Duncombe

This print could easily be described as either a *stipple engraving* or as an *etching in the crayon manner*. *Crayon manner* has been used here as it would appear that the replication of a crayon or chalk drawing was the main intention.
Bibliography


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