

## **Memories by M. C. Escher's oldest son, George Escher**

*Father's hands are the feature of him which I most vividly remember. Looking at their precise movements, neatly arranging tools, sharpening gouges and chisels with rhythmic motions, preparing the wood to a smooth, velvety finish, I could sense the pleasure that this activity gave him.*

*As I became older he explained carefully his preference for planks of parallel-grain pearwood, because of the challenge presented by the tendency to split if improperly cut. He hinted at a feeling of cowardice when he was forced to use end-grain pear or boxwood to create fine details.*

*How many hours he spent lovingly caressing the grainy surface of lithographic stones with a grease pencil, trying to approach ideal transitions from light to dark grey!*

*Printing a woodcut, if not repeated too often in a row, was also a pleasure. That ritual, seen over and over again during my life, kept its feeling of magic to the last. It was not only the visual aspect that held me entranced. The delicious strong smell of printing ink, the swishing, slapping sound of the putty-knife spreading ink on a glass plate, the loud crackle of the ink roller, the soft rubbing sound of the ivory spoon pressing the paper down on the wood; they all were essential preliminaries to a spectacular finale. Father would lay down his spoon, grasp carefully a corner of the paper, lift it a little to check if the black surface was uniform; then, after slowly peeling the sheet from the wood, he would triumphantly hold it up in the air for inspection: a sparkling crisp new print.*

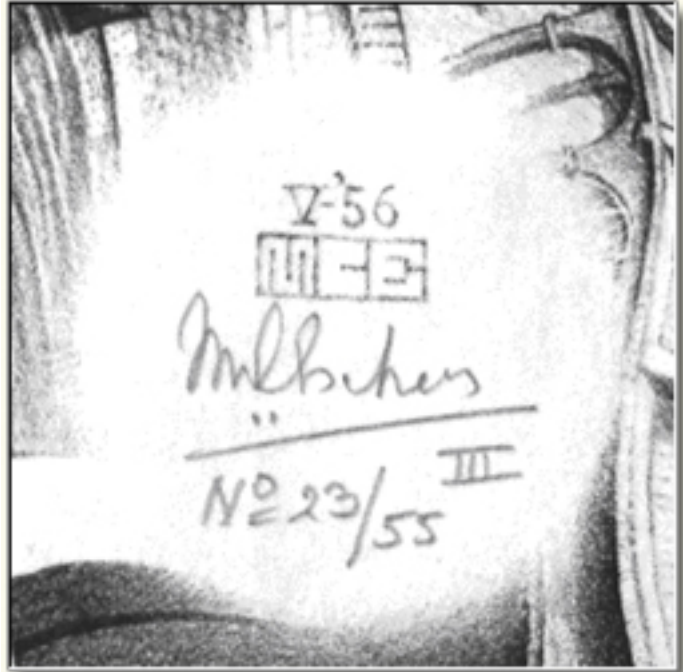
"Roman Memories" by George Escher was published in 1985  
"Mostra Maurits C. Escher," Istituto Olandese de Roma

## **M. C. Escher Editions by Jeffrey Price**

M. C. Escher wrote "I am a printmaker, heart and soul." His unique visions were not expressed in paintings or drawings-- these were only rough sketches to develop ideas which he would then realize using the traditional printmaking techniques of woodcut, mezzotint, and lithography.

It is critical to understand the difference between an original print and a reproduction if one is to understand why original Escher prints are so treasured. The concept of a reproduction is relatively easy to understand: it is a copy made by photographing an original artwork and printing its image into a book or as a poster reproduction. But what is an original? That requires a longer answer. The defining characteristic of an original print is that it must be printed directly from the artist's hand-made printing block or plate. There are many techniques in

printmaking, but in every case an original must be printed directly from the block or plate that the artists themselves create. If the artist makes the printing plate, be it by drawing an image on a lithographic stone, cutting into a woodblock, or working directly with a metal plate; and if that plate is then printed, the result is an original print which can have aesthetic and historic significance as well as real value among collectors and in the international art market. A reproduction, no matter how attractive it may be, has no such value.



To create a woodblock print Escher carved a block of wood with chisels or engraving tools with infinite patience and skills honed over a lifetime of printmaking. Once the block was carved, it could then be carefully inked and pressed against special paper, printing it similarly to the way that a child might print with a rubberstamp. To get the ink rich and even is an art in itself: too little ink and you will get unevenly printed areas, too much ink will fill in fine lines. Each example of every print required separate careful inking, printing, and drying. Escher would hand-print a small number of prints from his blocks and keep them in his studio for collectors and exhibitions. If an edition sold out (and if he felt so inclined) he might then print a few more examples of this woodcut. Escher continued to print some of his woodblocks until 1968 when his health deteriorated. This explains why woodcuts were not numbered editions, since Escher could not predict how many examples he would create in the future. Early prints that were very popular such as "Day and Night" and "Sky and Water I" would therefore have larger editions than a later more esoteric woodcut such as "Circle Limit II."

Lithography is a more mysterious technique, but there are similarities to woodblock printing. Escher drew his designs onto specially prepared blocks of German limestone using artist's lithographic pencils which are somewhat waxy. Printing these blocks required the assistance of a master lithographer who worked with Escher to first wet the stone evenly, then apply ink, and finally print it slowly under tremendous pressure of a large roller press. The finished lithographs were inspected by Escher, who destroyed any print not meeting his standards. Escher would decide on the number of prints to create with his lithographer, and it is my belief that since some defective prints were destroyed

the editions are often odd numbers (for instance an edition of 47 instead of fifty examples). All except ten of his lithographic stones were destroyed following printing, most of them resurfaced and 'erased' in order to create new prints in the lithographer's workshop. If a print was in great demand and the stone had not been destroyed, Escher would sometimes print additional small editions differentiated by a roman numeral following the edition number.

Escher also created exactly eight mezzotints, and this complex technique requires its own lengthy explanation. Suffice to say that Escher laboriously crafted a copper plate incised with his image and then inked this plate and printed it in his studio on a small roller press. The technique to create and print the plate was extraordinarily demanding and frequently tedious, and very few prints could be created before the copper plate degraded and could no longer be printed.

Escher's general method was to seldom sign smaller and medium-format woodcuts and to almost always sign larger major prints. Lithographs and mezzotints were usually, but not always, signed and numbered, whereas major woodcuts were generally signed but never numbered. Larger woodcut prints frequently bear Escher's notation 'eigen druk,' which roughly translates as 'printed by myself,' though the wording is infinitely more elegant in the original Dutch. Virtually all of Escher's prints have his MCE monogram and the date of the print's completion in Roman numerals within the image.

Every example of an original print is necessarily identical in size to every other print created from the same block, stone, or plate. These originals have frequently been photographed and reproduced in books and posters, just as painters' canvases have been photographically reproduced. As we have seen, in Escher's work only the woodblock prints, lithographs, and mezzotints created directly from the artist's blocks, stones, and plates are considered original prints and of value.

Originality has nothing to do with the size of an edition or whether each print is autographed by the artist. It is the conceptualizing, carving and printing of a graphic image that is the heart and soul of the creative process, and indeed there is a long history of printmakers creating their works without autographing them. This was certainly the case with the classic prints of Rembrandt and Durer, and often with modern printmakers such as Picasso as well. The practice of artists signing and numbering their editions was virtually unknown before the twentieth century. The creation of signed and numbered graphics sometimes had as much to do with marketing as it did with printmaking, and editions were often produced at the request of galleries and dealers to increase the sales of the work of their favorite artists. Many artists, including Chagall, Dali, and Picasso also signed and numbered photographic reproductions of their drawings and paintings. These reproductions are clearly not original prints, and Escher never signed reproductions of his work.

Escher held tenaciously to his roots as a traditional printmaker in technique and

temperament, though certainly not stylistically. He was the antithesis of a commercial artist and worked for most of his life without a wide audience or gallery network, so the marketing of his work was far less important than its creation. Escher preferred to work alone in his studio and generally sold his work directly to the scholars and collectors who discovered his unique creations. For Escher, it was the concept and creation of his images that was of the utmost importance whereas selling his prints could be a unwelcome distraction from his work as an artist. Escher kept close control over his printmaking materials and created comparatively few original prints during his lifetime, a mere fraction of the output of other famous twentieth-century printmakers such as Mirò, Picasso, and Chagall. Virtually all of Escher's printing blocks, lithograph stones, and mezzotint plates were canceled and made non-reprintable at the Hague Gemeentemuseum pursuant to Escher's instructions at the end of his life, so we know with certainty that all original Escher prints are from his small authentic vintage lifetime editions.

It was extraordinarily challenging for Escher to translate his visions into his prints. During his sixty years of printmaking he created only 448 different prints, each one a part of the interwoven fabric of images which stands as his life's work. Each and every original print that came from his exquisitely-crafted blocks and plates tells part of an extraordinary story that unfolds within the many layers of our consciousness. As Escher himself said, his story is "something that no other graphic artist on earth could tell you. It doesn't sound very modest, but what can I do? That is simply the way it is."

*Thank you to all the lovers and collectors of Escher's work that have made the past thirty years an extraordinarily rewarding art adventure with so many delightfully unexpected discoveries along the way. This is dedicated to Eva, Aaron, Taryn, and Blaire who have allowed me to make Escher a part of our family, even on vacations, and especially to Esta for making life fun and giving her constant love and support to all our projects large and small. - Jeffrey Price*

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