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William James Linton

Excerpt

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WOOD-ENGRAVING.

CHAPTER I.

OF ENGRAVING IN RELIEF.



TO ENGRAVE, says Johnson, is to *picture by incisions*. The root of the word, writes Chatto, is to be found in the Greek *γράφω* (*grapho*), I cut: upon which he observes:—"From the circumstances of laws, in the early ages of Grecian history, being cut or engraved on wood, the word *grapho* came to be used in the sense of 'I sanction or pass a law;' and when, in the progress of society and the improvement of Art, letters, instead of being cut on wood, were indented by means of a skewer-shaped instrument (a 'stylus') on wax spread on tablets of wood or ivory, or written by means of a pen or reed on papyrus or on parchment, the word *grapho*, which in its primitive meaning signified *to cut*, became expressive of writing generally. From *grapho* is derived the Latin

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scribo, I write ; and it is worthy of observation that *to scribe* (probably from *scribo*) signifies in our own language to cut numerals or other characters on timber with a tool called a *scribe* : the word thus passing, as it were, through a circle of various meanings, and in different languages, and at last returning to the original signification." [*Treatise on Wood-Engraving*, by Jackson and Chatto, 1838.]

Mr. Chatto's explanation will become clearer if, instead of cut *on* wood, &c., we say *cut in wood*, in wax, in timber : bearing in mind Johnson's definition—*to picture by incisions*,—to engrave (in French, *graver*) being really to grave, to cut a trench or a furrow, as with a spade or a plough, the cuts or incisions giving the lines of the writing or picture.

This is the ordinary process of engraving, no matter whether the engraving be in wood or metal : the subject (letters or pictorial lines) is seen cut *into* the material. The process and result are precisely the same, whether in a boy's name or initials cut on a tree, or on his school desk, or in the inscriptions (more mechanically exact) on tombstones, or (with more of art) in the monumental brasses of our churches and cathedrals. It is still the same process and corresponding result in the most delicate and elaborate engravings of steel or copper. The boy's desk-cutting, the lover's intertwined initials on a tree, the name of the disrespectful idler scratched into some wall or monument, —these all are, strictly speaking, engravings. We read them only in the hollows or incisions, soon perhaps to be effaced by the finger of Time wearing down the surface. So the names on tombstones become undecipherable ; and "Sacred to the memory" no longer lets us know of whom.

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To preserve the name and effigy, as well as more clearly to expose them, in the costlier brass, the lines were filled in with black, in which may have originated the idea of prints,—the method of printing from the incised lines of a copper or steel plate being, as in the brass monument, to fill in the lines with black, not hard (as when merely to show the subject), but of soft ink, which (the surface first cleaned) by pressure could be transferred to paper, and the impressions multiplied. Whether *engravings* (using the word in its present more confined meaning of “*prints*”) were so suggested, or not, what has been said may suffice to explain the use and method of incised lines, and how the same are available for prints.

In all this is no explanation of ENGRAVING IN RELIEF, which at first sight appears almost like a contradictory term, or a confusion of differing methods. By *engravings in relief*, let it be first said, we understand *engravings in which the surface is printed, instead of the incised lines or parts*. Such surface-printing is the necessity and the characteristic of wood-engraving, the very opposite of copper, in so far as the printing is concerned. Even though the process of printing copper-plates might have been taught by that filling-in of metal work for the mere sake of clearer perception of lines or figures, the first printing from surfaces would be suggested altogether independently of that, and so much earlier that there can be no possibility of our saying when. Anyone pressing a dirty finger on a white wall might perceive the fact of an impression, a print, if not too forcibly pressed, from only the surface of his finger, only the more prominent lines of the skin appearing. Between such perception and the invention and use of some rude stamp, the distance need not be great.

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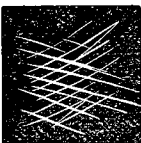
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WOOD-ENGRAVING.

Such rude stamps were the precursors of what is now known as ENGRAVING ON WOOD. And now the usual term *on wood* will be rightly applied: all of our early wood-engraving being of the character of this finger-mark. Though produced by cutting (every cut an incision), nevertheless it was not the cuts, the incisions, which were to represent the writing or the drawing, but the parts of the wood left on the original surface, that is to say, in relief. And for this reason: the earliest prints of the sort were designed by artists who, having learned that there was such a thing as printing—taking impressions (as from the finger) by simple direct pressure or by slower rubbing (which of the two processes they used does not concern us here), were desirous of having their designs multiplied without the necessity of repeated copying by hand. Their usual habit of drawing upon paper would be in black; it would be almost a matter of course to draw in the same way upon the plank of wood to be engraved. Simply to have cut their lines *into the wood* would have given their



drawing in white upon black. In metal, as has been before said, the ink can be rubbed into the lines, and so *they only* will appear black, the surface having been wiped clean without taking the ink from the incisions.

In wood this is not possible, simply because the surface of the wood absorbs the ink, and can not be wiped sufficiently clean. Artists, then, drawing in black on the white or light wood, wanted these black lines printed. We can hardly call it invention—the seeing that it was as easy to cut away all the wood, except the drawn lines, as to incise the lines themselves. The former process, indeed, would

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be easier for the unskilled hand of a mechanic, who would have the lines he would leave on the surface always before him, whereas in cutting out the drawn lines he would be continually losing his guides. It has been supposed that the early draughtsmen on wood engraved their own drawings. It may have been so at first. But it is not at all likely; it is barely possible (taking note of the vast quantity of engraving executed even in the very early days) that they could have had time to do it; the work also was wholly mechanical, so that any careful lad was able for the performance.

We will conclude then that the designer drew (or it may sometimes have been that an inferior artist drew for him), with pen or brush upon the wood, a few simple bold lines at first; and it was the business of the engraver carefully to cut away all the wood round these lines, so cleanly and exactly that the drawing, to the very shape of each line, should be preserved in its integrity, and that the white wood should be cut away—that is, lowered—sufficiently to prevent it from taking the ink with which the surface lines were to be blacked for the impression. An “engraving” so produced is, it will be seen, not an engraving of *incisions*, but an engraving of *the relief*. For the designer, this was an advantage. The pencil, or pen, or brush, being more easily used than the graver, he could more quickly make a drawing than he could engrave the same in metal; the material also was cheaper; and there was the further advantage, that the wood could be printed with type (the wood planed to type-height), a considerable economy in the production of book-work. This, however, is beside our immediate consideration, which is only to make clearly understood what “*engraving in relief*” for

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surface-printing is, as distinguished from what should alone be called *incised engraving*, in accordance with Dr. Johnson's definition.

From the above, without further explanation, it might appear that wood-engraving, being all surface-printed, is scarcely to be called an art, at best but a less or more skilful mechanical leaving and preservation on the surface of the lines drawn by an artist. But it has already been shown that lines, as in metal, *can be* incised or cut in the wood; and, of course, with as much artistic ability and value, only that such lines in surface-printing would appear white. There is accordingly in later wood-engraving a combination of black lines (left on the surface) and white lines (incised), distinguishing the best modern work altogether from the only mechanical rendering of early times. This will be fully explained and illustrated further on. Enough here, if the reader perfectly understands what is *engraving in relief* for surface-printing.

Of SURFACE-PRINTING it is well remarked by Mr. Chatto that impressions from wood-engravings "are obtained by the *on*-pression of the paper against the prominent lines (the higher lines left on the surface), while impressions from copper-plates are obtained by the *in*-pression of the paper into the hollowed (incised) ones." In consequence of this difference in the process, the ink-lines communicated to the paper from a copper-plate appear prominent when viewed direct, while the lines impressed on the paper from a wood-engraving are indented in the front of the print and appear raised, embossed, on the back.

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CHAPTER II.

OF THE HISTORY OF WOOD-ENGRAVING.



OUR Manual of Wood Engraving may be not unacceptably prefaced with some brief account of the history of the art in its early days.

It must be utterly impossible even to conjecture when letters or characters were first cut into wood, or when they were first cut in relief for the purpose of stamping. Some blocks in relief seem to have been used for stamping bricks in old Babylon,—bricks baked or hardened in the sun having been indented with characters in their previous soft state. These bricks, about twelve inches square, can be seen in the British Museum. In the Museum also may be seen some ancient Egyptian stamps, brought from Thebes, with incised characters; and also a brass stamp of Roman time, engraved in relief, with the word LAR upon it, reversed as for printing. These specimens may be sufficient to prove antiquity. It has also been claimed that the Chinese employed the



art of wood-engraving for books so early as the reign of We-Wing, 1120 years before the Christian era; and engraving *in* metal (copper, brass, silver, and gold) was certainly practised from a very remote period. We find it mentioned in the Bible, Aholiab and Bezaleel ornamenting the dress of Aaron: "They made the plate of the holy crown of pure gold, and wrote upon it a writing, like *the engraving of a signet*,—Holiness to the Lord." (*Exodus* xxxix. 30.)

Engraved metal plates have been found in the coffins of Egyptian mummies. In India, long before our era, records of the transfer of lands were engraved in copper. Homer and Hesiod seem to have known of engraving. In the Imperial Library at Vienna is an engraved plate, some Roman police ordinance of 200 years A.C.; and Dr. Willshire gives, from Fabretti, an inscription from a bronze plate used (under a law of Constantine) to be worn on the collars of slaves in lieu of their being branded, as had been the custom. Engraving on or in wood, for many purposes, was possibly as old as engraving in metal. We may pass from these antiques, to come down to what is better known.

We may also pass lightly over the incredible story of the Two Cunii, given by Papillon, a French wood-engraver and writer on engraving of the eighteenth century. In his *Historical and Practical Treatise on Engraving in Wood*, 1766, he relates that he had once seen a book (size nine inches by six) containing "The Chivalrous Deeds, in figures, of the great and magnanimous Macedonian King, the courageous and valiant Alexander," which book "by us Alexander Alberic Cunio, knight, and Isabella Cunio, twin brother and sister," was "first reduced, imagined, and attempted to be executed in relief with a little knife

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on blocks of wood joined and smoothed by this learned and beloved sister, continued and finished together at Ravenna, after eight pictures of our designing, painted six times the size here represented ; cut, explained in verse, and thus marked (printed) on paper to multiply their number, and to enable us to present them, as a token of friendship and affection, to our relatives and friends. This was done and finished, the age of each being only sixteen years." The date of this precious performance was fixed between 1285 and 1287 ; but the only authority for its existence is Papillon's account, professed to be written by him at the time of his seeing it ; his memorandum, however, was lost for thirty-five years.

It is certain, nevertheless, though Papillon's story (perhaps believed by him, the invention of a man not always in his right mind) affords no support to the position, that wood-engraving was used for taking impressions on paper or parchment, ink being applied to the surface lines, as early as the Cunii date: Chatto says—"in attesting documents in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries." Toward the end of the fourteenth and about the beginning of the fifteenth century, he thinks it was employed for the outlines (before colouring by hand or stenciling) of cards, which, first brought from the East into Italy, somewhere about 1350, had in the course of a few years come into common use and formed a considerable branch of industry in France and Germany. The term *Form-schneider* (figure-cutter), the German wood-engraver proper of the present day, then first used to distinguish the engraver of figures or superior subjects from the mere engraver and colourer of cards, does not, however, occur with any certainty until 1449, when it is found in the town books of Nuremberg.

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By then the *Form-schneiders* had become a numerous body ; and, though thus distinguished from the *Brief-malers*, or card-colourers, we find them long after occasionally employed on similar subjects (the *Brief-malers* sometimes



A Form-schneider at work.

From Jost Ammon's "ARTS AND TRADES," 1564.

engraving figures) and forming together one single guild or fellowship. [*Treatise* by Chatto.]

Our business here is with the *Form-schneiders*. Their earliest, and, for a long while, their chief work seems to have been the production of what may be called pictorial