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978-1-108-00915-7 - Treatise on Wood Engraving, Historical and Practical  
John Jackson and William Andrew Chatto

Excerpt

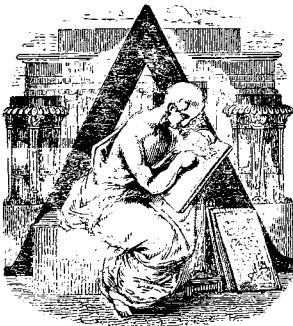
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ON  
WOOD ENGRAVING.

CHAPTER I.

ANTIQUITY OF ENGRAVING.

ENGRAVING—the word explained.—The Art defined.—Distinction between Engraving on Copper and on Wood.—Early practice of the Art of impressing characters by means of Stamps instanced in Babylonian Bricks; Fragments of Egyptian and Etruscan Earthenware; Roman Lamps, Tiles, and Amphoræ.—The Cauterium or Brand.—Principle of Stencilling known to the Romans.—Royal Signatures thus affixed.—Practice of Stamping Monograms on Documents in the Middle Ages.—Notarial Stamps.—Merchants'-Marks.—Coins, Seals, and Sepulchral Brasses.—Examination of Mr. Ottley's Opinions concerning the Origin of the Art of Wood Engraving in Europe, and its early practice by two wonderful children, the Cunio.



S few persons know, even amongst those who profess to be admirers of the art of Wood Engraving, by what means its effects, as seen in books and single impressions, are produced, and as a yet smaller number understand in what manner it specifically differs in its procedure from the art of engraving on copper or steel, it appears necessary, before entering into any historic detail

of its progress, to premise a few observations explanatory of the word ENGRAVING in its general acceptance, and more particularly descriptive of that branch of the art which several persons

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affect to call Xylography; but which is as clearly expressed, and much more generally understood, by the term WOOD ENGRAVING.

The primary meaning of the verb “to engrave” is defined by Dr. Johnson, “to picture by incisions in any matter;” and he derives it from the French “*engraver*.” The great lexicographer is not, however, quite correct in his derivation; for the French do not use the verb “engraver” in the sense of “to engrave,” but to signify a ship or a boat being embedded in sand or mud so that she cannot float. The French synonym of the English verb “to engrave,” is “graver;” and its root is to be found in the Greek *γραφο*, (*grapho*, I cut,) which, with its compound *επιγραφο*, according to Martorelli, as cited by Von Murr,\* is always used by Homer to express cutting, incision, or wounding; but never to express writing by the superficial tracing of characters with a reed or pen. From the circumstance of laws, in the early ages of Grecian history, being cut or engraved on wood, the word *γραφο* came to be used in the sense of, “I sanction, or I 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 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 *γραφο*, which in its primitive meaning signified “to cut,” became expressive of writing generally.

From *γραφο* is derived the Latin *scribo*,† “I write;” and it is worthy of observation, that “to *scribe*,”—most 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 its original signification.

Under the general term SCULPTURE—the root of which is to be found in the Latin verb *sculpo*, “I cut”—have been classed copper-plate engraving, wood engraving, gem engraving, and carving,

\* C. G. Von Murr, in his *Journal zur Kunstgeschichte*, 2 Theil, S. 253, referring to Martorelli, *De Regia Theca Calamaria*.

† If this etymology be correct, the English *Scrivener* and French *Greffier* may be related by descent as well as professionally; both words being thus referable to the same origin, the Greek *γραφο*. The modern *Writer* in the Scottish courts of law performs the duties both of *Scrivener* and *Greffier*, with whose name his own is synonymous.

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as well as the art of the statuary or figure-cutter in marble, to which art the word *sculpture* is now more strictly applied, each of those arts requiring in its process the act of *cutting* of one kind or other. In the German language, which seldom borrows its terms of art from other languages, the various modes of cutting in sculpture, in copper-plate engraving, and in engraving on wood, are indicated in the name expressive of the operator or artist. The sculptor is named a *bildhauer*, from *bild*, a statue, and *hauen*, to hew, indicating the operation of cutting with a mallet and chisel; the copper-plate engraver is called a *kupfer-stecher*, from *kupfer*, copper, and *stechen*, to cut with the point; and the wood engraver is a *holzschneider*, from *holz*, wood, and *schneiden*, to cut with the edge.

It is to be observed, that though both the copper-plate engraver and the wood engraver may be said to *cut* in a certain sense, as well as the sculptor and the carver, they have to execute their work *reversed*,—that is, contrary to the manner in which impressions from their plates or blocks are seen; and that in copying a painting or a drawing, it requires to be reversely transferred,—a disadvantage under which the sculptor and the carver do not labour, as they copy their models or subjects *direct*.

ENGRAVING, as the word is at the present time popularly used, and considered in its relation to the pictorial art, may be defined to be—“The art of representing objects on metallic substances, or on wood, expressed by lines and points produced by means of corrosion, incision, or excision, for the purpose of their being impressed on paper by means of ink or other colouring matter.”

The impressions obtained from engraved *plates* of metal or from *blocks* of wood are commonly called engravings, and sometimes prints. Formerly the word *cuts*\* was applied indiscriminately to impressions, either from metal or wood; but at present it is more strictly confined to the productions of the wood engraver. Impressions from copper-plates only are properly called *plates*; though it is not unusual for persons who profess to review productions of art, to speak of a book containing, perhaps, a number of indifferent woodcuts, as “a work embellished with a profu-

\* Towards the close of the seventeenth century we find books “adorned with *sculptures* by a curious hand;” about 1730 we find them “ornamented with *cuts*;” at present they are “illustrated with *engravings*.”

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sion of the *most charming plates* on wood;" thus affording to every one who is in the least acquainted with the art at once a specimen of their taste and their knowledge.

Independent of the difference of the material on which copper-plate engraving and wood engraving are executed, the grand distinction between the two arts is, that the engraver on copper corrodes by means of aqua-fortis, or cuts out with the burin or dry-point, the lines, stipplings, and hatchings from which his impression is to be produced; while, on the contrary, the wood engraver effects his purpose by cutting away those parts which are to appear white or colourless, thus leaving the lines which produce the impression prominent.

In printing from a copper or steel plate, which is previously warmed by being placed above a charcoal fire, the ink or colouring matter is rubbed into the lines or incisions by means of a kind of ball formed of woollen cloth; and when the lines are thus sufficiently charged with ink, the surface of the plate is first wiped with a piece of rag, and is then further cleaned and smoothed by the fleshy part of the palm of the hand, slightly touched with whitening, being once or twice passed rather quickly and lightly over it. The plate thus prepared is covered with the paper intended to receive the engraving, and is subjected to the action of the rolling or copper-plate printer's press; and the impression is obtained by the paper being pressed *into* the inked incisions.

As the lines of an engraved block of wood are prominent or in relief, while those of a copper-plate are, as has been previously explained, *intagliate* or hollowed, the mode of taking an impression from the former is, so far as relates to the process of inking, precisely the reverse of that which has just been described. The usual mode of taking impressions from an engraved block of wood is by means of the printing-press, either from the block separately, or wedged up in a *chase* with types. The block is inked by being beat with the pressman's balls or roller, in the same manner as type; and the paper being turned over upon it from the *tympan*, it is then run in under the *platten*; which being acted on by the lever, presses the paper *on to* the raised lines of the block, and thus produces the impression. Impressions from wood are thus obtained by the *on-pression* of the paper against the raised or

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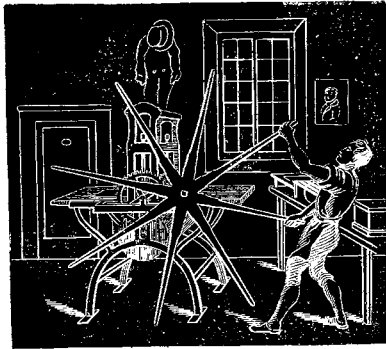
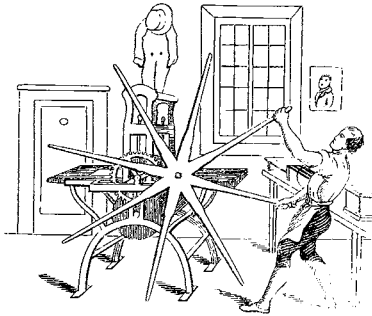
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prominent lines; while impressions from copper-plates are obtained by the *in-pression* of the paper into hollowed ones. In consequence of this difference in the process, the inked lines impressed on paper from a copper-plate appear prominent when viewed direct; while the lines communicated from an engraved wood-block are indented in the front of the impression, and appear raised at the back.



The above impressions—the one from a wood-block, and the other from an etched copper-plate—will perhaps render what has been already said, explanatory of the difference between copper-plate printing from hollowed lines, and *surface printing* by means of the common press from prominent lines, still more intelligible. The subject is a representation of the copper-plate or rolling press.

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Both the above impressions are produced in the same manner by means of the common printing-press. The upper one is from wood; the lower, where the white lines are seen on a black ground, is from copper;—the hollowed lines, which in copper-plate printing yield the impression, receiving no ink from the printer's balls or rollers; while the surface, which in copper-plate printing is wiped clean after the lines are filled with ink, is perfectly covered with it. It is, therefore, evident, that if this etching were printed in the same manner as other copper-plates, the impression would be a fac-simile of the upper one from wood. It has been judged necessary to be thus minute in explaining the difference between copper-plate and wood engraving, as the difference in the mode of obtaining impressions does not appear to have been previously pointed out with sufficient precision.

As it does not come within the scope of the present work to inquire into the origin of sculpture generally, I shall not here venture to give an opinion whether the art was invented by ADAM or his good angel RAZIEL, or whether it was introduced at a subsequent period by TUBAL-CAIN, NOAH, TRISMEGISTUS, ZORASTER, or MOSES. Those who feel interested in such remote speculations will find a jumble of "authorities" in the second chapter of Evelyn's "Sculptura;" an author who can be safely referred to on such points only; for on almost every other branch of his subject, which admits of any degree of certainty, he is but a blind guide. Where all indeed is dark, a blind man is as likely to find his way as one who has the use of his eyes; but, after all, mere antiquarian gropings where there is no light, though they may be interesting to the seeker, who is apt to mistake a worthless pebble for a rough diamond, are seldom interesting to any one else.

Without, therefore, inquiring when or by whom the art of engraving for the purpose of producing impressions was invented, I shall endeavour to show that such an art, however rude, was known at a very early period; and that it continued to be practised in Europe, though to a very limited extent, from an age anterior to the birth of Christ, to the year 1400. In the fifteenth century, its principle appears to have been more generally applied;—first, to the simple cutting of figures on wood for the purpose of being

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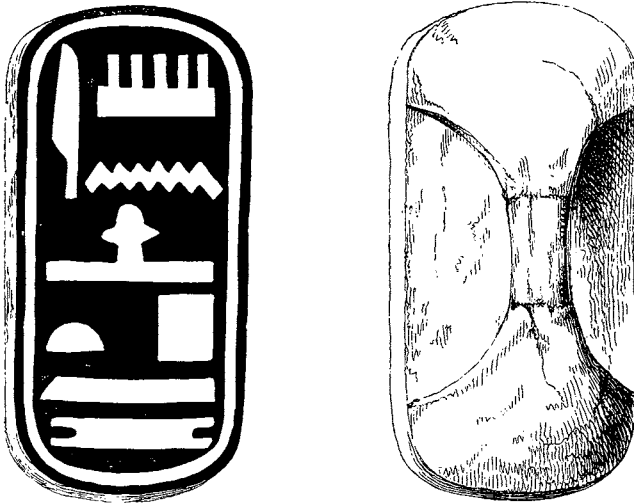
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impressed on paper; next, to cutting figures and explanatory text on the same block, and then entire pages of text without figures, till the “*ARS GRAPHICA ET IMPRESSORIA*” attained its perfection in the discovery of PRINTING by means of movable fusile types.\*

At a very early period stamps of wood, having hieroglyphic characters engraved on them, were used in Egypt for the purpose of producing impressions on bricks, and on other articles made of clay. This fact, which might have been inferred from the ancient bricks and fragments of earthenware containing characters evidently communicated by means of a stamp, has been established by the discovery of several of those wooden stamps, of undoubted antiquity, in the tombs at Thebes, Meroe, and other places. The following cuts represent the face and the back of one of the most perfect of those stamps, which was found in a tomb at Thebes, and has recently been brought to this country by Edward William Lane, Esq.†



The original stamp is made of the same kind of wood as the mummy chests, and has an arched handle at the back, cut out of the same piece of wood as the face. It is of an oblong figure, with the ends rounded off; five inches long, two inches and a

\* Astle on the Origin and Progress of Writing, p. 215, 2nd edit.

† Author of “An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, written in Egypt during the years 1833, 34, and 35.”

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quarter broad, and half an inch thick. The hieroglyphic characters on its face are rudely cut in *intaglio*, so that their impression on clay would be in relief; and if printed in the same manner as the preceding copy, would present the same appearance,—that is, the characters which are cut into the wood, would appear white on a black ground. The phonetic power of the hieroglyphics on the face of the stamp may be represented respectively by the letters, A, M, N, F, T, P, T H, M; and the vowels being supplied, as in reading Hebrew without points, we have the words, “Amonophtep, Thmei-mai,”—“Amonoph, beloved of truth.”\* The name is supposed to be that of Amonoph or Amenoph the First, the second king of the eighteenth dynasty, who, according to the best authorities, was contemporary with Moses, and reigned in Egypt previous to the departure of the Israelites. There are two ancient Egyptian bricks in the British Museum on which the impression of a similar stamp is quite distinct; and there are also several articles of burnt clay, of an elongated conical figure, and about nine inches long, which have their broader extremities impressed with hieroglyphics in a similar manner. There is also in the same collection a wooden stamp, of a larger size than that belonging to Mr. Lane, but not in so perfect a condition. Several ancient Etruscan terra-cottas and fragments of earthenware have been discovered, on which there are alphabetic characters, evidently impressed from a stamp, which was probably of wood. In the time of Pliny terra-cottas thus impressed were called *Typi*.

In the British Museum are several bricks which have been found on the site of ancient Babylon. They are larger than our bricks, and somewhat different in form, being about twelve inches square and three inches thick. They appear to have been made of a kind of muddy clay with which portions of chopped straw have been mixed to cause it to bind; and their general appearance and colour, which is like that of a common brick before it is burnt, plainly enough indicate that they have not been hardened by fire,

\* On a mummy in the royal collection at Paris, the six first characters of this stamp occur. Champollion reads them, “Amenoftep,” or “Amonaftep.” He supposes the name to be that of Amonoph the First; and says that it signifies “approuvé par Ammon.”—*Précis du Système Hiéroglyphique. Planches et Explication*, p. 20, No. 161.



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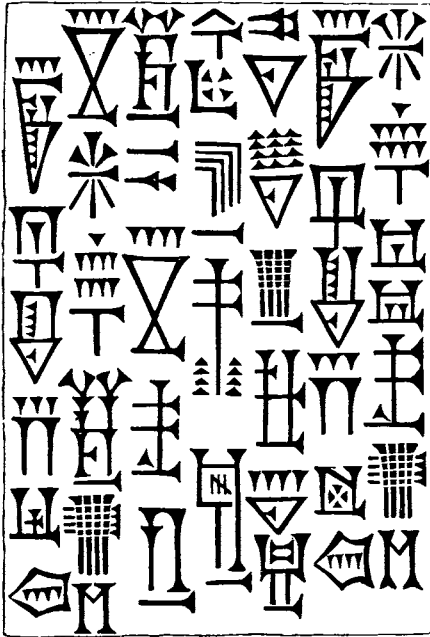
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but by exposure to the sun. About the middle of their broadest surface, they are impressed with certain characters which evidently appear to have been indented when the brick was in a soft state, and, probably, from an engraved block of wood. The characters are indented,—that is, they are such as would be produced by pressing a wood-block with raised lines upon a mass of soft clay; and were such a block printed on paper in the usual manner of wood-cuts, the impression would be similar to the following one, which has been copied, on a reduced scale, from one of the bricks above noticed. The characters have been variously described as cunei-form or wedge-shaped, arrow-headed, javelin-headed, or nail-headed; but their meaning has not hitherto been deciphered.



Amphoræ, lamps, tiles, and various domestic utensils, formed of clay, and of Roman workmanship, are found impressed with letters, which in some cases are supposed to denote the potter's name, and in others the contents of the vessel, or the name of the owner. On the tiles,—of which there are specimens in the

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British Museum,—the letters are commonly inscribed in a circle, and appear raised; thus showing that the stamp had been hollowed, or engraved in intaglio, in a manner similar to a wooden butter-print. In a book entitled “*Ælia Lælia Crispis non nata resurgens*,” by C. C. Malvasia, 4to. Bologna, 1683, are several engravings on wood of such tiles, found in the neighbourhood of Rome, and communicated to the author by Fabretti, who, in the seventh chapter of his own work,\* has given some account of the “*figlinarum signa*,”—the stamps of the ancient potters and tile-makers.

The stamp from which the following cut has been copied is preserved in the British Museum. It is of brass, and the letters are in relief and reversed; so that if it were inked from a printer’s ball and stamped on paper, an impression would be produced precisely the same as that which is here given.



It would be difficult now to ascertain why this stamp should be marked with the word *LAR*, which signifies a household god, or the image of the supposed tutelary genius of a house; but, without much stretch of imagination, we may easily conceive how appropriate such an inscription would be impressed on an amphora or large wine-vessel, sealed and set apart on the birth of an heir, and to be kept sacred—inviolable as the household gods—till the young Roman assumed the “*toga virilis*,” or arrived at years of maturity. That vessels containing wine were kept for many years, we learn from Horace and Petronius;† and we may also infer from the former author, that to remove one from its place of deposit,

\* *Inscriptionum Explicatio*, fol. Romæ, 1699.

† “*O nata mecum consule Manlio!*” says Horace, addressing an amphora of wine as old as himself; and Petronius mentions some choice Falernian which had attained the ripe age of a hundred: “*Statim allatæ sunt amphoræ vitreæ diligenter gypsatæ, quarum in cervicibus pittacia erant affixa, cum hoc titulo: Falernum Opimianum annorum centum.*” *Pittacia* were small labels—*schedulæ breves*—attached to the necks of wine-vessels, and on which were marked the name and age of the wine.