

Dead Wood?

The Forgotten Art of Woodcut Illustrations

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Is the art of woodcut illustrations in children's books really dead? Have they been relegated to the trash bin by computer capabilities for creating images? Has digitization usurped the creativity and skill of this hands-on medium? The answer is simple—yes and no.

So what is woodcutting? Essentially, it's a type of relief painting in which an image is carved into the surface of a block of wood and printed on paper. To apply the technique, the design is drawn on a smooth block of wood and the parts that are to be white are cut away with knives or chisels, leaving the design standing up in relief. It is then inked and pressed against a sheet of paper.¹

There are two forms of the process, woodcuts and wood engraving. Though they are similar, they are not interchangeable. The only difference between them is the direction of the wood grain. Woodcuts use blocks of wood with the grain running length-wise, while wood engraving is the opposite, using wood blocks sawn across the grain.

Woodcuts have a long history. As early as the sixth century, designs were cut into wood and printed on textiles in the Near East. They were the forerunners of the technique, but it was English printer William Caxton who established woodcuts as an art form in the 1400s when he illustrated his books with finely chiseled line drawings (though they were not intended for children).

It wasn't until the late 1700s that Thomas Bewick (pronounced Buick) chiseled woodcuts in books for children. He was a country farm boy who was apprenticed to an engraver and put

to work making woodcuts, which were at that time considered to be unimportant and cheap, but nevertheless popular. His portraits of farm animals and birds were impeccably produced, making him a natural to illustrate *Aesop's Fables* in 1784.²

When Bewick died in 1828, George Cruikshank, at the young age of 24, became the master of line and the craft of the wood block. He was among the early illustrators of Charles Dickens' books, but his foremost work for children was the first English translation of Grimms' *German Popular Tales* (1823 and 1826). His flair for caricature and strong use of line infused his work with amusing detail that established the whole tone of the book.

Twenty years or so later, Edward Lear was another skilled artist whose sharp line drawings cleverly captured the absurdity in his children's *Nonsense Book* (1846).³

Probably the most famous engraved images are John Tenniel's from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). Tenniel himself didn't print his own art, he depended on the skilled engraver Dalziel to transfer his delicate and intricate creations to the printing surface.⁴



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Then came photography. It revolutionized the technique of reproducing pictures and almost eradicated woodcutting and wood-crafted illustrations save for the gifted printer, Edmund Evans. He developed improved methods in color printing with which he could print up to eleven different colors. A trio of famous illustrators was captivated by this newly developed method and applied it to their signature styles. Randolph Caldecott, Walter Crane, and Kate Greenaway led the way of a confluence of artists whose expertise made them major players in setting the bar for this new challenging process.

Fritz Eichenberg was a German-American artist who worked primarily in wood engraving. Politically outspoken and a critic of the Nazis, he moved his family from Berlin to the United States. In his prolific career he was drawn to novels of emotional conflict and social satire. In particular, he was inspired by the haunting, tragic stories of the Bronte sisters. His images in *Wuthering Heights* (1943) not only portrayed the events in the story but also captured the book's spirit.

Antonio Frasconi had a similar lifeline. Born in Argentina, he moved to the United States at the end of World War II. He quickly gained recognition for his intricate woodcuts and social commentary. It was legendary children's book editor (and his neighbor) Margaret McElderry who saw his woodcuts and asked him to do a children's book, and he did.

His first book for children, *See and Say: A Picture Book in Four Languages* (1955), was critically acclaimed. The multilingual picture book cited word translations in four different languages, making it unique in the medium used as well as content. It validated him as one of the foremost graphic artists of his generation.

Enter the Caldecott Award. In 1938, the then Children's Services Division (now the Association for Library Service to Children) of the American Library Association initiated the annual award, named for Randolph Caldecott, in recognition of illustrations in children's picture books as a distinguished art form.

The first book illustrated with scratchboard or wood engraving technique to receive Caldecott recognition, an Honor citation, was *Song of Robin Hood* by Virginia Lee Burton in 1948.

Eichenberg and Frasconi, masters of woodcutting, each received a Caldecott Honor award: Eichenberg for *Ape in a Cape* (1953) and Frasconi for *The House That Jack Built* (1959).

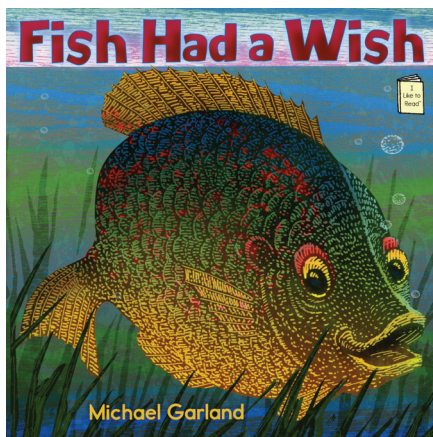
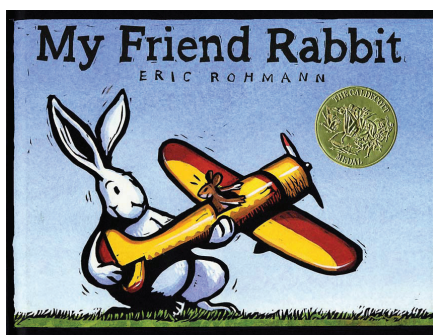
Another prominent artist who lent his dexterity to the craft of woodcutting was Lynd Ward. While studying in Germany, he

discovered a woodcut novel without words by Belgian engraver Frans Masereel. He was so inspired by the book that he created six adult, wordless novels with woodcuts or wood engravings that gained him the title "Father of the Graphic Novel."⁵

Ward then turned his hand to children's books, three of them, all based on childhood experiences (eight to ninety pages in length). He won the Caldecott Medal for the first, *The Biggest Bear*, in 1953.⁶ It's interesting to note that in that same year, two of the five Honor books were also illustrated with woodcuts: *Ape in a Cape* and *Puss in Boots*.

Just as Ward was inspired by Masereel, Michael McCurdy was inspired by Ward. When he was a teenager, he wrote him a fan letter that evolved into a lifelong friendship and collaboration. Their rapport was so strong that when Ward died in 1985,

McCurdy reportedly inherited his wood engraving tools. McCurdy's multifaceted career as printer and publisher includes children's books, having illustrated more than one hundred eighty titles. As a master of engraving, woodcuts, and scratchboard techniques, his work has a special affinity for recreating folktales and historical scenes. His style ranges from the dramatic compositions in *Giants in the Land* (1993) to the hewn depictions in *American Fairy Tales* (1996).



A similar method to woodcutting is linoleum block printing, for which a linoleum block is used in place of wood. The end result is difficult to distinguish from wood prints. Famous painters Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, known for their fine art, were early adapters of linocuts, which are easier to handle though the details are not as fine. A contemporary artist working in linocuts is Ashley Wolff. Examples of her work include *A Year of Birds* and *Bells of London*.

One Skilled Style

Say the word "scratchboard" and the name that comes to mind is Brian Pinkney, the king of this technique. Akin to woodcutting, a drawing board is covered with white clay, then black ink. A scratch knife is used to scratch into the top coating so the color underneath shows through. Pinkney often uses crosshatching to create texture. He has won two Caldecott Honors with this method: *The Faithful Friend* (1996) and *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* (1999).

To date, twenty-four books illustrated with woodcuts or like techniques have been awarded either the Caldecott Medal or Honor. Notably, of those twenty-four titles, four were illustrated

Interview with Rick Allen

Illustrator Rick Allen's latest book is *Winter Bees & Other Poems of the Cold* written by Joyce Sidman (Houghton Mifflin, 2014). In a conversation with *Children and Libraries*, he describes his approach and application.



Woodcut self-portrait, © Rick Allen

"The images for this book were made through the unlikely marriage of some very old and almost new art mediums. The individual elements of each picture (the animals, trees, snowflakes, etc.) were cut, inked, and printed from linoleum blocks (nearly two hundred of them), and then hand-colored. Those prints were then digitally scanned, composed, and layered to create the illustrations for the poems. The somewhat surprising (and oddly pleasing) result was learning that the slow and backwards art of relief printmaking could bring modern technology down to its level, making everything even more complex and time-consuming."

The result, in his words, "makes for an attractive anomaly."

His step-by-step process begins with sketching the initial concepts for the images, transferring them to blocks, then cutting. Each image takes from three to seven blocks. Next is choosing the color palette and finally registering and printing.

"You're never quite sure how each image—produced from so many blocks and with so many hours of cutting—will turn out until they're finally pulled off the press, and that in itself introduces enough healthy uncertainty to keep your attention."

There's no doubt that his vigorous and extremely well crafted art will keep the attention of many who appreciate children's book illustration.

by Marcia Brown, recipient of nine total Caldecott awards and honors. Two of her three Caldecott Medals were created with woodcuts: *Once a Mouse* (1962) and *Shadow* (1983). Two of her six Honor books also used woodcut techniques: *Dick Whittington and His Cat* (1951) and *Puss in Boots* (1953).⁷ The choice of *Shadow* was somewhat controversial because some critics felt that the dramatic mix of collage, woodcuts, and acrylics was too scary for children and the story itself too adult.

It is encouraging that in the last five years of Caldecott Awards and Honors, there have been four illustrators who have used some form of wood printing techniques: *The House in the Night*

(2009), illustrated by Beth Krommes; *Red Sings from Treetops* (2010) and *Sleep Like a Tiger* (2013), both illustrated by Pamela Zagarenski; and *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* (2011), illustrated by Erin Stead.

If asked the question, are woodcuts as illustrations dead, some people would emphatically say yes, while other contemporary artists such as Betsy Bowen (*Ant, Bear, Canoe: A Northwoods Alphabet*, 1991), Brian Pinkney (*The Faithful Friend*), Mary Azarian (*A Farmer's Alphabet*, 2012), Holly Meade (*On the Farm*, 2012 and *In the Sea*, 2012), David Frampton (*The Song of Francis and the Animals*, 2005), Bonnie Christensen (*Daring Nelly Bly: America's Star Reporter*), Eric Rohmann (*My Friend Rabbit*, 2003), Barry Moser (*The Blessing of Beasts*, 2007), and Hadley Hooper (*The Iridescence of Birds: A Book about Henri Matisse*, 2014), would firmly say no. Each of them has kept alive the traditional technique of woodcutting with handsome results.

Can hands on a keyboard transmogrify an ancient technique that uses chisel in hand into equally striking art using chisel in hand? There is evidence that artistic hands can do so.

Michael Garland is a case in point. He has pioneered a new art form that incorporates the old with the new. He calls it "digi-woodcut," a form of digital art that mimics woodcuts by scanning in wood textures and then layering them in the painting. *Fish Had a Wish*, published by Holiday House in 2012, is illustrated in this way.

Another newcomer who is embracing technology and infusing it into his woodcut art is Rick Allen. He made a stunning debut with his illustrations for *Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night*, a 2011 Newbery Honor Book, written by Joyce Sidman.

To paraphrase a childhood tongue twister, how much wood could a woodcutter cut, if a woodcutter did cut wood? As much as the skilled artist chooses to create art, if only they would. Let's hope there will be many. ✂

References

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