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Every Picture Tells a Story

Wendy Buckle

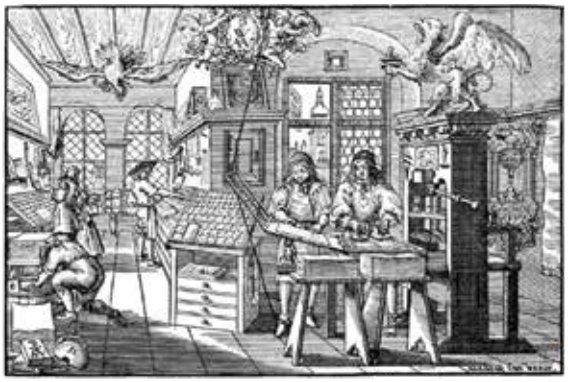

Fig.1. Interior of a printing office. *Woodcut by Abraham Von Werdt with his monogram top center and bottom left. Undated.*

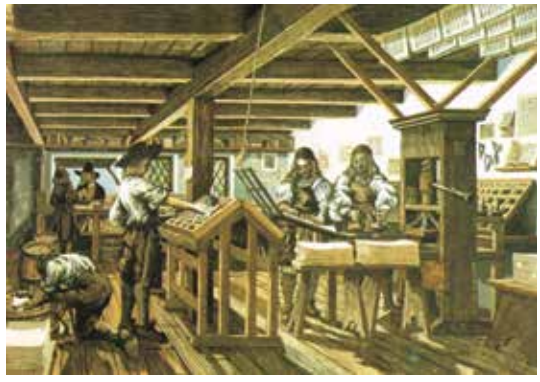

Fig.2. Interior of a printing office. *Modern version of Von Werdt original, with ornate ironwork and other details removed.*

We all know the saying "A picture is worth a thousand words." This is true for an amateur like me, collecting subjects for which I have no practical knowledge. Here I offer two examples of illustrations which portray printing methods very clearly and help me understand the processes shown. Both illustrations are from the seventeenth century, their attractiveness and interest spawning modern versions and stamp designs.

First we have a woodcut by a Dutchman, Abraham Von Werdt (1594-1671), showing the interior of a printing office with all the tasks involved in printing a page of type (Fig.1).

Paper needs to be damp for printing, so in the left foreground a man is dipping sheets of paper into a vat of water to prepare them. On the right his colleague is fixing those sheets to the press.

Individual letters had to be selected using a composing stick, as seen in the center. The compositor would set the lead type in a composing stick to form a line. Successive lines were then assembled into a page, transferred to the press and locked into a frame called a chase. On the right a man is inking the chase using ink balls (sheepskin stuffed with wool or horsehair).

The wooden press works very simply. The carriage is in two parts: on the left it holds the sheet of paper, with a hinge attaching it to the right part, holding the type. The paper folds over on to the type and the carriage is wound forward under the heavy screw press, which is applied with the lever. This design, known as the common press, stayed in use more or less unchanged until the nineteenth century.

When the printed page comes off the press, still damp, it is hung up to dry, as shown top right on the modern reproduction (Fig.2). *cont. on pg 39*

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In the days before retail shops, people sold what they made on the premises. To the back right of the original, and back left in the copy, a window opens on to the street, ready for customers. Part of this woodcut was used for an attractive Hungarian stamp issued in 1987 (Fig.3).

Fig.3. Hungary 1987. 125th anniversary Hungarian Printing, Paper and Press Workers' Union. [Sc 3074]

Different printing methods were used for illustrations and text. The 1642 work shown below (Fig.4) is called "A Printer's Workshop" with a note underneath which says in translation, "This print shows you how to print the etched plates." A modern colored version of the print is shown nearby (Fig.5).

Fig.4. A Printer's Workshop. *Etching by Abraham Bosse, 1642.*

The printmaker, Abraham Bosse, lived from c.1604–1676. He was born to Huguenot parents in Tours, France, where his father had moved from Germany. His father was a tailor, and Bosse's work always depicted clothes in loving detail. Roughly 1,600 etchings are attributed to him. Most of his output was illustrations for books, but many were also sold separately.

Engraving is done by incising the illustration on to a copper (or later, steel) plate by hand using a burin, a small steel rod with a sharpened V-shaped point.

Bosse worked with etched plates, where acid is used to eat into the parts of a printing plate to take the ink. However the printing process was the same for both etching and engraving.

The plate is being inked by the man at the back, who had to work the ink into the lines of the plate. Then, in the left foreground, a man wipes the surplus ink off the surface of the plate with his hand, leaving only ink lying in the engraved lines.

The printer would then place the plate face up in the press, a sheet of dampened paper placed on top of it, and cloths placed on top of both to even out the pressure when the plate passed through the rollers of the press. On the right the man operates the handles of a wheel which moves a heavy roller over the plate, the pressure of this forcing the paper into the grooves of the plate and dragging out the ink. Finally, as with the type press, the printed sheets are hung up to dry.

Fig.5. A Printer's Workshop. *Modern colored version of the Bosse etching—no changes to design.*

Like the Von Werdt woodcut, when used as a stamp illustration, in this case Switzerland in 2002, only a part of the design has been used (fig 6).

Fig.6. Switzerland 2002. Swiss Post Stamp Printers. [Sc 1124]

I admit to a fondness for these and similar early illustrations used on stamps, which to me have more interest and character than many modern designs.