

Information sheet Mezzotint



This became the most common method. The whole surface (usually) of a metal, usually copper, plate is roughened evenly, manually with a rocker, or mechanically. If the plate were printed at this point it would show as solid black. The image is then created by selectively burnishing areas of the surface of the metal plate with metal tools: the smoothed parts will print lighter than those areas not smoothed by the burnishing tool. A burnisher has a smooth, round end, which flattens the minutely protruding points comprising the roughened surface of the metal printing plate. Areas smoothed completely flat will not hold ink at all: such areas will print "white," that is, without ink. By varying the degree of smoothing, mid-tones between black and white can be created, hence the name *mezzo-tinto* which is Italian for "half-tone" or "half-painted". This is called working from "dark to light", or the "subtractive" method.

Plates can be mechanically roughened; one way is to rub fine metal filings over the surface with a piece of glass; the finer the filings, the smaller the grain of the surface. Special roughening tools called 'rockers' have been in use since at least the eighteenth century. The method commonly in use today is to use a steel rocker approximately five inches wide, which has between 45 and 120 teeth per inch on the face of a blade in the shape of a shallow arc, with a wooden handle projecting upwards in a T-shape. Rocked steadily from side to side at the correct angle, the rocker will proceed forward creating burrs in the surface of the copper. The plate is then moved – either rotated by a set number of degrees or through 90 degrees according to preference – and then rocked in another pass. This is repeated until the plate is roughened evenly and will print a completely solid tone of black.

