

# Bracken Press **print-workshop**

## Information sheet Etching

**Etching** a method of making prints from a **metal** plate, usually copper, into which the design has been incised by **acid**. The copperplate is first coated with an acid-resistant substance, called the etching ground, through which the design is drawn with a sharp tool. The ground is usually a compound of beeswax, **bitumen**, and resin. The plate is then exposed to nitric **acid** or dutch mordant, which eats away those areas of the plate unprotected by the ground, forming a pattern of recessed lines. These lines hold the **ink**, and, when the plate is applied to moist **paper**, the design transfers to the paper, making a finished print.



In the variety of etching known as **aquatint**, a copperplate is exposed to acid through a layer of melted granulated resin, leaving an evenly pitted surface that yields broad areas of tone when the grains are removed and the plate is printed. Etching and **aquatint** are often combined in a print by means of successive workings of its plate.

The practice of making prints from etched metal plates grew out of the custom of etching designs on armour and was adopted by printmakers as an easy way of **engraving**, a process of making prints from metal plates incised with a tool called a **burin**. The first dated etching was made in 1513 by the Swiss artist **Urs Graf**, who printed from iron plates. The prolific German graphic artist **Albrecht Dürer** made only five etchings. In his “Cannon” (1518), he tried to imitate the formal, premeditated quality of engravings, revealing that etching’s spontaneity and flowing line were as yet not valued in northern Europe. The 16th-century Italian artist Parmigianino, however, made etchings with easy, graceful strokes that show his full understanding of the technique.

The first and perhaps greatest master of pure etching was [Rembrandt](#) (1606–69). He abandoned all links with engraving and produced over 300 etchings with unsurpassed virtuosity, using the freedom inherent in the medium to render light, air, and space. The 18th-century Venetian artists [Giovanni Battista Tiepolo](#) and [Canaletto](#) also used etching to capture atmospheric effects, and the Roman etcher and archaeologist Giambattista Piranesi used etching to serve his fantasy in his series “Carceri” (c. 1745), a group of interior views of foreboding imaginary prisons. More horrific was the series “Los desastres de la guerra” (1810–14), by the Spanish artist [Francisco de Goya](#). Unlike most of his other prints, Goya’s “Desastres” were done mainly in etching with little aquatint.



During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, [soft-ground etching](#), or *vernis mou*, became current. This technique involves drawing with a pencil on a sheet of paper placed on a copperplate coated with an extremely soft, sticky ground. The ground adheres to the paper wherever the pencil passes, leaving the metal exposed in broad, soft lines. The plate is exposed to acid and, when printed, yields results similar to pencil or chalk drawings.