



Anne Julie Desmet (b. 1964)
Brooklyn Bridge: Afternoon
2015
Wood engraving and 2 linocut blocks on
ivory paper, 24.6 x 17.3 cm
Collection of Nigel Hamway
© Anne Desmet

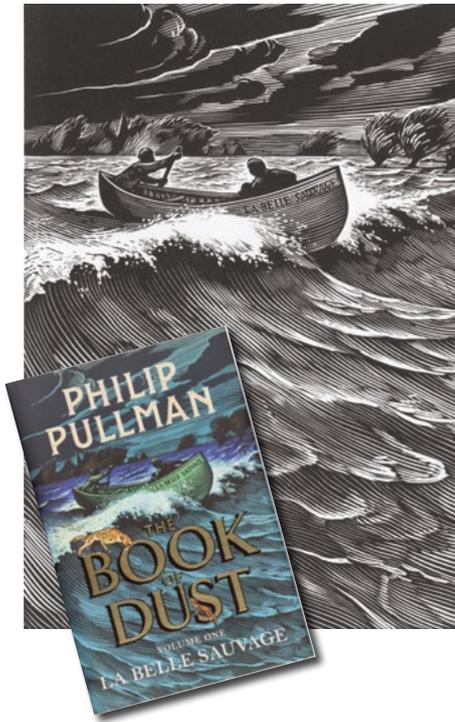
SCENE THROUGH WOOD: A CENTURY OF WOOD ENGRAVING
10 August–15 November 2020

Originally scheduled for March 2020, *Scene Through Wood* celebrates one of the most astonishingly skilful and richly creative forms of visual art. Curated by Anne Desmet RA, currently the only engraver elected to the Royal Academy of Arts, the exhibition marks 100 years since the founding of the Society of Wood Engravers in 1920. It includes 120 works from the Ashmolean's outstanding collection of many thousands of prints, plus loans from private collections by leading artist-engravers from the 1790s right up to the present. They range over Romanticism, modernism and abstraction, to extraordinary photo-realistic works that defy belief. It demonstrates the endless versatility of the medium which has been used to depict the whole 'theatre of life', from work and play, war and hardship, designs for industry and typography, to natural landscapes and dazzling scenes of inner cities. Included are well-known names such as William Blake, Samuel Palmer, M. C. Escher and Peter Blake; and many women artists including Gertrude Hermes RA, Gwen Raverat and Edwina Ellis whose outstanding works deserve to be better known.

Wood engraving, as opposed to the broader technique of wood-cutting, involves detailed drawing with tools on end-grain hard wood blocks, traditionally boxwood. It is one of the few art practices to have originated in England. The technique was developed by Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) in Newcastle in the late-18th century. Having been an apprentice metal engraver, he taught himself to draw and then started to experiment with wood, producing images of immense detail and subtle tonal effects. His hugely successful books on natural history were lauded by William Wordsworth, Charlotte Brontë, John Ruskin and George III. Bewick has influenced virtually every artist-engraver that came after him, most immediately 'The Ancients' – the literary/philosophical group that gathered around William Blake (1757–1827) in the 1820s. Blake himself produced a series of epic illuminated books including the *Songs of Innocence* (1789) which are well-loved and still in print. His poetic visions suffuse the tiny wood engravings for 'Dr Thornton's School Edition of *Virgil's Eclogues*'. These inspired a small group of works by Edward Calvert (1799–1883) and a single wood engraving by Samuel Palmer (1805–81), *Harvest under a Crescent Moon* (c. 1826) which is in the Ashmolean's collection. This tiny output of prints, in turn, greatly influenced the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite movements in British art.

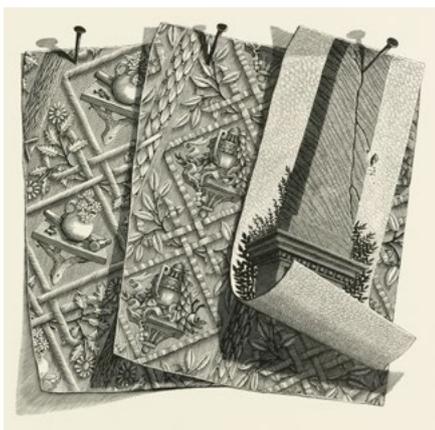
By the mid-19th century, wood engraving had become a means for making images for mass-circulation media. Journals including *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News* in the UK, and *Harper's Weekly* in New York, hired teams of wood engravers to provide illustrations. As speedy production was important, blocks were engraved in sections by numerous artisans, then re-joined for printing. The technical skill and aesthetic quality of many such engravings are astounding and the images would have seemed miraculous to readers who had rarely seen the world reproduced with such accuracy and realism.

The founding of the Society of Wood Engravers in 1920 was, in part, motivated by a desire to distinguish wood engraving as an independent



Chris Wormell (b. 1958)
 For *Book of Dust - La Belle Sauvage* by Philip Pullman
 Penguin and David Fickling Books, 2017
 Wood engraving (lemonwood) on white Fabriano Rosaspina paper, 19 x 12.6 cm
 From the artist's own collection
 © Chris Wormell

Book of Dust - La Belle Sauvage by Philip Pullman
 Penguin and David Fickling Books, 2017.
 Hardback book of 560 pages, with 26 wood engravings and linocuts by Chris Wormell
 Webb & Webb Design Limited
 From the collection of Roy Willingham
 Photograph by Tom Willingham
 © Chris Wormell



Edwina Nora Ellis (b. 1946)
Pride
 From *The Maxims of the Duc de Rochefoucauld* boxed print suite 1986
 Wood engraving (Brazilian boxwood) on cream Old Basingwerk Parchment paper, 19.6 x 20 cm
 Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
 © Edwina Ellis

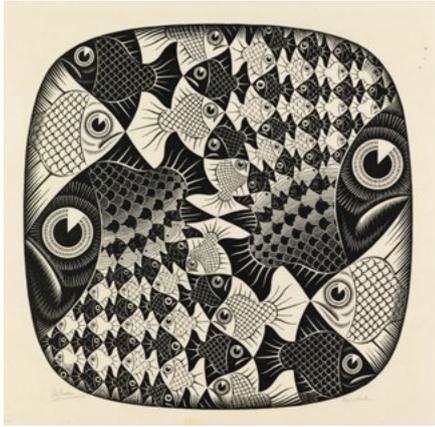
art form, not just a service of the printing industry. A nucleus of six artists met in London on 27 March that year, led by Lucien Pissarro (1863–1944), son of the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro. They invited additional members which eventually numbered ten including Eric Gill (1882–1940), Gwen Raverat (1885–1957) and John Nash RA (1893–1977). Their initial aim was simply to hold exhibitions devoted solely to wood engraving. Much of the Society's early visual language is strikingly progressive. We find bold lines and deceptively simple designs that will resonate with graphic novel fans. One beautiful example by Clare Leighton (1898–1989), *Bread Line* (1932), demonstrates a sympathy for the grinding poverty people experienced in the Great Depression. Together with contemporaries Joan Hassall (1906–88), Gwen Raverat, Agnes Miller Parker (1895–1980) and Gertrude Hermes (1901–83), she contributed to the 1930s revival of wood engraving. Later in the century war artists like Henry Moore (1898–1986) and Paul Nash (1889–1946) and civilian artists, Rachel Reckitt (1908–95) and Hermes, used their experiences of the conflict to create profound images in both figurative and abstract prints.

Our own familiarity with wood engraving is probably greater than we realise. Many people instantly recognise M.C. Escher's (1898–1972) mind-bending patterns. Other intricate designs flit through our consciousness in postage stamps, logos and heraldic crests. In the drop-down box in e-documents you can select from hundreds, if not thousands, of fonts including the eponymous 'Gill Sans' and 'Perpetua' designed by the artist and engraver Eric Gill. Anyone travelling on the Northern Line via Charing Cross tube station will see David Gentleman's (b. 1930) engravings (1978), a tableau of the 13th-century workmen who erected the original Charing Cross. The prints were scaled up to 20 times their size to create the metre-wide sections of the murals that extend down the platforms. There is every chance that commuters passing through the station will have carried copies of Philip Pullman's world-wide best-seller, *The Book of Dust* (2017). The front cover and 26 illustrations in the hardback edition are dramatic wood engravings by Chris Wormell (b. 1955). They mirror the out-of-time quality and rich textures that characterise Pullman's writing.

Other engravings are rightly celebrated like Edwina Ellis's posters for *TFL Art on the Underground* (1996); and her recent designs for the Royal Mint which include the new 50p coin (2019) commemorating Stephen Hawking. Born in Australia in 1946, Ellis is a pioneering artist responsible for 'some of the most technically elaborate engravings ever made'. Her work is held in international collections around the world. Her treatments of mundane objects like pieces of paper are virtuoso achievements, so realistic they take on surreal dimensions.

Anne Desmet RA is only the third artist-engraver ever elected to the Royal Academy. She makes traditional wood engravings and innovative mixed-media wood engraved collages that combine monochrome and colour prints with drawings and other materials like gold leaf or sections of maps. Her work frequently features architecture and the built environment in evocations of well-known structures and architectural fantasies which reflect on the passage of time, human aspiration, endurance and change. Her *Brooklyn Bridge* series (2015) demonstrates the amazing range of effects wood engraving can achieve. Five prints from the series show the bridge from the same viewpoint in a variety of weather conditions and times of day. The different impressions evoke everything from Japanese woodblock printing, Monet's *Rouen Cathedral*, to a scene from *film-noir*.

Desmet says: 'In curating this exhibition, I have chosen works that moved me: engravings that drew me in, demanded attention and lingered long in the mind. *Scene Through Wood* offers a visual feast of some of the finest wood engravings of the last 100 years and celebrates the extraordinary artists who made them. We aim to show the fantastic diversity of wood engraved prints in Britain over the last century, while also highlighting artist-engravers from Europe, Russia, Canada, the USA, China, Japan and Australia whose work has influenced British engravers past and present.'



Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898–1972)
Fish and Scales
1959
Woodcut on white paper, 37.8 x 37.8 cm
On long-term loan from the collection of
Professor Roger Penrose
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▪ PRESS IMAGES:

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▪ CREDITS:

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▪ NOTES TO EDITORS:

Exhibition: *Scene Through Wood: A Century of Wood Engraving*
Dates: 10 August–15 November 2020
Venue: Gallery 8, Lower Ground Floor, Ashmolean Museum
Open: Mon–Sun 10:00–17:00
Admission: Free. [Booking](#) for (free) admission to the Museum is essential so that we can maintain social distancing..
Publication: The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue; £25, available at the Ashmolean or [online](#)

