

Relief Printing and the Works of Frank C. Eckmair

Lesson for Educators
Artistic Technique: Relief Printing



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

LESSON

GRADES 9–12

This curriculum is aligned
with the New York State
P–12 Learning Standards



New York State
Museum

The New York State Museum is a program of
The University of the State of New York
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Office of Cultural Education



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ABOUT THIS LESSON

The New York State Museum’s online exhibit *The Landscape of Memory* explores a singular artistic vision through the Museum’s extensive collection of works by Frank C. Eckmair. An internationally recognized printmaker, Eckmair had an intimate affinity for the quiet landscapes of rural central New York. His subjects are the region’s farm fields, stone walls, abandoned homes, and old barns. Through memory and direct observation, Eckmair created a poignant body of work that invites us to contemplate a historic and beautiful region of New York State.



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ARTISTIC TECHNIQUE: RELIEF PRINTING

LESSON



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OBJECTIVE

This lesson encourages students to gain a basic understanding of printmaking. Students will use observation skills to evaluate, discuss, and connect to the art of printmaker Frank C. Eckmair. They will experiment with techniques and create their own linocut print; learn how to care for materials and use tools in a safe and responsible manner; and make connections between process and meaning.

The New York State Learning Standards met in this lesson are included at the end of this guide. For more information on the standards, visit <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/curriculum-instruction/nys-visual-arts-at-a-glance-final-8-2-2017-high-res-v2.pdf>.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Frank C. Eckmair (1930–2012) lived most of his life in central New York. He spent his early years drawing and working at his parents' hotel in Gilbertsville, a small village in Otsego County, west of Cooperstown. He earned a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Iowa, where he studied with Mauricio Lasansky, who is considered the “Father of 20th-century American Printmaking.” After teaching public school, Eckmair served in the U.S. Air Force in Korea, Japan, and the northwestern United States. During his service, he often hiked in the countryside and visited galleries and printmaking workshops in Ginza, Tokyo's shopping district. Eckmair collected Japanese woodcut prints, which inspired his own artwork. When he returned to the U.S. he earned a master of fine arts in printmaking at Ohio University. From 1963 to 1995 he was a revered teacher at Buffalo State College, where he influenced generations of artists.

Eckmair's work received its earliest recognition through American Associated Artists (AAA), a program founded to market affordable fine art prints to the public. Like earlier artists, such as Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, Eckmair created prints of regional landscapes that had broad appeal. Considered a master of the woodcut and represented in major collections around the world, Eckmair continued to create haunting works evoking rural life in upstate New York throughout his long career.

FEATURED WORKS



There Was a Time, 1967
Woodcut print
24" x 32"



Untitled (Tree), 1972
Woodblock and woodcut print
12" x 19"



Lake Side, c. 1962-1963
Woodcut print
16 1/8" x 12 7/8"

VOCABULARY

- **relief printing** – In art printmaking, a process consisting of cutting or carving away the surface in such a way that all that remains of the original surface is the design to be printed. Examples of relief-printing processes include woodcut, anastatic printing, linocut, and metal cut.
- **landscape** – The natural landforms of a region; also, an image that has natural scenery as its primary focus.
- **composition** – A whole made up of multiple parts arranged in such a way that the relationships between the parts work together to create a particular effect or meaning.
- **positive space** – The area in a work of art that is the subject or area of interest, such as a face, as in a portrait, or an object, as in a still life or landscape.
- **negative space** – The space around or between the subject(s) in an image.
- **constructed environment** – Human-made or human-modified spaces and places; art and design-related disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, interior design, game design, virtual environment, and landscape design shape the places in which people live, work, and play.
- **subtractive process** – The action of removing material. The artist carves away the negative space of the image so that the remaining surface area of the relief block can be inked and printed.
- **woodcut** – A printmaking technique that involves printing an image from a carved plank of wood. The image is cut into the wood using tools such as chisels, gouges, and knives. Raised areas of the image are inked and printed, while cut away or recessed areas do not receive ink and appear blank on the printed paper.
- **linocut** – A relief technique using a sheet of linoleum from which shapes are gouged away using chisels or knives, leaving the printing image as the raised surface. Ink is transferred from the surface of the block by the application of pressure. Linoleum is softer and therefore easier to carve than wood; however, it exhibits neither wood's characteristic grain nor its durability.
- **hand burnishing** – To rub (a material) with a tool for compacting or smoothing or for turning an edge.

WARM-UP: VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES

To support class discussions, use these visual thinking strategies to explore Eckmair's prints and create a student-driven dialogue. Have students make careful observations of the featured artwork.

- What is going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you think that?
- What more can we find?

GUIDED PRACTICE

Analyze and discuss the subject and composition of Eckmair's prints.

- Do the prints fall within an established genre? (landscape, portrait, abstraction)
- How do the subject and setting interact with the negative space? Does this space function as a structural form in the design to create balance or contrast?
- Can you find evidence of people in the landscape?
- Describe visual characteristics of the natural environment and of the constructed environment.
- Do you see borders within the images?
- How does the use of line create texture?
- Does Eckmair's contrast of light and dark impact the tone of the art?

ARTMAKING ACTIVITY

In this activity, students will create a hand-burnished linocut inspired by Frank Eckmair's work. Linocuts are relief prints that use the same subtractive process Eckmair used to make his woodcuts. Softer than wood, linoleum is an easier material for students to use while exploring relief-printing techniques. Encourage the creative use of negative space in the composition of the design, and avoid creating distinct borders. Be sure to review safety precautions and best practices for using linocut tools and materials.

Materials needed:

- Drawing paper and pencils
- 1 linoleum block per student
- felt-tip pens or markers
- linocutting tools: gouges and utility knives
- printing ink
- brayers
- glass plate or other flat, smooth, non-porous surface to roll out ink
- rice paper
- flat-bottom wooden spoons or printing baren

Linocut Relief-printing Process:

1. Sketch your design

- On a piece of drawing paper, sketch a landscape design of your choosing. Bearing in mind the discussion of Eckmair's use of positive and negative space, consider your own use of space in the drawing: What in your linocut will be cut away, and what will remain? Remember that in a relief print any raised areas will hold the ink, and that when you make your print, the image will be the reverse of your carving on the block.

2. Transfer the image

- Using a felt-tip pen or marker, draw your design directly onto the block of linoleum.

3. Carve the linoleum

- Using your linocutting tools, start to remove material comprising the negative space. In other words, remove any areas that you wish to appear white in the final print. Remember, what is carved away will not print. Work slowly and be careful not to cut through any connecting lines. Use small tools to define areas and details and larger tools to clear larger spaces. Check your progress as you go. Incorporate details of texture and pattern. Follow safety precautions and always cut away from yourself.

4. Roll the ink

- To ink the brayer, apply ink to the glass plate and with the brayer roll out the ink on the plate until the surface of the brayer is evenly covered.
- Roll the inked brayer onto the surface of the carved linoleum block to create a smooth and even coating of ink on the uncarved areas. If you use too much ink you will lose fine line details, but if you use too little ink you will lose the bold color and definition in your final print.

5. Make the print

- With a steady hand, lay a piece of rice paper onto the inked linoleum block. Gently but firmly burnish, or rub, the back of the paper with a flat instrument, like a wooden spoon, applying even pressure across the entire block. Make sure the ink transfers from the block to all areas of the paper.
- Gently peel the paper off the linoleum block to reveal the final print.

WRAP-UP

- Have students reflect on their own printmaking process and pose the question: How might the process of printmaking add to the meaning of the artwork?

LESSON LEARNING STANDARDS

NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS

VISUAL ARTS/RESPONDING

#VA:Re9.1

- Anchor Standard: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.
- Enduring Understanding: People evaluate art based on various criteria.
- Essential Question: How does one determine criteria to evaluate a work of art? How and why might criteria vary? How is a personal preference different from an evaluation?

VISUAL ARTS/CONNECTING

#VA:Cn10.1

- Anchor Standard: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- Enduring Understanding: Through art making, people make meaning by investigating and developing awareness of perceptions, knowledge, and experiences.
- Essential Question: How does engaging in creating art enrich people's lives? How does making art attune people to their surroundings? How do people contribute to awareness and understanding of their lives and the lives of their communities through art making?

VISUAL ARTS/CREATING

#VA:Cr2.3

- Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Enduring Understanding: People create and interact with objects, places, and design that define, shape, enhance, and empower their lives.
- Essential Question: How do objects, places, and design shape lives and communities? How do artists and designers determine goals for designing or redesigning objects, places, or systems? How do artists and designers create works of art or design that effectively communicate?

#VA:Cr2.2

- Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Enduring Understanding: Artists and designers balance experimentation and safety, freedom and responsibility while developing and creating artworks..
- Essential Question: How do artists and designers care for and maintain materials, tools, and equipment? Why is it important for safety and health to understand and follow correct procedures in handling materials and tools? What responsibilities come with the freedom to create?



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Lake Side, c. 1962–1963

Woodcut print

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