

Albrecht Durer
Men's Bath



THE ART OF THE WOODCUT

SELECTED WOODCUTS AND WOOD ENGRAVINGS
FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

29 JUNE - 5 AUGUST 1979

REX de C. NAN KIVELL

A number of the prints in this exhibition were donated to the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1955 by Rex de C. Nan Kivell, one of London's foremost art dealers who died in 1977.

Rex Nan Kivell, a New Zealander by birth, went to England in 1917 after injury at the Battle of Messines in France where his company suffered heavily.

An early fascination with books, dating from an early friendship with a Christchurch bookseller, was pursued in London, where he concentrated on collecting prints and books on the early days of New Zealand and Australia.

In 1922 he bought a partnership in the newly opened Redfern Gallery which specialized in works by little known British artists. Five years later he became the sole owner of the gallery, moved it to its present West End premises and branched out into contemporary French art, still showing lesser known artists with those already recognised masters. Many of the prints which Rex Nan Kivell donated to this Gallery (more than 300 items in all) are by artists he represented. Because a number of these are still little known, it has proved impossible to consistently provide dates for the works and artists in the catalogue.

The works themselves, however, are of a consistently high standard as Nan Kivell was obviously able to recognise and constitute an important part of this gallery's total print collection, documenting an artistic period which is otherwise not well represented by the Gallery.

INTRODUCTION

"By using wood, I found in the earlier prints, a material that contributed an animal energy to the image. A section cut from a tree is a graph of frozen growth - the tree a vertical river of arrested sap. By conspiring with the flow of timber in forming an image, I felt in circuit with reality outside."

Michael Rothenstein, 1972

The woodcut is the oldest of standard printing processes having originated in China around the 10th century where it was employed as a means of reproducing small devotional images on silk and later mulberry paper. Some time in the 15th century the woodcut was introduced to the West where it served a similar function but a different religion. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries the woodcut acquired great importance, supplanting the hand-painted illumination as a means of illustrating text, making books accessible to a wider audience than just clergy and cognoscenti.

As the artisans who cut the woodblocks were by trade cabinet makers with no aspirations to art, they dutifully plied their skill in an unpretentious and often unimaginative way. By the late 15th century, however, artists adopted the woodcut as a means of replicating their drawings. Only occasionally did these artists cut their own blocks, usually relying instead on highly skilled craftsmen who did the work for them, sometimes preserving the spirit of the drawing to a degree which is nothing short of miraculous. To produce a single black line in print, the cutter had to make four cuts in the wood - two vertical, on either side of the projected line, and two inclined cuts to remove the two resulting shavings of wood. The result was a free-standing ridge, which when inked by means of a roller, could be printed. By this means the woodcutter worked his whole design on the block, in the negative, cutting away wood he did not want to print. In many cases the artist seems to have totally disregarded the woodcutters' difficulties, making no concessions to the medium.

One of Dürer's great technical achievements in the medium was to develop a vocabulary of lines designed to simplify the woodcutter's task by giving tonal lines an expressive function - for example, instead of cross-hatching lines to denote shadow down the side of a figure, Dürer made the black lines follow the contours of the muscles, in parallel; thus single tapering scoops with a burin could be used in place of laborious multi-directional chopping with knives. Previously, if the artist cross-hatched lines to denote shadow, the woodcutter had to chip out a chequered pattern of minute pits to leave a remaining grid of upstanding ridges, with sharp angles.

With the development of copper-plate engraving in the late 16th century, the woodcut fell into decline; engraving permitted much greater detail than the woodcut and the copper-plates were more durable than the wooden blocks which warped and split after prolonged printing. Unlike the woodcutters, copper-plate engravers hailed from the guilds of goldsmiths, silversmiths and embellishers of armour, distinguished and imaginative crafts more closely aligned with artists' guilds. Engraving soon became a means of disseminating ideas about painting - compositional ideas and such like - from town to town and country to country within Europe. Because of its comparative coarseness, the woodcut could not compete with engraving as a reproductive process.

In spite of certain disadvantages, the woodcut has inherent strengths. It took artists of sensibility and imagination to recognise and exploit the unique qualities of the woodcut to produce images so dependent on their means of realisation, it is difficult to imagine them in any other form. The earliest woodcuts, with their curious toy-like buildings and isometric compositions were 'honest to themselves' in this respect but were rarely very inspired nevertheless.

The finest early use of the woodblock as an art medium, was with the development of chiaroscuro prints in the 16th century. In this process the block was chiselled and scooped away in stages, with successive printings taken between to leave a final fretwork of upstanding ridges which when printed produced the dark contour lines and deep shadows of the image. Generally only two or three colours were used, a separate colour for each stage in the cutting of the block. Such prints can be read as a simplified map of light and shadow with 'tidal marks' demarcating the borders between the graduated tones. From an appropriate distance the schematised colours of a chiaroscuro print can convey a whole range of tones, the unprinted paper denoting points of illumination in the subject. The print, 'Descent from the Cross' by Ugo da Carpi, the artist credited with the invention of the chiaroscuro process, is a superb example - true to the medium, economical in its means and expressive in a direct, humble and harmonious way. Although based on a painting by Raphael, da Carpi's print comes into its own as a unique image, related only thematically and compositionally to the painting which was its model.

The history of the woodcut has been a chequered one; like many other media it has experienced its ups and downs in popularity. Out of favour for centuries it experienced a remarkable revival in the late 19th and early 20th centuries owing to artists like Edvard Munch, Paul Gauguin and, later, the German Expressionists. In the woodcuts of these artists the essential character of the wood, what Rothenstein refers to as "animal energy", is exploited in the images. Frequently in Munch's woodcuts the annual growth rings and knots of the wood are clearly visible and are metamorphosed as tidal ripples and cloud drifts in landscape images and, even more remarkably, as 'mind waves' encircling the human figure in intense psychological portraits.

Gauguin found the woodcut ideally suited to Tahitian themes - a culture which had a long heritage in woodcarving interpreted by means of images printed from carved wood. Conversely the woodcut was inappropriate for depictions of sophisticated Parisian society - such themes were more appropriately rendered by means of the graceful hair-like lines of drypoint, as realised by such artists as Helleu and Tissot.

The Japanese also had a keen empathy for woodcut as is apparent from their Ukiyo-e prints, a number of which are included in this exhibition. More so than European culture of the same period, Japanese material culture of the 18th and 19th centuries was wood oriented - buildings, vehicles and utensils, right down to chopsticks were made of wood. In the Ukiyo-e prints of the same period, depicting all aspects of their life and culture, harmony between subject and medium was attained.

A growing awareness of primitive carving from Africa, Polynesia and the Americas coupled with an unstable political situation in Europe made the woodcut an ideal means of expression for the German Expressionist who took to the woodblock with an apparent vengeance.

"...their farewell to the beauty of things, to the lovely outward surface of this world, became logically inevitable in face of the events of world history.... with pitiless hardness they scored forbidding grooves in the softwood blocks."

Horst Keller

Wood engraving , a modification of the woodcut, developed largely in response to a publishing boom in the 19th century, which called for a convenient and economical method of printing images and type together. Because type was printed by letterpress (a relief process) the use of engravings and etchings (intaglio processes) for illustration, required separate printings. By using the dense engrain of a hardwood, such as boxwood or pear, it was possible to obtain durable engraved woodblocks, bearing fine detail, which could be fitted into the printers form with type, and the two printed together by letterpress. With the advent of photography, wood engraving was adopted as a means of reproducing tonal images for books and newspapers. In tone engraving, the engraver simulates the half-tones of the original image, usually a photograph, by cutting fine 'white' lines and dots into the block, lightening areas of the block that print black. At an appropriate distance, the lines of tone engravings become indistinct and merge into tones of grey. When process engraving enabled halftones to be photomechanically produced on metal plates, tone engraving on wood blocks became obsolete.

But white line engraving, freed from its reproductive role became a particularly popular form of print making in the post war period, especially for luxury illustrated books with small illustrations. Gradually wood engravings became freed from their illustrative role and were made with a view to wall display. The majority of prints in this exhibition derived from this period of prolific production.

Today the woodcut has been eclipsed in popularity with printmakers by lithography and etching. Compared with these media, the woodblock is a relatively intractable material. Nevertheless, throughout the world, artists continue to make woodcuts appreciating the unique qualities of the medium.

Andrew Bogle,
Curator of Prints and Drawings

CATALOGUE OF WORKS

1. A. BUDAY (1907-) British
Timon of Athens wood engraving 1940
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
2. STEPHEN F. CHAMP (active mid 20th cent.) New Zealand
Temptation of Eve wood engraving
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
3. ASA CHEFFETS (1897-) American
Reflection in Crystal wood engraving
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
4. IAN CHEYNE (1895-1955) British
Beeches in Glen Lyon woodcut
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
5. PHILIP CLAIRMONT (1949-) New Zealand
Sink woodcut 1978
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
6. UGO DA CARPI (1479-1532) Italian, after Raphael
The Descent from the Cross woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
7. ERIC FITCH DAGLISH (1894-) British
Marine Life wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
8. A Fireside wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
9. GASTON DE LATENAY (1851-1913) French
Le Parc woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
10. ALBRECHT DURER (1471-1528) German
The Angel with the Key of the Bottomless Pit woodcut
Presented by the Auckland Institute and Museum
11. The Men's Bath woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

12. KIKUGAWA EIZAN (1787-1867) Japan
Woman reading by the side of a river woodcut Ukiyo-e print
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

13. LIONEL ELLIS (1903-) British
Nude wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

14. JOHN FARLEIGH (1900-1965) British
From the Nursery Window wood engraving 1927
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

15. LYONEL FEININGER (1871-1956) German
The Ship (Das Schiff) woodcut 1920
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

16. MARJORIE FIRTH (active 1940-60) British
Summer Rain wood engraving c.1944
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

- HELMUT (HAP) GRIESHABER (1909-) German
Carmina Burana (set of 13 prints) 1965
woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

17. Floret Silva
18. Chum geselle min
19. O Fortuna
20. Primo vere
21. Uff dem anger I
22. Uff dem anger II
23. Ego sum abbas
24. In taberna I
25. In taberna II
26. Cours d'amour I
27. Cours d'amour II
28. Blanziflor et Helena
29. Cover Block

30. MARY GROOM (active c1950) British
Angels Harvesting wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

31. HERBERT GURSCHNER (1901-) German/British
Bavarian Cafe woodcut
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
32. HIDEO HAGIWARA (1913-) Japanese
Clematis 1960 woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
33. K. W. HASSALL (1901-1970) British/New Zealand
Feeding Time wood engraving
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
34. Sheep under Trees wood engraving
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
35. Two Large Trees wood engraving
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
36. Tortured wood engraving
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
37. ERICH HECKEL (1883-1970) German
Head of a Young Girl (Mädchenkopf) woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
38. S. HELMUT (active mid 20th cent.) British
The Red Stood woodcut
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
39. GERTRUDE HERMES (1901-) British
Bird wood engraving 1932
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
40. ANONYMOUS, after P. J. HOGAN (1805-1878) New Zealand
Auckland - from the New Wharf wood engraving 1853
Presented by Dr. I.J.A. MacFarlane
41. TOMIO KINOSHITA (1923-) Japanese
The End woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
42. Masks (Calamity) woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
43. SANGOKUTE KUNIMORI (active early 19th cent.) Japanese
The Actor Sawamura Gennosuke woodcut Ukiyo-e print
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
44. CLARE LEIGHTON (1900-) British
Breaking Camp wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

45. NICHOLAS LESEUR (1690-1764) French, after Daniel Saiter
St. Sebastian etching and woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
46. PETER LULING (active mid 20th cent.) British
Provençal Farm wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
47. WINIFRED MCKENZIE (1905-) British
Rivers woodcut
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
48. GERHARD MARCKS (1889-) German
Bullfight III woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
49. Old Woman with Spade (Alte mit Spatem) woodcut 1945
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
50. S. B. MACLELLAN (1903-1973) New Zealand
The Cove wood engraving
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
51. SHIKO MUNAKATA (1903-) Japanese
Setsuin woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
52. GEORGE NICHOLSON (active mid 20th cent.) British
Pigs woodcut
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
53. MARY VIOLA PATERSON (1899-) Scottish
Crayfish woodcut
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
54. Hyde Park woodcut
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell
55. MAX PECHSTEIN (1881-1955) German
Bathers VII woodcut handcoloured
Purchased by the Auckland City Council
56. CLAUGHTON PELLEW (1890-) British
Marsh Marigolds wood engraving 1930
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

57. ERIC WILLIAM RAVILOUS (1903-1942) British
The Young Men in the Fiery Furnace wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

58. KARL SCHMIDT-ROTTLUFF (1884-1976) German
Melancholy woodcut 1914
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

59. Three Kings woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

60. Woman in the Woods woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

61. MAY AIMEE SMITH (active mid 20th cent.) British
Crayfish wood engraving
Presented by Rex d'C. Nan Kivell

- HERBERT R. TORNQUIST (1897-) New Zealand
5 Tree Studies wood engravings
Presented by the relatives of T.V. Gulliver

62. Tree Study
63. Tree Study
64. Tree Study
65. Barn, Fern and Tree
66. Tree Stump

67. GOSOTEI TOYOKUNI II (1777-1835) Japanese
The Courtesan Zensei no Yosohoi writing
woodcut Ukiyo-e print
Mackelvie Trust Collection

68. TOYOKUNI III (KUNISADA) (1786-1864) Japanese
The actor Sawamura taking the part of a maid
woodcut Ukiyo-e print
Presented by the relatives of T.V. Gulliver

69. MASAJI YOSHIDA (1917-) Japanese
Space, No.10 woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

70. GENEVA TRELLE (1938-) American
Where the water bends to accommodate the stems of grass
1977 woodcut
Purchased by the Auckland City Council

