Printing Without a Press

Pochoir Printing

Stencilling is an ancient craft. The earliest examples appear in neolithic cave art and today it is utilised in a more complex form through screenprinting. Pochoir (French for stencil) refers to a more refined form that was popular in France between the World Wars, particularly in the Livres d’artistes movement. This technique involved the cutting of stencils from thin sheets of metal. Ink was brushed or daubed by hand through the stencil, with as many as 20-30 stencils used for a single print. One of the benefits of this process was the amount of control it gave the artist in applying the ink, stippling, spattering and drybrush with a selection of course and soft brushes provided rich texture and varied tonality. Predominantly used to recreate paintings and watercolours in remarkably truthful imitations, it could also be used to add colour to existing black and white prints, such as lithographs and etchings, or as a technique to create prints in their own right.

The Stencil
Stencils can be cut from thick paper, cardstock or food packaging (cereal boxes etc) however with repeated use these will begin to break down quickly. Greaseproof paper or Kitchen Foil may also work and be longer lasting. Acetate sheets make ideal stencil material as they will not degrade and allows for easy tracing of the stencils before cutting. With stencilling you need to remember that a shape within a shape, such as the letter ‘O’ will require some sort of link to hold the centre part of the stencil in place. Complex imagery may prove challenging in solving how to create the stencils successfully.

The Ink
Traditionally watercolour and gouache are used but, Acrylic inks such as Dr Ph Martins or thinned acrylic paint will provide brilliant colours and have the advantage of being quick drying and colourfast so you can overlay inks without disturbing the previous colours.

Paper Selection
A good quality cartridge paper upwards of 160gsm will work, though may cockle with large amounts of ink. Soft cotton printmaking papers such as Bread & Butter Edition, Madrid Litho or Somerset Book will offer the strength to hold up against large amounts of ink and provide luminosity to the finished prints. Whichever paper is used it should be relatively smooth, paper with lots of texture will allow ink to undercut the stencil.

Registration
Registration is easy when using acetate stencils as the previous layers of colour can be seen through the stencil. For larger editions of a print, or when using card stencils, knock the printing paper up against a right-angled edge onto which the stencil is taped, ready to be hinged down onto the sheet in the exact position ready to be coloured. A piece of mountboard or greyboard (the back of a sketchbook) cut in a ‘L’ shape can be used for a registration jig.
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01. Draw out and cut the stencils from cardstock or acetate using a craft knife.

02. Position your first stencil over the printing paper. In this case, registration is not crucial so the stencils are being positioned by eye.

03. Pick up a small amount of colour on the sponge/brush. First blot on waste paper to remove any excess paint, leaving only a thin film of paint.

04. Hold your stencil firmly in place and begin to dab the surface with a twisting, pouncing movement to apply the colour.

05. Build the intensity of the colour and tonal variations by applying more colour in selective areas and use brushes for different effects such as dry brushing.

06. Carefully remove the stencil and repeat for each colour/stencil. Ensure the colour is dry before laying another colour over the top.

Tips
- The golden rule is to have an almost dry sponge or brush to stop the colour seeping under the stencil.
- Cosmetic sponges work very well for applying smooth areas of colour and gradations.
- The amount of colour loaded on a brush will create different textures and marks from streaky textures to dry scumbling.
- For complex imagery plan out your stencils first, determine the cut areas (to be printed). The stencil needs to remain as one piece.
- Islands need to be connected by a bridge. You can apply colour to the bridge space on a later stencil.
- Cutting all the stencil material to exactly the same size prior to cutting out the stencil areas will aid with registration when printing.

Tools & Equipment

For printing at home, work in an area with sufficient space and at a firm flat work surface. You will need: a Cutting mat and Scalpel/Xacto knife plus Spare blades for cutting the stencil. Watercolour brushes and Sponges (a kitchen sponge or foam makeup applicator) for applying the colour. A Registration Jig and Masking tape, for holding the paper and stencil in place (optional). Scrap paper for blotting excess colour from the brushes and sponges and Rags to clean up with.