

THE ART OF THE RELIEF-BLOCK PRINT

or,

A Printmaker's Journey

Children's Books Council Feature • April, 2003

"Not since the Belgian master Frans Masereel (1889 - 1972) has an artist reached such elevated heights in the art of printmaking"

-Daniele Baroni, Critic and Art Historian

Excerpted from the cover story entitled The Art of Stephen Alcorn
Linea Grafica, Number 296; Pg. 10-19; Milano, Italy; 1995

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For over three decades I've continued to relish the challenges of the relief-block print. Indeed, my longstanding investigation of the linocut has become an odyssey, a journey in which each fresh discovery led to new frontiers, and the territory remaining to be explored is apparently boundless.

It is a medium fraught with imposing constraints, but, paradoxically, its constraints have forced me to be more resourceful and inventive as an artist. As poet Richard Wilbur remarked, noting that the limitations imposed by poetic form can produce powerful imagery, "The strength of the genie comes of his being confined in a bottle." An often-misunderstood yet fascinating medium, at once age-old and modern, the relief-block print has been my printmaking medium of choice. I have embraced its virtues, as well as its inconveniences, enthusiastically, one might even say obsessively.

People are often surprised to learn that most of the polychrome, multi-layered images that grace my studio floor and walls are rendered in linocut — a medium that has traditionally been considered rudimentary, confining, monochromatic, an esthetically primitive — ultimately incapable of the technical complexity that characterizes much of my printmaking.

The material/linoleum I use is composed of compressed wood fibers and cork with resinous and oily additives, and is made in Holland expressly for relief-block printmaking. Not to be confused with the relatively soft, easy to cut variety that is often used in grammar school art classes as a tool to demonstrate the technique of relief-block printing (a tradition often associated with the production of simple, straightforward drawings, which, having been incised into the base material, often appear in the negative, as white lines on a dark ground), this particular material offers a greater range of aesthetic possibilities than the conventional, flooring linoleum of old — hence my inclination to use the broader, less confining term "relief-block print" when identifying the technique I employ. Alas, this product is no longer manufactured. Fortunately for me, I had the foresight to acquire 2 full rolls of the material, each one weighing close to a ton, back in 1987. A precious resource, if ever there was one!

People tend to assume that linoleum is soft and easy to cut, but the particular material I use is, in fact, extremely hard and brittle, especially in cold weather. Possessing a smoothness worthy of polished hardwood, the density and hardness of this material permits me to achieve a degree of refinement more often associated with 19th century wood engraving than with the primitivism of children's art. Linoleum does not possess a grain of its own; as a result, a clean jet-black may be readily achieved. The challenge lies in trying to bring a barren, nondescript, uncut surface to life by the deliberate creation of texture. In this respect, linoleum is an unforgiving material. The prominent grain in a pine woodcut, for example, may serve to distract the viewer from shortcomings in one's draftsmanship. But there's an inevitable crystalline clarity to every mark you make in a linocut; there is no way of alleviating what is poorly drawn. Finally, what you cut away can't be put back. But it's precisely these qualities that give a good linocut its particular vigor and appeal.

ABSORPTION OF THE PAST, AND EARLY APPRENTICESHIP (1971-1980)

I first became enamored of the relief-block print in the early seventies while studying at the fabled Istituto Statale d'Arte in Florence, Italy.

There I embraced a multitude of printmaking techniques, including several forms of etching (soft ground, sugar lift, aquatint and drypoint), lithography, and relief-block printmaking in general, and the linocut in particular. After my return to the U.S. in 1977, I continued my studies first at Cooper Union and later at SUNY, Purchase, which I found more sympathetic to my interest in learning such basic traditional skills as draftsmanship and figure drawing. I did a lot in the way of independent study, too, spending literally sleepless nights faithfully copying paintings by such old masters as Velasquez, Tiepolo, Goya, and Rembrandt in a kind of informal apprenticeship.



(Fig.1 — Copy of Velázquez's Crowning of Bacchus; oil on canvas)



(Fig.2 — Copy of painting by Tiepolo; oil on canvas)



(Fig. 3 — Copy of portrait by Velazquez; oil on panel)

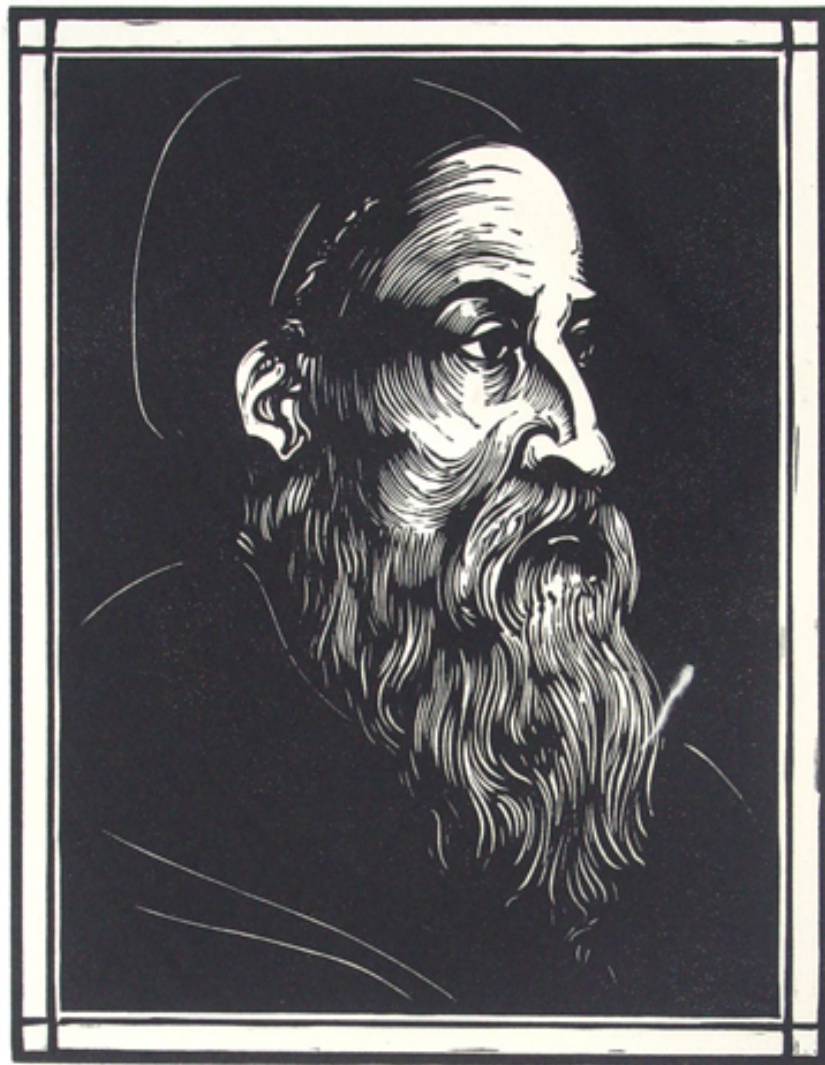


(Fig. 4 — Copy of portrait by De La Tour; oil on panel)

BLACK IS NOBLE

Early portraiture (1978-1980)

At SUNY at Purchase I continued my exploration of the relief-block print, and inspired both by a book of 16th and 17th century Italian folk art, and by SUNY's new, streamlined printing facilities, I began a series of 45 10 inch x13 inch black and white linocut portraits of famous artist titled "Ritratti degli Artisti più Celebri". Published by Herb Lubalin in 1980 in U&LC, these prints caught the attention of Random House art director Bob Scudellari, who asked me to do the covers and frontispieces for a new Modern Library series of literary classics.



5/16

Stephen Allcorn

TIZIANO

(Fig. 5 Tiziano)



7/66

Stephen Skow

BOTTICELLI

(Fig. 6 Botticelli)



GIOTTO

(Fig. 7 Giotto)



9/16

Stephen Alcorn

MICHELANGELO

(Fig. 8 Michelangelo)

Link to Ritratti degli Artisti Più Celebri:

<http://www.alcorngallery.com/CelebratedArtists/CA.php>

MODERN LIBRARY

This project gave me the opportunity to solve with linocuts a whole new range of problems relating to storytelling, symbolism and the creation of imagery that can be appreciated on a multitude of levels. I found that the imagery for each new group of six or eight titles were imbued with a different sensibility from those in the group of titles I had done six months earlier. In a portrait of Herman Hesse that dates from this period, for example, the linear textures, in comparison with those of earlier portraits, have been expanded, refined, and broken into cubist planes that give what might have been a static head pose a sense of vigor and emotional tension. Although deliberately formal in composition, and often framed with decorative borders, I always seek to imbue my images with vitality and thoroughly contemporary and sensibility even when they draw on the folk art or cubist sources that are fundamental to my inspiration.



(Fig. 9 Hermann Hesse)



(Fig. 10 William Faulkner)



(Fig. 11 Lady Chatterley's Lover)



(Fig 12. Man's Hope)

Link to literary portraits:

<http://www.alcorngallery.com/LC/LC.php>

SPONTANEITY

(Experimenting with engraving tools)

In early 1984, to avoid lapsing into formulaic mannerisms and being confined by the strictly literary nature of the black and white subject matter I had been treating at that point in time, I began to strive for a more spontaneous, flexible approach in my work. Rather than starting with a precise, predetermined drawing, which would be subsequently transferred to the block, I began to use the tools as if they were brushes, resolving the drawing as I was cutting directly into the block, and without the aid of tight preliminary sketches.



(Fig 13. Engraving tools)



(Fig. 14 The Awakening)



(Fig. 15 Lord Byron)



(Fig. 16 Moll Flanders)

Link to interpretations of literary classics:
<http://www.alcorngallery.com/literarythemes.html>

COLOR

The substance of my initial experiments with color was a series of animal prints begun in 1987, which I originally conceived as a bestiary alphabet or collection of verse. The first images were rendered in just two colors — a pale background and a darker tone for the principal subject. Gradually, the color concepts became more complex, and borders were added. I suspect that the borders, as well as the intricate, stylized textures of feathers, fur, and foliage that lend the prints vibrancy, derive in part from the crafts tradition — the frame carving and inlaid furniture making — that I was exposed to in the Florentine neighborhood where I lived as a boy.



(Fig. 17 — La Città Ideale; 4 color, relief-block print; a.p.)

<http://www.alcorngallery.com/Folklore/Folklore.php>

The illustrations that adorn the book entitled HOOFBEATS, CLAWS & RIPPLED FINS: CREATURE POEMS were selected from the aforementioned series of animal prints that I had created for my own satisfaction. The stimulus came from new surroundings. In 1986 I moved from Florence, Italy — an ancient, bustling city — to Cambridge, New York, a 19th century village in the country north of Albany. Amid gentle, rolling hills and noble farmhouses, I was drawn to Nature,

and to her greatest wonder, the Animal Kingdom. To my delight, I discovered that modern life does not diminish Nature's charm. The timeless beauty of the Animal Kingdom, and our folklore and mythology about it, spoke vividly to my imagination. It was this return to Nature that inspired me to introduce color into my work as a printmaker.

Working from memory- and tapping into the recesses of my mind — I sought to give concrete form to the most fanciful notions of a rooster, a cow, and a frog. What resulted is a series of animal icons.

Looking back, I see that the series embodies a history of experimentation in relief-block printmaking technique. It seems appropriate that the infinite variety of the Animal Kingdom is matched by my ceaseless experimentation in ways to depict it.

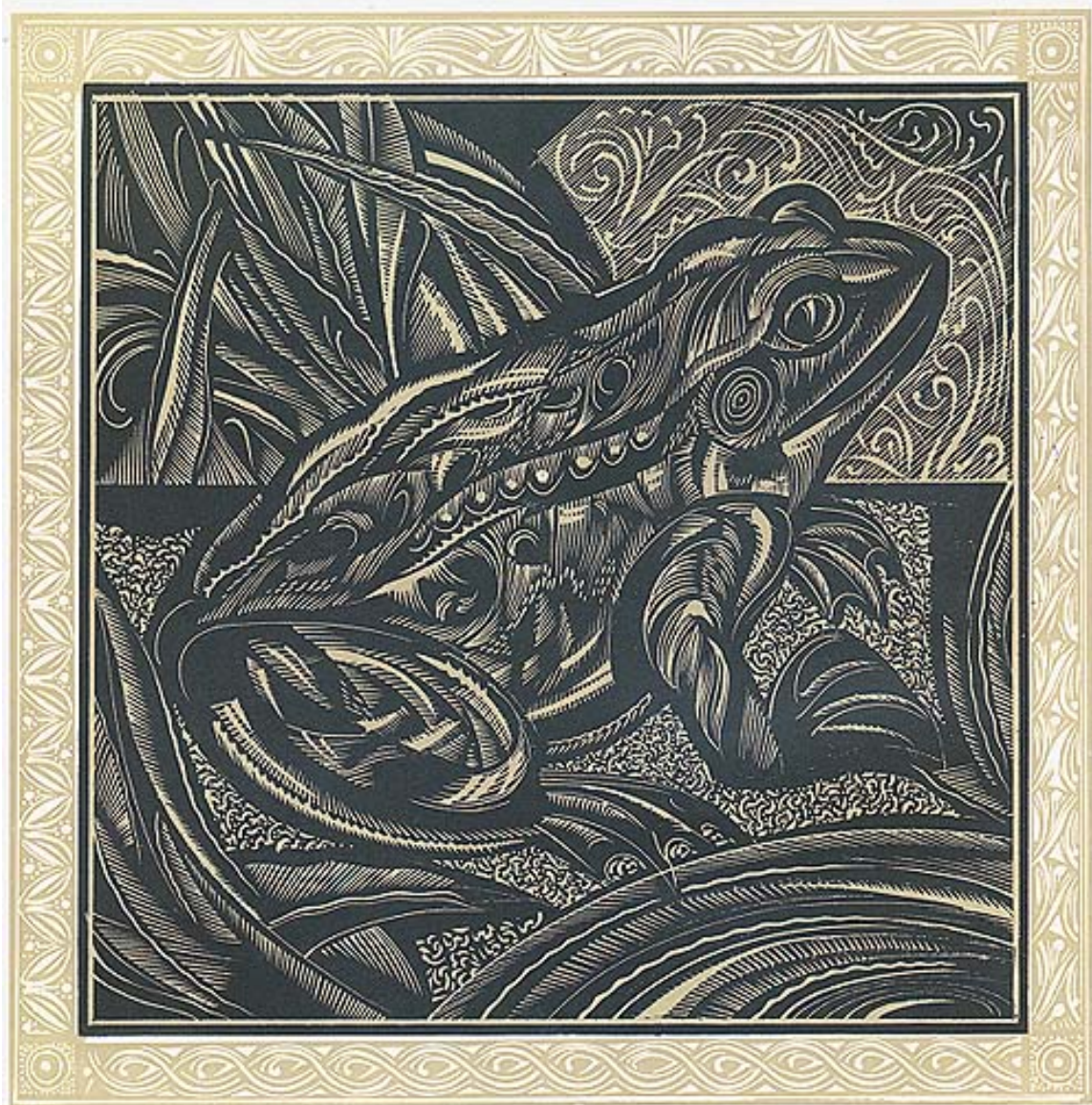
The greatest challenge was to match prints and poems. Milton Glaser showed me the way. Contrary to conventional wisdom, he explained, images need not follow a text. Just as words may inspire images, so, too, may images inspire words. He spoke from experience: *CATS & BATS & THINGS WITH WINGS* (Atheneum, 1965) — a book of Glaser's images "illustrated" by Conrad Aiken's poems — is an exquisite example of how art may be a catalyst for original poetry. In this spirit, Lee Bennett Hopkins brought my work to twelve poets who have turned a dream into reality. I thank them all.



(Fig. 18 — The Sacred Cow; 2 color relief block print)



(Fig. 19 — The Proud Porcupine; 2 color relief-block print)



(Fig. 20 — Kiss Me — I'm Really A Prince!; 2 color relief-block print)



(Fig. 21 — The Great Yak; 2 color relief-block print)

Link to Il Bestiario Straordinario:

<http://www.alcorngallery.com/Bestiary/Bestiary.php>

FULL COLOR

In the late eighties I found myself striving to achieve within the realm of printmaking the kind of sensuous gratification that, as a painter, I had always derived from the manipulation of color, the glorious gradations of tone, the use of different brushes and palette knives. In time, I found I could achieve analogous effects in my relief-block prints by manipulating the use of the inks and rollers, and by using the cutting tools in such a way as to create the illusion of tonal gradation.



(Fig. 22 — The Happy Reaper; polychrome relief-block print)



(Fig. 23 —The Wishing Well; polychrome relief-block print)

LIGHT OVER DARK

My satisfaction with the gentle luminosity of his bestiary drove me in 1989 to experiment with light over dark relief-block printing. The delicate quality of the dark lines and the translucent quality of the overall surface of these prints is

achieved by reversing the traditional cutting and printing technique and by printing the principal block in a semi-opaque white over a previously printed dark background. By cutting away areas of the dark background the white of the paper is permitted to function as highlight.



(Fig. 24 — Portrait of Jack Kerouac; light over dark, relief-block print)



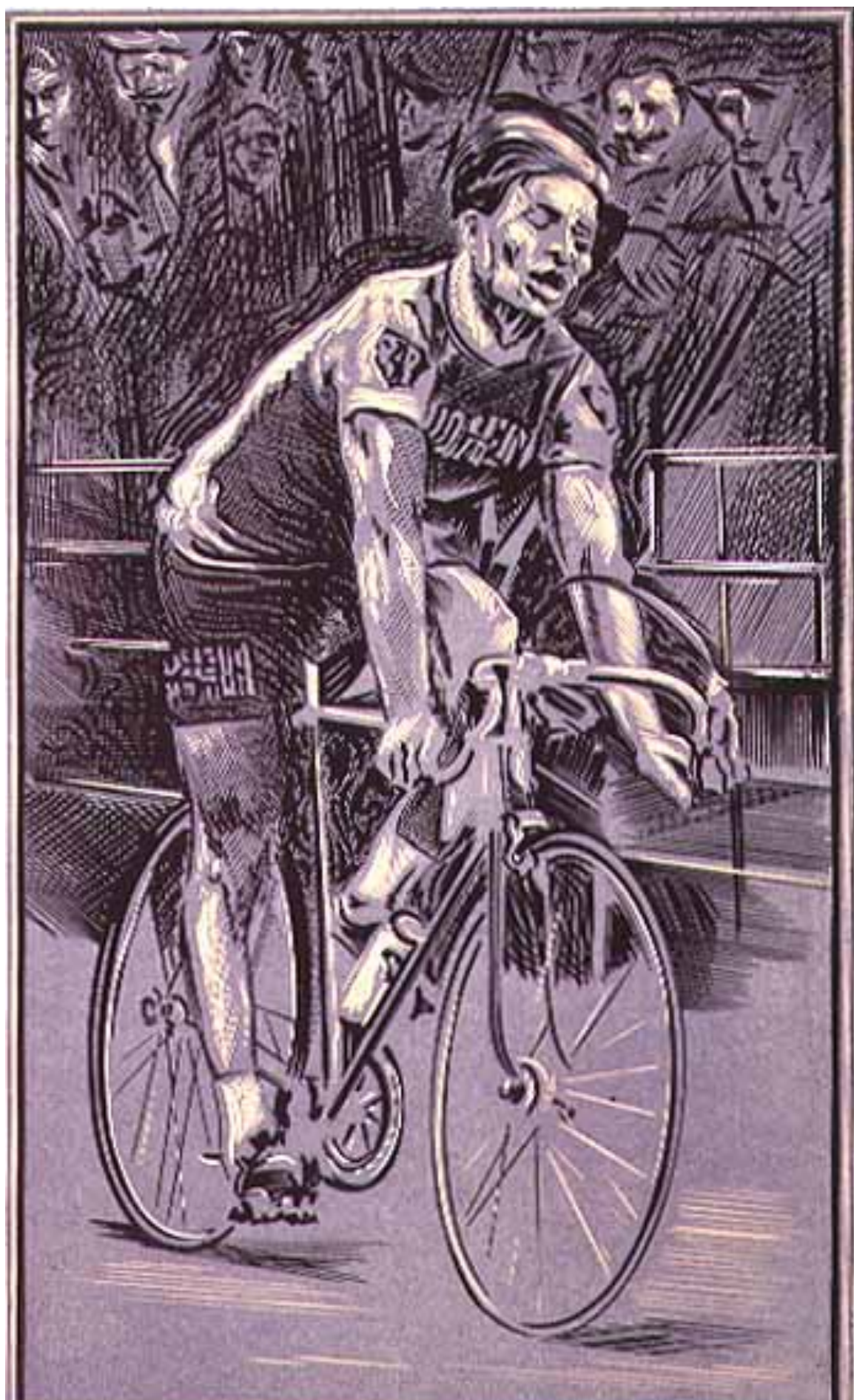
(Fig. 25 — Portrait of Frederick Douglass; light over dark, relief-block print)



(Fig. 26 — Portrait of Gioacchino Rossini; light over dark, relief-block print)



(Fig. 27 — Portrait of Sabina Reading; light over dark relief-block print)



(Fig. 28 — The Finish Line; light over dark, relief-block print)
<http://www.alcorngallery.com/rbp/PrintmakingTechniques.php>

REDUCTION PRINTS

Deciding to push the “Light Over Dark” procedure even further, in the fall of 1990, I began producing my first “Reduction Prints”. Initially, I was guided by the example of my only mentor in this particular endeavor, Picasso, who in his eighties, because he was impatient with cutting separate blocks for each color of polychrome print and with the difficulties of registration, invented the technique of creating a multi-colored print from a single block. What this involves is cutting the block, printing it, cleaning it, then cutting away a little more, then printing it again, and then cutting away a little more. Each time the image is printed, the newly cut surface reveals portions of the previously printed block, and the image takes more complete shape. Paradoxically, you end up with a block that is completely carved away, and that, therefore, can never be reprinted.

Picasso’s linocuts were generally limited to three or four colors and inked to render a uniform opacity so that the resulting images produce flat, graphic, and dramatic visual effects that are closer to poster art than oil paintings. I, on the other hand, still nourishing my appetite for lush color, have sought to push Picasso’s invention in new directions. Producing small editions of twelve to twenty-four, and striving for a delicacy, translucency, and gentle gradation of tone that would seem to be antithetical to the capacities of relief-block printing, I alternate transparent, glossy, and opaque surfaces, sometimes using as many as twelve colors. I am apt to exploit painterly effects even further by printing the white highlights with a density of pigment that produces a rich impasto effect. Unlike Picasso, whose linocut images were produced by journeyman printers under his instruction, I am thoroughly involved in every aspect of my printmaking. Craft as much as art, it is labor intensive work that offers a certain amount of physical resistance giving me time, as I draw, cut, ink, and print the bright layers of my images, to ponder what has gone into their makeup.

Of course, I have no way of knowing, but I have a sense that Picasso regretted terribly not having discovered this particular medium fifty years earlier. In any event, I feel as if I were picking up where he left off.



(Fig. 29 — Feeding Time; reduction print; finite edition of 10)



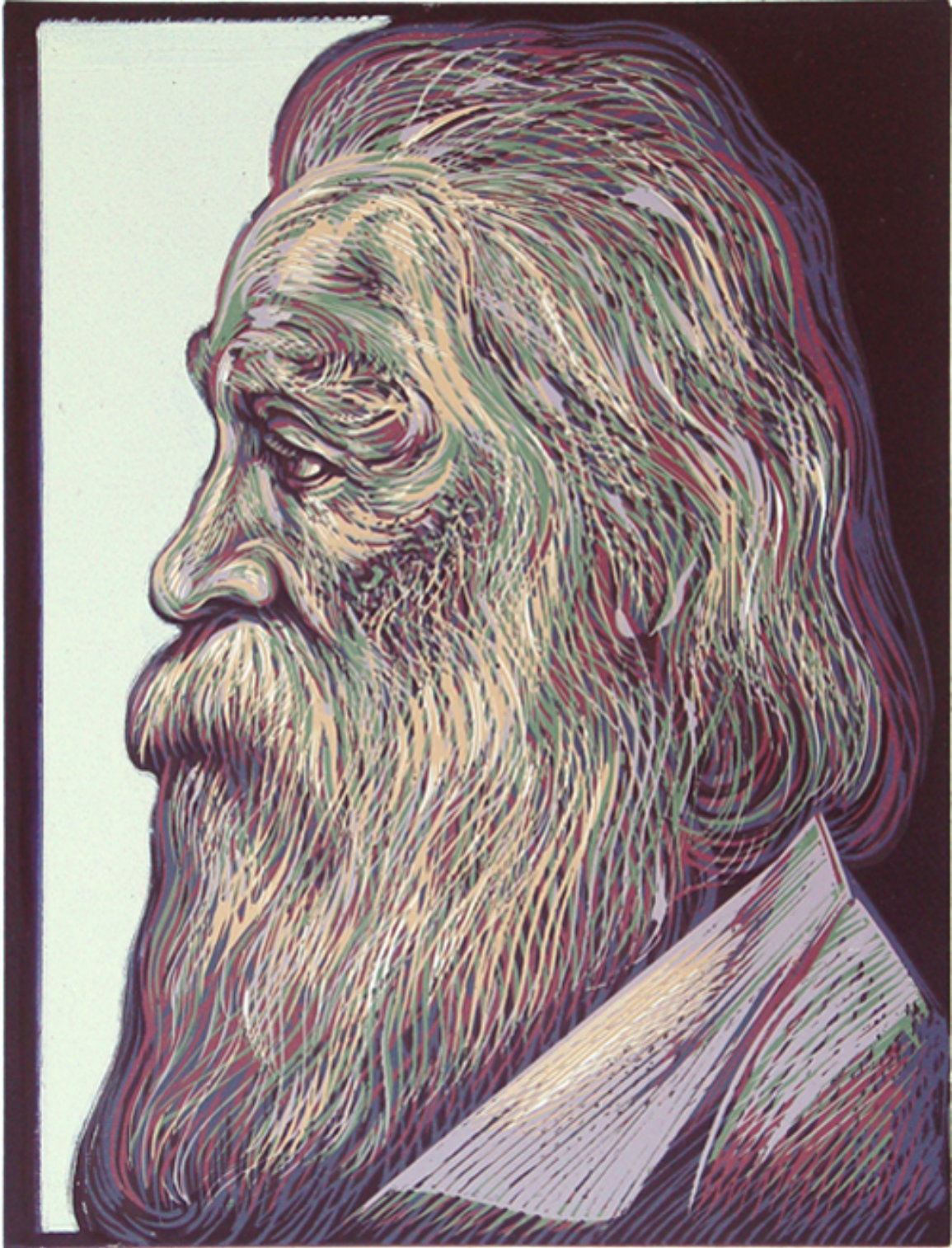
(Fig. 30 — Ludovica at age 3; reduction print; finite edition of 10)



(Fig. 31 — Portrait of Sabina (seated in wing chair); reduction print; finite edition of 12)



(Fig. 32 — Portrait of Lucrezia at age 5; reduction print; finite edition of 18)



(Fig. 33 — Portrait of Walt Whitman; reduction print; finite edition of 12)

RAINBOW INKINGS

My early experimentation lead, in 1990, to my experimentation with "rainbow inkings", a technique more often a component of my simple one block prints, one in which different colors are blended with a palette knife on a marble slab, picked up on a roller, and printed in one pass through the press, creating an unexpected, sensuous spectrum.



(Fig. 34 — 14 Birds; 2 block relief-block print, with rainbow inking)

STYLE

Despite my fascination with exploring the outer limits of the linocut, I avoid allowing my own motives to prejudice my commissioned work, preferring to let subject matter determine style. For the dust jacket of a book titled *Black Heroes of the American Revolution*, for example, I was able to indulge a fondness for idiosyncratic liberties of scale in a six color reduction prints that appropriately recalls the naivet  of 18th century American folk art.



(Fig. 35 Black Hero of The American Revolution; reduction print; finite edition of 18)

But in another assignment, the handsome, heavily illustrated anthologies *Abraham Lincoln: In His Own Words*, and *Frederick Douglass: In His Own Words*, I cheerfully returned to the simplicity of black and white, calling into play its capacity not only for detail and faithful representation but also for stylization and dramatic abstraction.



(Fig. 36 — The Martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln; B&W relief-block print)



(Fig. 37 — William H. Carney; B&W relief-block print)

Link to Frederick Douglass & His Times:
<http://www.alcorngallery.com/Africa.html>

Link to Abraham Lincoln & His Times: <http://www.alcorngallery.com/Douglass/>

CULMINATION

A combination of virtually all of the techniques I've referred to may be viewed within the context of the portraits entitled MODERN MUSIC MASTERS. This series constitutes a culmination of over a quarter-century of experimentation with relief-block printmaking.

A selection of these portraits will be published by Hyperion in the Fall of 2003.

Link to MODERN MUSIC MASTERS series:
<http://www.alcorngallery.com/MMM/>

Creating a black and white relief-block print:

First I make sketch upon which to base my image. I then transfer the sketch using a larger sheet of gray carbon paper. After the sketch has been carefully transcribed, I sometimes flesh out the drawing with diluted ink.



(Fig. 38 —)



(Fig. 39 —)

At this point I can begin to cut and engrave the surface in accordance with the requirements of the particular image at hand, and always thinking in reverse.



(Fig. 40 —)



(Fig. 41 —)

As I near the completion of the engraving process, I ink the block, using oil-based, black ink. I pass the inked block through my printing press.



(Fig. 42 —)

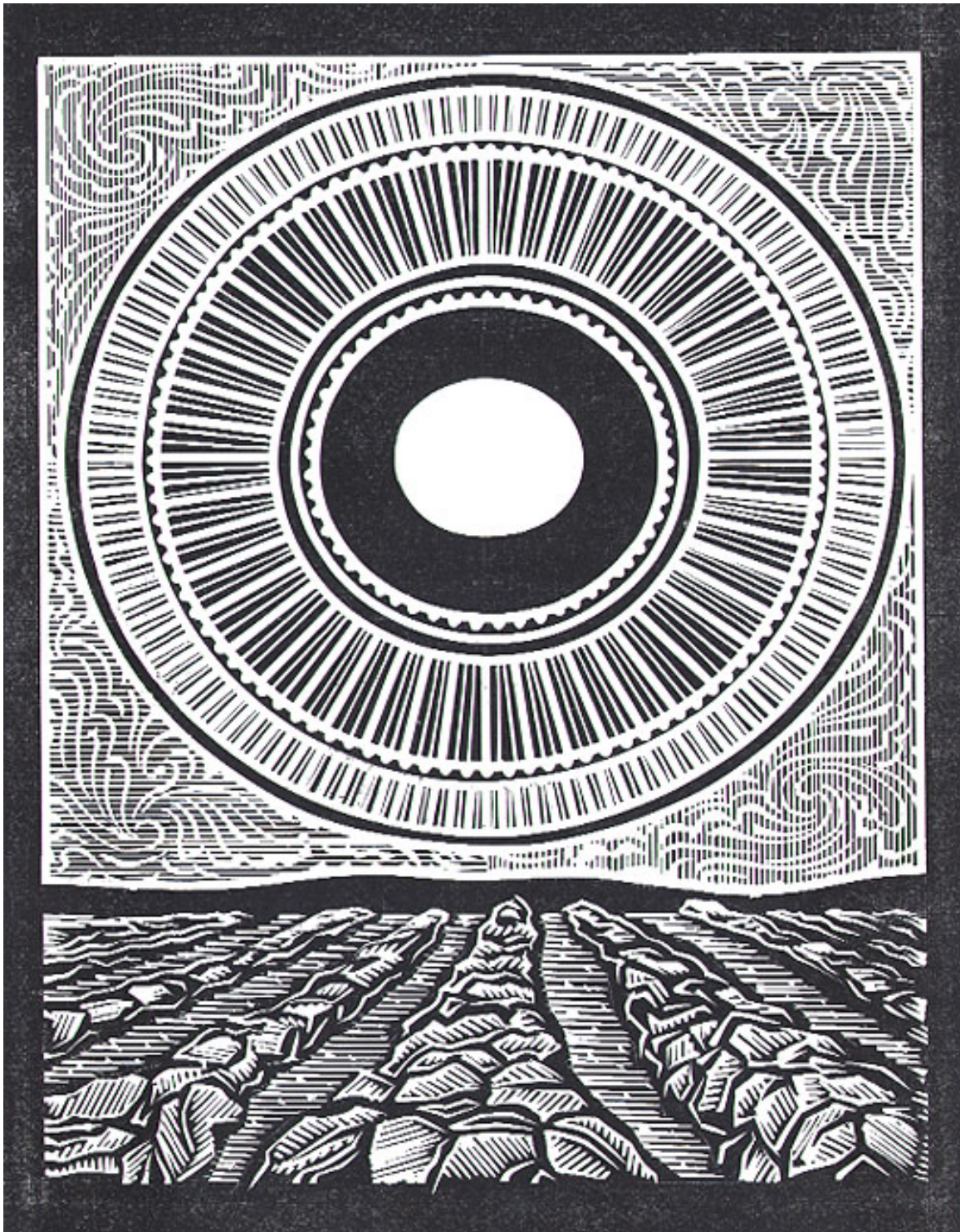


(Fig. 43 —)

Finally, I place the proof to dry on my drying rack. The print dries by oxidation over a period of 1 to 2 days.



(Fig. 44 —)



(Fig. 45 — Sunburst; B&W relief-block print)

This image is one of 24 images recently created specially for the book tentatively titled *The Food Gardener's Guide to Growing Organic* by Tanya Denckla and soon-to-be published by STOREY PUBLISHING, LLC 210 MASS MoCA Way, North Adams, MA

Link:

<<http://www.alcorngallery.com/Organic/Organic.php>>