

WHAT IS A MEZZOTINT PRINT?

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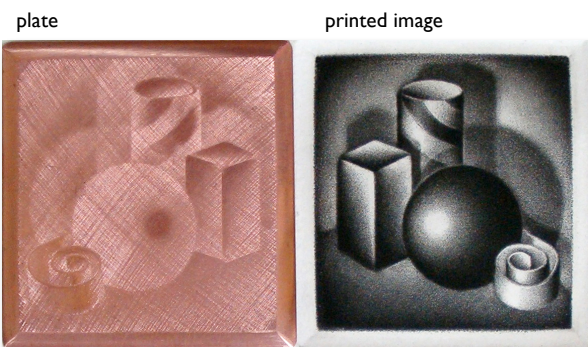
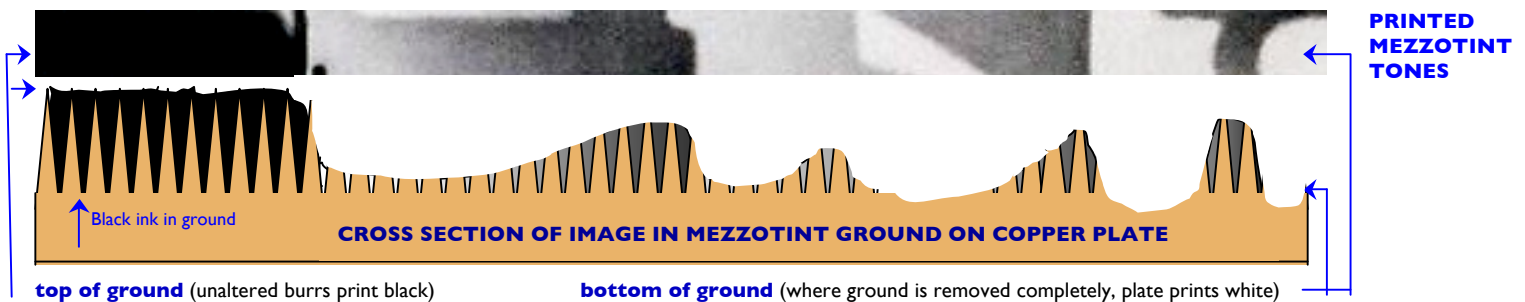
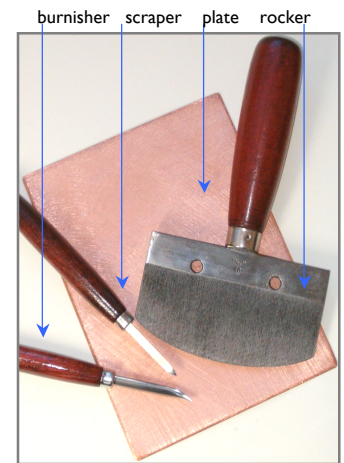


Mezzotint is a tonal form of engraving that was invented in 1642 by Ludwig von Siegen, a German soldier on leave in Amsterdam. The medium's ability to render subtle tonal gradations and replicate brushstrokes made it ideally suited for translating paintings, particularly portraits, into prints. Once introduced into England by Prince Rupert of the Rhine, mezzotint quickly developed into a vital industry for creating and disseminating reproductive prints. Although little known today, mezzotint prints had a profound impact on the course of Western art, especially Colonial American art. The medium fell into obscurity after the invention of photography made the need to copy images manually obsolete. Today, mezzotint engraving is experiencing a virtual renaissance as an art form for original expression.

As opposed to burin engraving, in which black lines are incised on a white background, mezzotint begins with a black background from which tones are deducted. It's similar to the method of drawing in which a white sheet of paper is blackened with charcoal and the image is "drawn" with an eraser. In mezzotint, a copper plate is substituted for the paper, and the black background is created using a tool called a rocker.

The rocker has a curved serrated blade that is rocked back and forth over the plate surface. As the blade's teeth prick the copper they plow up tiny burrs. When printed, these burrs will hold ink. Systematically rocking over the entire plate surface in many directions produces a field of burrs that will hold ink all over and print as a solid black tone. Variations in this process can imbue the ground and image with unique textures.

To create an image, the burrs are either shaved away with a scraper, or squashed and polished with a burnisher. Only by completely removing the burred ground can the plate be made to print white again. Altering the ground in minute increments produces subtle gradations and a broad range of grays or half tones. In fact, the word mezzotint is derived from the Italian **mezzo**, for half, and **tinto**, for tone.



To print a mezzotint, viscous ink (made from burnt linseed oil and pigment) is applied to the entire plate surface. The excess ink is then wiped away. Ink sticks to the unaltered burrs and wipes off in varying amounts where the ground has been scraped and burnished. The more an area of the ground has been altered, the less ink it will hold, and the lighter the tone will print. After wiping the plate, it is placed on the bed of a rolling press. Damp paper is placed over the plate, wool felts are placed over the paper, and the plate is run through the press under enormous pressure that forces the ink to transfer

to the paper. The printed paper is then placed in blotters to dry. As with other printing techniques, the printed image appears in mirror image, or in the opposite direction, from the image on the plate.