

Wood Engraving

While woodcuts used the obvious method of cutting the illustration on the side of a piece of wood, wood engraving used the end. This allowed far greater detail, & the blocks also lasted longer. It also meant the wood had no grain, (assuming knots are avoided), & even texture, making cutting more controllable. The one snag was that large illustrations had to be produced by fixing several pieces of wood together, for the wood used, boxwood, does not grow to large sizes. However, Victorian ingenuity overcame this to such a degree that large illustrations for newspapers & topical magazines were even produced with different wood engravers cutting separate pieces, bolted together to make the complete picture for printing!

As with many processes, one of the earliest exponents is considered the most outstanding; in this case Thomas Bewick in the mid-eighteenth century. Apart from his graphic skill, & eye for narrative detail, he developed methods of shading ideally suiting the new medium, in particular using white detail cut in black areas, as well as the conventional black details on white. Later craftsmen produced wood engravings in vast quantities for Victorian publications, & their work ended looking less like wood engravings than like the photoengraved copies of pen & ink drawings that they were competing with: this required consummate technical skill, but rather lost the merits of



Top: An engraving by Thomas Bewick, typical in that many of his illustrations were observed directly from nature.

Middle: a typical mid-Victorian wood engraving, probably cut by a craftsman from the artist's drawing.

Bottom: a modern wood engraving example.

the process. These pictures are probably familiar to almost everyone – the original illustrations to *Alice in Wonderland*, & in Victorian editions of the *London Illustrated News* are of this style, with both an artist & an engraver being credited in many cases. The photo-chemical process of photoengraving was being developed at this time, & rapidly wiped out the entire commercial wood engraving industry (10,000 engravers were said to have been put out of work), although engraving still continues as an artistic craft in its own right.

Engravings in commercial printing did continue in one niche market: technical catalogues. Here, the advantage over photographic halftones of clear detail (for the customer) & simple line work (which was easier to print) let engravings continue until the latter half of the twentieth century when the quality of reproducing photographs improved. The engravings were copied by electrotyping, & some stock items continued with the same illustrations for decades. (An example of an actual engraving of this kind and its electro copy is shown on the sheet about Electrotyping.)

Wood engraving is still used today by artist-craftsmen, & when used commercially, is usually reproduced from a single print by whatever process is running the product in question, not direct from the wood.