

# PRINTMAKING: It's Elementary!

by Andrew Wales



"The Mad Bunny," by Robert Rought. Printed on magazine page.

**B**lock printmaking is a great experience for students, and most elementary-age children love it. For many years I have introduced linoleum block carving at the fifth-grade level. However, younger children seem to have trouble carving into the linoleum. The carving tools can easily slip, and if their hands are in the wrong position, they can be cut badly.

I had seen the newer materials that are easier to carve in the art catalogs and was eager to try using them for the next time. After testing them myself, I felt comfortable using them with my fourth-grade classes.

Soft-Kut® and E-Z-Cut are two of the brands of material that I'm describing. They are made of a rubber-like material that won't skid away from the student, and cuts without requiring much pressure or force. It is so easy to carve that young students can safely do it.

I introduced block printmaking as part of a larger unit on Pop Art. First, I displayed art reproductions by two different pop artists: Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. I asked students to compare and contrast the two artists. Their comments were very discerning. I was surprised at how they could put in their own words the similarities and differences of the two artists.

They noticed that both artists used images from advertising and cartoons, but that Lichtenstein's work was more "cartoony," with bold primary colors and very straight lines and that Warhol's was more "serious," with images of elec-



"Shadow Man," by Nick Minier. Printed on tissue paper.

tric chairs and endangered species. They also noticed that Warhol used a greater variety of colors and sometimes let his colors drip and run.

After looking at some of Warhol's work in which he used silkscreen methods to repeat a single image in a variety of different colors, we began our own printmaking projects.

**CHOOSE AN IMAGE** After learning that Pop Art is fine art, in which the subject matter or style is taken from commercial art, I had the students choose a subject for their printmaking project. The only stipulation was that it had to be an image taken from "popular culture." The students were very excited about this, since it left the door wide open for Poke-

mon® and other cartoon characters, and symbols from the music and fashion industry. The students spent one class period excitedly making sketches of a variety of their favorite subjects.

### TRANSFER THE IMAGE TO THE PRINTING BLOCK

At this point, I feel it is a good time to reiterate to my students my own personal philosophy of tracing. I do not allow it in my classes. I understand that some educators might disagree with me in that it helps with motor-skill development and I know that some adult artists trace all the time. However, at the elementary school level, I don't feel that habitual tracers become good drawers.

What I teach them is this: I do not want them to trace the work of others, but an artist sometimes traces his or her own work.

At first this confuses them, but an explanation helps: They may have a fantastic drawing finished and they want to use the same subject for their print. Why draw the whole thing all over again? In this instance, I encourage them to trace the drawing or part of it on tracing paper. Then turn the tracing paper over and shade the entire sur-



*"Dog on Leash," by Emily Cornish. Printed on multi-hued construction paper.*

face with a lead pencil. Then, tape the tracing paper to the block. In effect they have made something comparable to a sheet of carbon paper and can transfer the image simply onto the block. I instruct them to go over the lines of the drawing on the block with black permanent marker.

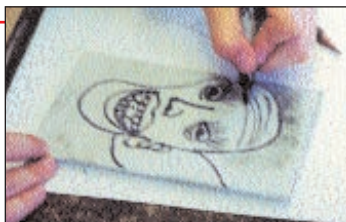
### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will...

- be introduced to the printmaking process.
- experience their first carving project.
- compare and contrast the work of two artists whose work is part of the same movement or style.
- choose an image from today's popular culture as inspiration for their project.
- transfer an image from a drawing to the printing block.
- demonstrate safe carving procedures.
- work in teams as they print their blocks.
- experiment with using a variety of different papers and ink combinations.

### MATERIALS

- Source material for students to refer to when making drawings of pop imagery: comic books, sports cards, candy wrappers, magazines, etc.
- 4" x 6" E-Z-Cut printing blocks
- 4" x 6" drawing paper
- Black permanent markers
- Carving tools
- Brayers
- Speedball printmaking ink
- 5" x 7" "printing" paper (i.e. construction, metallic, wallpaper samples, neon-colored, newspaper, etc.)
- construction paper (for mounting prints)



After drawing their images on their printing blocks with pencil, they go over the lines with black permanent marker.



This student is demonstrating proper procedure: always carve away from oneself.



The moment of truth—pulling a clean print!

**BEGIN CARVING THE BLOCK** This carving material is much easier to carve and thus, much safer. However, I still insist on good posture and correct carving technique. I demonstrate this to them at the start of every class in which some students will be carving. I show them how to hold the block at the bottom and push the carving blade away from my hand and away from my body. I can turn the block as I carve toward my hand or toward myself. If I see someone using incorrect technique, I take the carving tool away from him or her until the following week. Students really want to do this project so I have not had any "repeat offenders."

For most students I encourage them to carve the white area of the block and to leave the black lines as the raised area of the printing surface.

**TIME TO PRINT** After everyone has finished carving, we set up printing stations. First we tape down a 9" x 12" square of finger-paint paper as an inking plate. It is glossy enough to use for this and disposable. Each printing station gets two brayers. One is for inking the plate. After laying the paper on top of the

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block, they use the second, clean

brayer to rub the back of the paper.

Before we start, I give a little pep talk on teamwork. Each student within the group is given a number (1, 2, 3 or 4). I encourage them to let each student print their own block, but to help one another put the prints in the drying area, etc. Each student takes a turn printing their own block, then a second turn, then a third, and so on. In this way, I want to discourage an assertive student from making 20 prints, while his or her shy neighbor makes two.

I also encourage experimentation in printing the blocks. Here are some of the different kinds of prints we came up with:

- Printing on wallpaper. At our local wallpaper store they gave me several large sample books of discounted wallpaper. In these books we found a great variety of textures and backgrounds for prints.
- Printing on metallic paper.
- Printing on fluorescent neon colors.
- Printing on newspaper.
- Printing on pages from magazines.
- Printing on colored tissue paper.
- Make a print, let it dry; then on the following week, print over it with another color.

**MOUNTING THE PRINTS** After two weeks of printing, we trimmed and mounted the prints. I encouraged the students to trade their prints among their friends, which they enjoyed doing. Some even mounted a print on a folded 9" x 12" piece of construction paper to make their own greeting cards. I also kept one copy of each student's work so that on the following week we could have our own art auction.

For the art auction, each student was given several \$1 million bills in "Art Money" (bills I designed). Students bid for prints and enjoyed finding out which of their classmates was going to be the highest-selling artist in their class.

Students thoroughly enjoyed the project. It was probably the lesson they were most enthusiastic about that year. I also enjoyed watching them enjoy it, and felt a lot less nervous about potential accidents with carving materials. I can't wait to try it again! ■

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