The Matilda *stamp (inset, a digital print using color laser) inspired making a playing card-sized enlargement print that could be part of a two-plate intaglio print. This MiniBook shows you how I used the original dry point to get started.*

Making Artist's Stamps:

How a printmaker does it

By Bill Ritchie

There are many ways to make your own non-governmental, collectible artists stamps, and in this MiniBook you will see how an etcher can do it using basic etching techniques on little copper plates. This MiniBook shows the steps I take to make an Artist Trading Card, based on my stamp, using laser print etching (the *PnP Blue* method) for the text and the original dry point for the image.

Bill Ritchie shows granddaughter Matilda how he prints her drypoint portrait on his Mini Halfwood Press. She tries her hand at drawing him on paper on her side of the "workbench".

It started at the beach

The print in this demonstration started at the beach at Iron Springs Resort. I brought my Mini Halfwood Press, a plate and tools, including my digital camera and laptop. Our grandaughter posed a little while, long enough for me to start a dry point plate. I snapped a digital photo backup. For about 15 minutes I worked and re-worked the plate and then printed it--one print for each of my family members who were with us on that day at Iron Springs, on the coast of Washington State.

Back in Seattle I continued to print it, and then I scanned one of the proofs, added text and printed it on sheets of 36 stamps on a color laser printer. I used "fake" perforations for this one. (See inset, page 1)

Then I wanted to make an Artist Trading (ATC) card version.

Getting Started: PnP for text

Etching involves three steps: Applying a resist, drawing the image or design, and then etching it in with an etchant. In making artist's stamps, you often want text and numbers. You can do this using laser print etching, shown in the photo. I'm using the PnP Blue technique.

I created the graphics in my computer, made it a negative, and printed it on PnP Blue paper. You iron it on the plate at 285 degrees, let it cool, and peel off the plastic. The blue film attached to the black toner. Now it is an acid resist.

This technique is described in my MiniBook *Laser Print Etching II*. You may find pinholes that need to be covered with liquid resist such as Universal Etching Ground or stop-out varnish.

Preliminary etch

I like to give the plate a prelimary etch so that I create a lower level where the ink is going to be. For an etchant I'm using ferric chloride, one of the less hazardous chemicals for etching copper and brass printmaking plates. It has the peculiar characteristic of precipitating iron, so the plate has to be etched face-down, or on its edge suspended in the solution, or--as in the photo--pouring repeatedly across the plate surface. Ferric choride is relatively safe to use, but stains anything it contacts. I use latex gloves when I work with it, and I'm careful not to leave the rinsing area stained. I pour the solution over and over for about five minutes. The back is covered with self-adhesive plastic.

Texture with aquatint

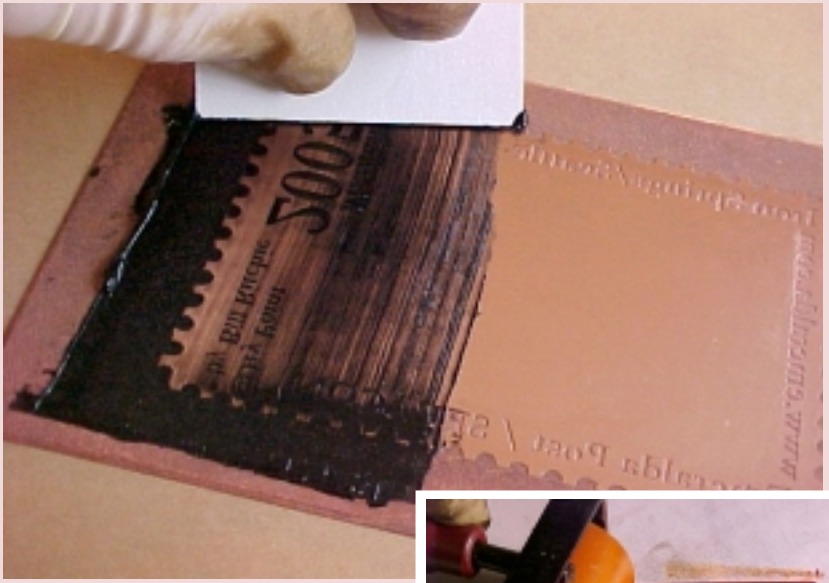
The prelimnary etch gives you a new level below the original surface of the plate, but in order to make those areas print they need to be enhanced with a texture. I use aquatint for this, by dusting on a fine coating of rosin crystals. Then I fuse the rosin on the plate with a hot iron, forming a field of fine rosin spots. When the plate is etched again, the spots will make little "peaks" of metal, giving the open aeras a sandpaper-like surface that will trap ink.

There are alternative ways to make aquatint. One is to use a spray paint, such as spray enamel, in a fine mist.

In the snapshot you can see the aquatint box I made for my small plates. It contains a few tablespoons of ground rosin crystals. I shake it and put the plate inside to catch the settling dust.

Etch the aquatint

Once again the plate is etched, this time to bite in the aquatint texture. You can't see in these snapshots, but the back of the plate has a covering of adhesive shelf paper (Contac). This is a handy way to protect the back of the plate; you can also cover it with spray paint brush on a coat of acid resist such as asphaltum or stop-out varnish. While ita ppears in these photos that only one application of aquatint was made, I actually aquatinted it three times and etched it three times. The last application was not in the aquatint box, but with a hand-dusting using a shaker. This gave me bigger crystals and produced a coarser array of dots. The more texture you can etch, the more ink the plate will trap.



A small piece of matboard serves as a squeegee tool to scrape ink into the etched areas of the plate, and I follow up with a brayer to smooth it.

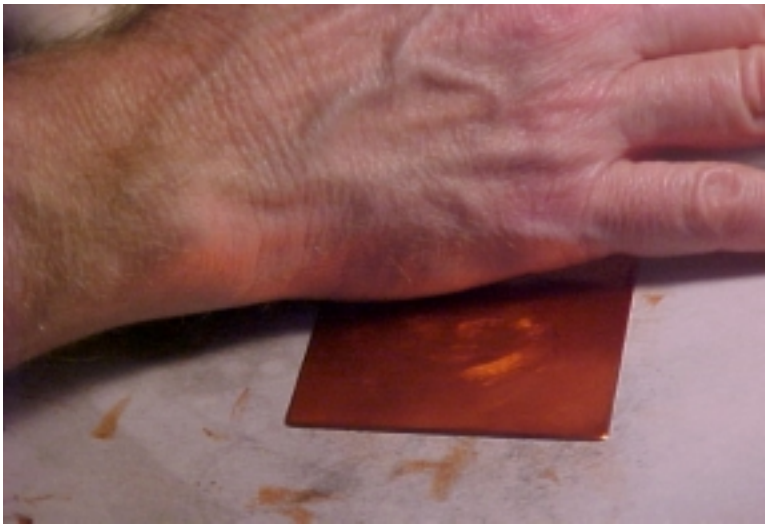
Clean plate and ink, wipe

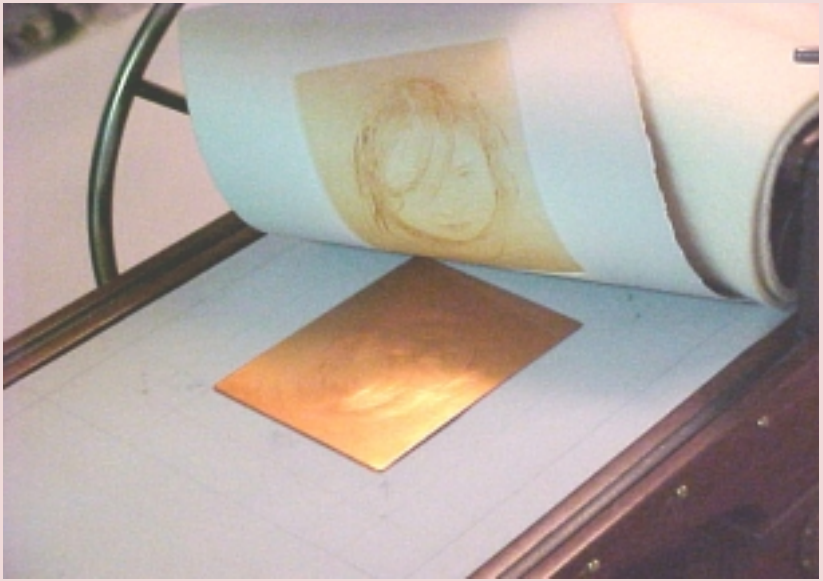
All the acid resists--the rosin, the PnP Blue with its black toner, the touch up etching ground (or stopout varnish) must be removed. Also the plastic film used to cover the back of the plate. I use mineral spirits and Soy Solve for most of the cleanup, but for the finish I use lacquer thinner, and I go outdoors for this because this solvent is hazardous to your health. It is said a whiff of the main ingredient, methyl ethyl ketone (or MEK) is enough to cause brain damage.

Next the ink is squeegeed all over the plate, working it into the lines and ntextures. I use a brayer to make the ink uniform. Following that I wipe the plate either with tarlatan or the heel of my hand.

Wiping the plate

Tarlatan, which is something like starched cheesecloth, makes a good wiping fabric for the etched plate. For the dry point plate, however, I roll the ink on the plate with the brayer and then I use only the heel of my hand for wiping the plate.

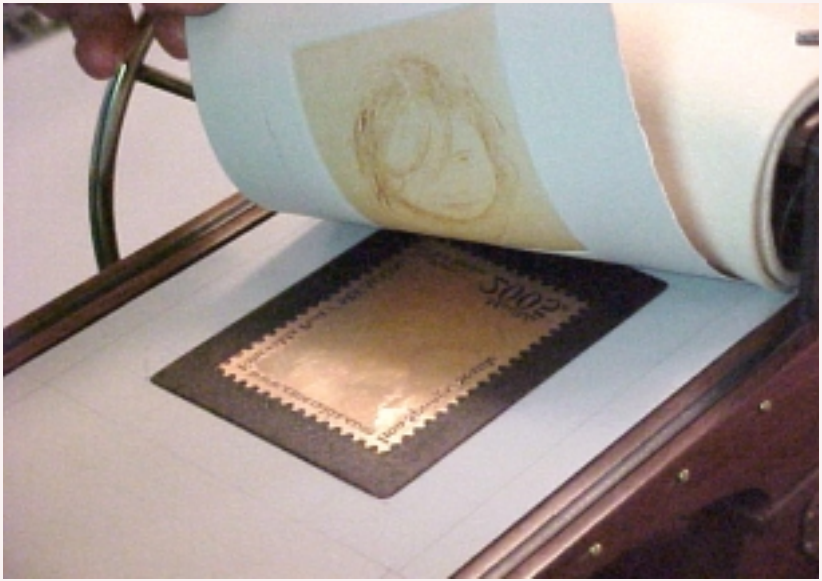




The dry point image after the paper and plate have been through the press. Pencil lines show through the semi-transparent plastic--my method for registration.

Printing the dry point

The drypoint plate, inked and wiped and warmed slightly on the hotplate, is centered within lines on a sheet of frosted plastic. The lines are on the underside and they show through. This helps register the plate so the image on the second plate--the etched one--will align with the printed dry point image. The paper, too, is aligned within pencil lines. The paper was soaked for an hour, then blotted so that it was damp and soft, but not glistening wet. The paper edge is left in the press, awaiting the second plate and ready to print.



Printing the etching

The paper with the dry point printed on it was left in the press, its end secure under the roller. The pencil lines showing through the frosted plastic sheet show where to place the second, etched and inked plate. This is called “printing wet-in-wet”, which means the first color ink has not been allowed to dry. It will lose a trace of ink when it is run through the press a second time to get the second color. You may let the first color dry thoroughly so no ink will be lost. Drying may take days. The registration technique must be carefully planned, taking into account the expansion and shrinkage of the paper and the image.

The first trial proof

The finished trial proof. It began as a dry point at the beach, became a digital artist's stamp, and now it's a playing-card sized "blow-up", one of my Artist Trading Cards.

Bill Ritchie, right, talks with visitors to the demonstration at Daniel Smith, Inc. Seattle.

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Published by Halfwood Press
Division of Emeralda Works.

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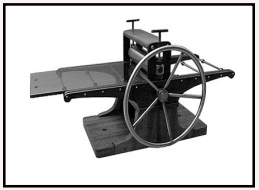

The Mini Halfwood Press sells for $685 and up.

Bill started his career at the UW (Seattle) specializing in printmaking and media arts. His artist stamps began as miniature dry points and etchings. He uses mixed media today, including digital printing. He works in traditional printmaking and multimedia, plus he designed and makes Halfwood Presses to go with his interest in developing links with like-minded artists, designers and crafts people worldwide. Ask about his CD/ROM series called *Stamps 'N Stories*, part of a game he's working on, *Emeralda: Games for the Gifts of Life*. Other MiniBooks can be found here, online. This MiniBook accompanied Bill's demonstration at Daniel Smith Inc. on Novermber 12, 2005.