

M. C. Escher: Paths to Perception

2009 Exhibition and Offering of Original Prints



“We Are Coming Out of It” 1946 wood engraving (detail)

M. C. Escher’s artwork continues to resonate in the century after it was created because his pictures illustrate themes that are fundamental to our consciousness. The patterns Escher composed give us a path along which we can discover even more than the artist himself may have been aware of, for the doors he opened ultimately reveal what we find reflected in the mirrors of our own perception.

Jeffrey Price, from his essay that accompanies this exhibition

“I try in my prints to testify that we live in a beautiful and orderly world, and not in a formless chaos, as it sometimes seems.”

M. C. Escher

ESCHER'S EDITIONS

by Jeffrey Price

M. C. ESCHER wrote "I am a printmaker, heart and soul." His unique visions were generally not expressed in paintings or drawings – these were but his working models, used to develop ideas which he would then bring to life using the traditional printmaking techniques of woodcut, mezzotint, and lithography.

It is critical to understand the difference between an original print and a reproduction if one is to understand why original Escher prints are so rare and so treasured today. It is relatively easy to understand the nature of a reproduction: it is a copy made by photographing an original artwork and reproducing its image in a book or as a poster. But what is an original? That requires a longer answer. The defining characteristic of an original print is that it must be printed directly from the artist's hand-made printing block or plate. There are many techniques in printmaking, but in every case an original must be printed directly from the block or plate that the artists themselves create. If the artist makes the printing plate, be it by drawing an image on a lithographic stone, cutting into a woodblock, or working directly with a metal plate; and if that plate is then printed, the result is an original print which can have aesthetic and historic significance as well as real value among collectors and in the international art market. A reproduction, no matter how attractive it may be, has no such value, just as a reproduction of currency has no monetary value.

To create a woodblock print Escher carved a smoothed slab of wood with chisels or engraving tools with infinite patience and skills honed over a lifetime of printmaking. Escher's preferred woodblocks were of cherry, pear, or other dense fruitwood, since these could be carved with the detail and precision the artist desired. Once the block was carved, it could then be carefully inked and pressed against special paper, printing it in somewhat the same way one might print with a rubberstamp. To get the ink rich and even is an art in itself: apply too little ink with the ink roller and you will get unevenly printed areas, too much ink will fill in fine lines. Escher placed a sheet of printing paper on a large flat board and pressed his inked woodblock onto the paper. If multiple blocks were being used to create a multi-color print, there were always places at the edge of the design where Escher could align the inked block with a previously-printed woodblock's impression. Once the inked block was in place on the paper, a second flat board was placed on top of the paper and woodblock, creating a kind of sandwich. Escher would then carefully flip the boards with his

block and paper upside down and remove the top board so that the paper was now on top of his inked block. He would then rub the back of the paper either with a roller or an ivory spoon (intended for eating soft-boiled eggs) in order to transfer the ink from the block to the final print. Each example of every M. C. Escher print required separate careful inking, printing and drying before it was ready to be exhibited or sold.

Escher would hand-print a small number of prints from his blocks and keep them in his studio for collectors and exhibitions. If an edition sold out (and if he felt so inclined) he might then print a few more examples of this woodcut. Escher continued to print some of his woodblocks until 1970 when his health deteriorated. This explains why woodcuts were not numbered editions, since Escher could not predict how many examples he would create in the future. Early prints that were very popular such as 'Day and Night' and 'Sky and Water I' would therefore have larger editions than a later more esoteric woodcut such as 'Circle Limit II' Some editions by Escher, such as his 1932 portfolio 'XXIV Emblemata,' were printed in a woodcut press, as were his woodcuts in the books 'Flor de Pascua,' 'The Terrifying Adventures of Scholastica' and 'The Regular Division of the Plane.' The woodcuts 'Grasshopper,' 'Scarabs,' 'The Spinner' and 'Vaulted Stairway' were also printed in this way for a portfolio included within the art journal 'Halcyon' in 1940. Escher remarked of this printing, "how excellent the prints are: I never succeeded to handprint that print so deep black while retaining the very thin white stripes."

Lithography is a more mysterious technique, but there are similarities to woodblock printing. Escher drew his designs onto specially prepared blocks of German limestone using artist's lithographic pencils which are somewhat waxy. Printing these blocks required the assistance of a master lithographer who first wet the stone evenly, then applied ink, and finally printed it slowly under tremendous pressure of a large printmaker's press. The finished lithographs were inspected by Escher, who destroyed any print not meeting his standards. Each successful print would be signed by Escher and the edition number noted. Escher would decide on the number of prints to create with his lithographer, and it is my belief that since some defective prints were destroyed the editions are often odd numbers (for example, "Print Gallery" has an edition of 43 instead of perhaps fifty examples). All except ten of his lithographic stones were destroyed following printing, most likely they were resurfaced and 'erased' in order to create new prints in the

lithographer's workshop. If a print was in great demand and the stone had not been destroyed, Escher would sometimes print additional small editions, usually differentiated by a roman numeral following the edition number.

Escher also created just eight mezzotints, and this complex technique requires a lengthy explanation to fully understand its challenges. Suffice to say that Escher laboriously crafted a copper plate incised with his image and then inked this plate and printed it in his studio on a small roller press. The technique to create and print a mezzotint was extraordinarily demanding, unimaginably tedious, and somewhat magical. Escher's final frustration was that very few prints could be created before the mezzotint plate degraded and could no longer be printed with the shading and details his meticulous images demanded.

Escher's general method was to seldom sign smaller and medium-format woodcuts and to almost always sign larger major prints. Lithographs and mezzotints were usually, but not always, signed and numbered, whereas major woodcuts were generally signed but never numbered. Larger woodcut prints frequently bear Escher's notation 'eigen druk,' which roughly translates as 'printed by myself,' or 'self-printed' though the wording is infinitely more elegant in the original Dutch. Virtually all of Escher's prints have his MCE monogram and the date of the print's completion in Roman numerals drawn within the image.

Every example of an original print is necessarily identical in size to every other print created from the same block, stone, or plate. These originals have frequently been photographed and reproduced in books and posters, just as painters' canvases have been photographically reproduced. As we have seen, in Escher's work only the woodblock prints, lithographs, and mezzotints created directly from the artist's blocks, stones, and plates are considered original prints and of value.

Originality has nothing to do with the size of an edition nor whether each print is autographed by the artist. It is the conceptualizing, crafting and printing of a graphic image that is the heart and soul of the creative process, and indeed there is a long history of printmakers creating their works without autographing them. This was certainly the case with the classic prints of Rembrandt and Dürer, and often with modern printmakers such as Picasso as well. The practice of

artists signing and numbering their editions was virtually unknown before the twentieth century. The creation of signed and numbered graphics sometimes had as much to do with marketing as it did with printmaking, and editions were often produced at the request of galleries and dealers to increase the sales of the work of their favorite artists. Many artists, including Chagall, Dalí, and Picasso also signed and numbered photographic reproductions of their drawings and paintings. These reproductions are clearly not original prints, and Escher never signed reproductions of his work.

Escher held tenaciously to his roots as a traditional printmaker in technique and temperament, though certainly not stylistically. He was the antithesis of a commercial artist and worked for most of his life without a wide audience or gallery network. The marketing of his work was far less important than its creation. Escher preferred to work alone in his studio and generally sold his work directly to the scholars and collectors who discovered his unique creations. For Escher, it was the concept and creation of his images that was of the utmost importance whereas selling his prints could be a unwelcome distraction from his work as an artist. Escher kept close control over his printmaking materials and created comparatively few original prints during his lifetime, a mere fraction of the output of other famous twentieth-century printmakers such as Mirò, Picasso, and Chagall. Virtually all of Escher's printing blocks, lithograph stones, and mezzotint plates were cancelled with a small hole and thus made non-reprintable at The Hague Gemeentemuseum pursuant to M. C. Escher's instructions at the end of his life, so we know with certainty that all original Escher prints are from his small authentic vintage lifetime editions.

It was extraordinarily challenging for Escher to translate his visions into graphic art. During his sixty years of printmaking he created just 448 different prints, each one a part of the interwoven fabric of images which stands as his life's work. Each and every original print that came from his exquisitely-crafted blocks and plates tells part of an extraordinary story that unfolds within the many layers of our consciousness.

As Escher himself once wrote, the story he told is "something that no other graphic artist on earth could tell you. It doesn't sound very modest, but what can I do? That is simply the way it is."

I'd like to offer my special thanks to George Escher for his comments on this essay that gave me first-hand insights into his father's work. And thank you to all the lovers and collectors of Escher's work who have made the past thirty years an extraordinarily rewarding art adventure for me with so many delightfully unexpected discoveries along the way.

– Jeffrey Price

M. C. Escher: Paths to Perception Exhibition and Offering of Original Prints



The connections between Escher's prints are as remarkable as their imagery. Each and every print, large and small, is part of an interconnected whole that is the artist's life's work. These pictures tell a fascinating story, and every one is a window through which we can see more than we might expect and find paths that inspire our perception. I might add that these extraordinary artworks are in some of the most exquisite frames we have ever designed at Artists' Market. This is a unique opportunity to see and to acquire the very best and rarest of Escher masterworks. Catalog numbers are from "M. C. Escher: His Life and Complete Graphic Work" and sizes are of the printed images.

Jeffrey Price



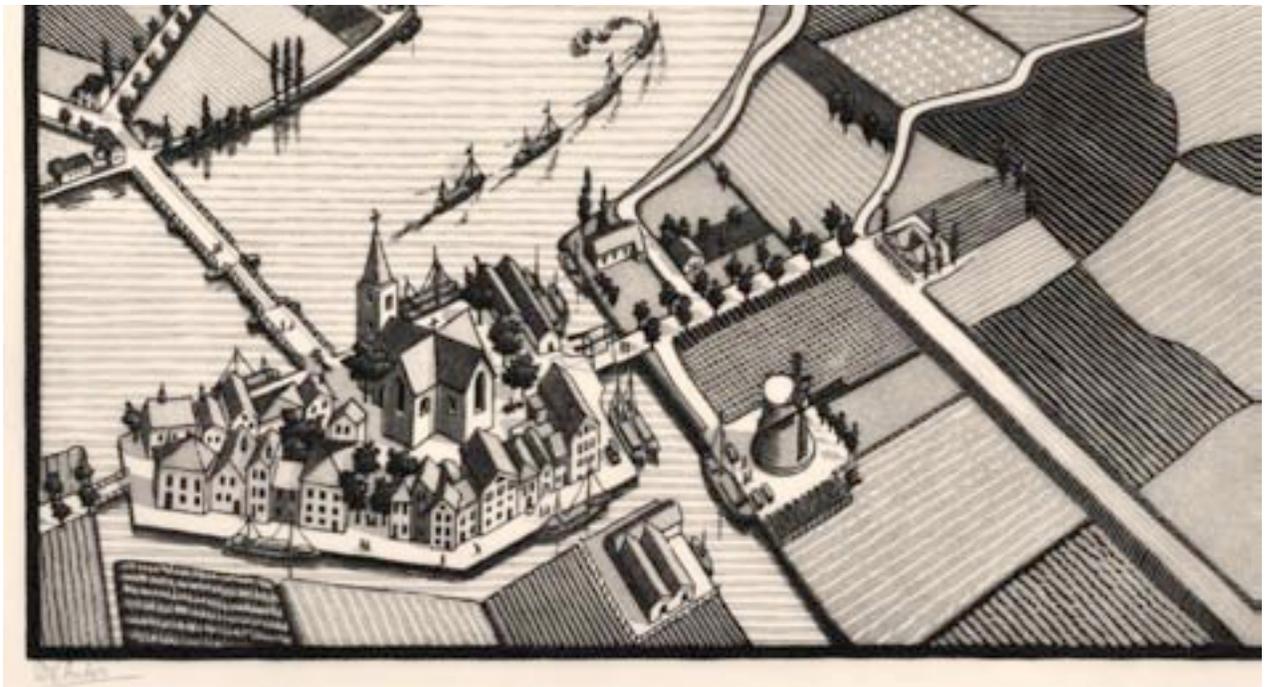


Amazing Images

Drawing, 1959 (5" X 5") ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation
Previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland

Doris Schattschneider wrote in her book "M. C. Escher: Visions of Symmetry" that "Escher wanted his graphic works to be not only visual expressions of puzzling concepts, but puzzles themselves, and planned to reveal this in the title of the first book devoted to his graphic work." One of the titles he considered was 'Speelse Verbazing' (Dutch for "Playful Amazement"), which he designed into the interlocking design shown at the right. For the English edition of his book he conceived 'Amazing Images,' which is a far more descriptive and evocative title than the one on which the publishers insisted: "Graphic Work and Drawings!" This elegant word-play is reminiscent of the crossword pattern that begins and ends Escher's masterpiece "Metamorphosis" and is a unique expression of the artist's vision of the perception of his work.





Day and Night

(B.303) 1938 color woodcut printed in grey and black (15½" X 26½") , signed and noted 'eigen druk' ('self-printed')

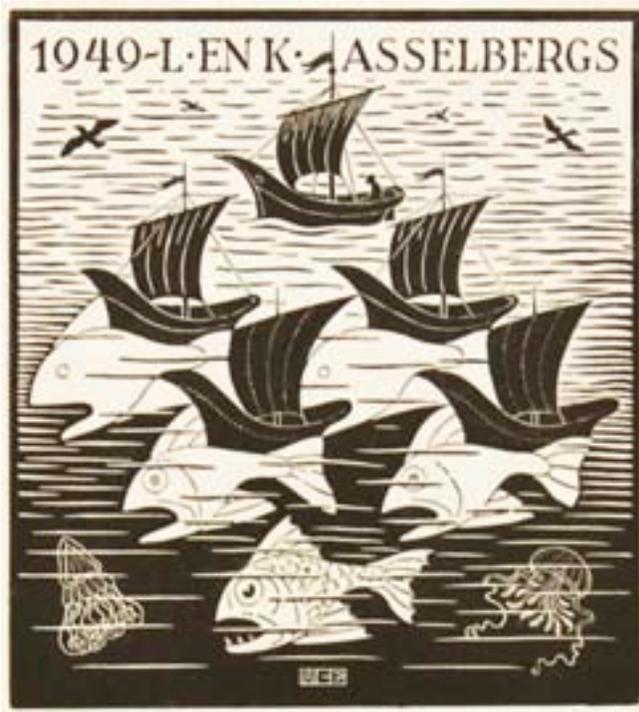
Often considered Escher's greatest woodcut, here we see two similar Dutch townscapes joined by curious fields that magically transform into flocks of birds soaring into dissimilar skies. Day and night join together as do the sky and the earth, living birds and plowed fields. A closer reveals that subtle changes occur as the town is illuminated at night and birds raise or lower their tails depending on which way they travel. Escher carved two large woodblocks to print the grey and black of this image, and it was always the print that was most requested and acclaimed when Escher exhibited his prints. This is an exceptionally brilliant early printing, before the chip in the church's spire that is usually seen in later impressions, with clear rich black inking in the upper right that is remarkable for this monumental woodblock print.



Cycle

(B.305) 1938 lithograph, signed and numbered 3/12 (18³/₄" X 11")

Escher has transformed stairways similar to those he drew in 'Scanno.' Here we see a boy running from a tower and down some steps. His arms are raised in a somewhat awkward salutation, and he's smiling, perhaps in secret reverie. His journey is short and yet this passage encompasses his entire world. As he descends the stairs a transformation occurs that is as miraculous as any myth. In a few steps he metamorphosizes into marble and what was once an actor becomes his stage. Beyond the tower is a serene landscape, perhaps part of the Tuscan countryside or maybe a small portion of paradise. "Cycle" can be seen as an archetypal image of the universe created from our own being. Is everything our imagining? Where does our interior landscape end and the countryside begin? What is the essential difference between body and stone, and why can we find soul in one and not the other? By raising such fascinating questions, perhaps Escher proposes that everything from the distant hills to our outstretched hands is a part of a complex, ever-changing and often invisible cycle.



Boats and Fish

(L. and K. Asselbergs 1949)

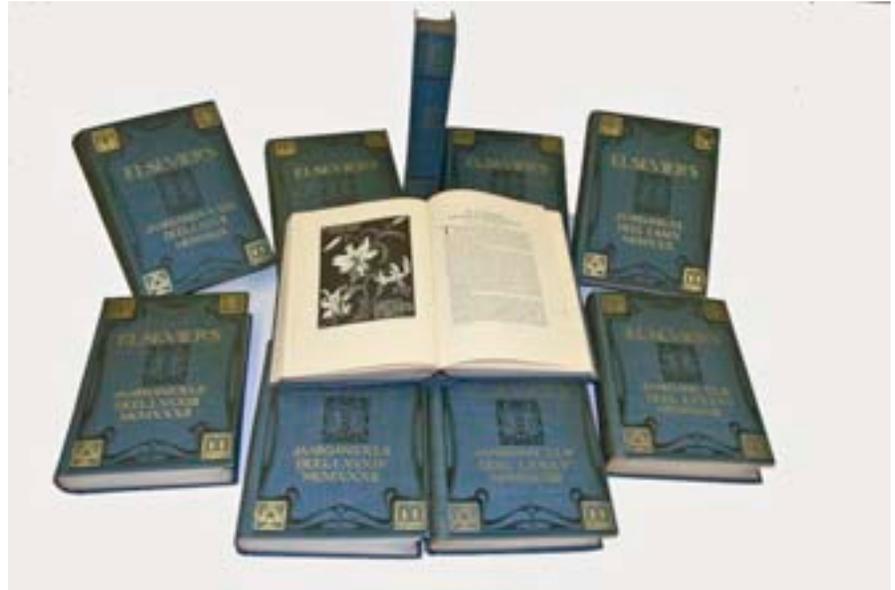
(B.360) 1949 woodcut (6" X 5 1/2")

This is Escher's most complete small print where landscape combines with interlocking forms. The sea and the sky connect on many levels, and the perfect figures interact with their surroundings. This rare work was commissioned by noted art patrons L. & K. Asselbergs, who presented it to their friends and colleagues. Karel Asselbergs, whose photograph is reproduced at the right, was commissioner for refugees after World War II in Breda, Holland, and also had a private publishing company known as 'Eenhoorn Pres' (The Unicorn Press). This explains why The Asselbergs commissioned Escher a year later to create the woodcut "Unicorns" which is also featured in our exhibit. When Escher designed one of his last masterpieces, the extended version of Metamorphosis III in 1967, he returned to this wonderful motif of boats and fish and incorporated a similar transformation into this print, illustrated below.



(M. C. Escher, the Boats and Fish section of Metamorphosis III (B446)

© The M. C. Escher Company B.V. Baarn, Holland



Lily

(B.156) 1931 woodcut (7" X 5½") printed directly from Escher's woodblock within a ten-volume set of 'Elsevier's'

While living in Rome in the early 1930's Escher collaborated with the scholar G. J Hoogerwerff, who was director of the Dutch Institute in Rome and a specialist in Renaissance art. Hoogerwerff composed a series of Latin mottos and Dutch poems that were unified by Escher's images. The three messages: the Latin, the poem, and the image, were intended to give separate impressions of a unified idea. The Latin can be translated as "People gaze in wonder at another's transience." The Dutch is difficult to translate, but we might capture the essence of the meaning by saying: "Be aware of our frailty, we may not be here long, but oh how we delight your sight." The woodblock print was changed to a much more serious and static version in the final printing of "XXIV Emblemata," and this lyrical lily was only printed in the Elsevier's journal. The print could, of course, be removed from the book and framed separately. I have not seen another bound set of this work, which is a compendium of art and literature of the 1930's and a rich cultural history of the period. The article by Hoogerwerff accompanying Escher's print was one of the first serious art-historical appreciations of his work and reproduces several of the artist's early prints.



Ponies and Birds Signed Print and Carved Woodblock Set

(B.363) 1949 wood engraving, signed annotated 'eigen druk' ('self-printed') (each 3½" X 3")

Together with M. C. Escher's unique carved printing block, cancelled, formerly in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague This is one of only three small prints by Escher that combine interlocking forms within a landscape and show the evolution of two-dimensional background shapes to three-dimensional foreground creatures. On a small scale this print encompasses so much of what Escher expressed in his life's work. Escher's woodblock gives a unique insight into his craft and is one of very few blocks outside of museum collections.



Nocturnal Rome: The 'Discurso' Pollux, Piazza del Campidoglio

(B.256) 1934 woodcut, signed in pencil (11 3/4" X 9 1/2")

For Escher, it seems, Rome was even more fascinating by night than by day. Here we see the gleaming white marble of an ancient mythological statue contrasted against stark black trees and a shadowy classical building. When we compare Escher's woodcut to a photograph of the scene, reproduced at the right, we become aware of how the artist transformed his subject into a dramatic vignette. Using almost exclusively horizontal lines, he captures texture, light, and perspective; weaving them together with a mastery that was reaching the height of its powers. The remarkable frame we created for this exceptionally rare woodcut echoes the classical forms seen in Escher's print.





Earth: Ants

(B.382) 1953 color print (6" X 5½")

"Earth" is one of only four small-format prints Escher created in color. This is one of the "Four Elements," created for the noted connoisseurs and patrons, Eugène and Willy Strens. The Strens' were Dutch print collectors and connoisseurs, and were friends of M. C. Escher. They organized exhibitions of printmaker's work, and had particular interest in small, personal prints such as 'ex libris' library woodcuts. In the early 1950's they commissioned M. C. Escher to create a special set of prints representing the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. These were believed to be the building blocks of creation, and had been sacred since ancient times. Escher used the properties of these elements to form the basis of his patterns, and so "Earth" is represented by a tessellation (tiling) of ants in which the pattern jiggles visually like swarming ants on their anthill. We may assume that the Strens family presented these fine editions to their circle of print-collector friends as holiday gifts at the New Year from 1953 through 1956, as is the European tradition. In this way the Strens family was able to have their own 'personal' Escher woodcuts and also share their connoisseurship with their fortunate friends. Escher created 'Earth' in two color variations: first using brown and dark blue, and several years later creating a brilliantly contrasting variant edition with orange instead of brown. We are fortunate to have both color examples in our exhibition.



"Earth" variant in orange and dark blue (detail)



M. C. Escher's preparatory drawing for "Earth"
© The M. C. Escher Company B.V. Baarn, Holland



Fish and Waves

(B.442) 1963 woodcut (4¼" X 4¼")

This was to be Escher's final small-format print, and it is certainly one of his most dramatic. Fish interlock and combine with waves in surprisingly complex ways, and the artist captures the quintessential harmony of his contrasting subjects.

Douglas Hofstadter, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Gödel, Escher, Bach," has written of this woodcut: "If ever a work of art merited the title 'poem' this is it! It is a paragon of compression and concision, and its visual polysemy – the black-fish/white-fish oscillation – is as elegant as could be. To my mind, this miniature represents what creative genius at its absolute peak is capable of."



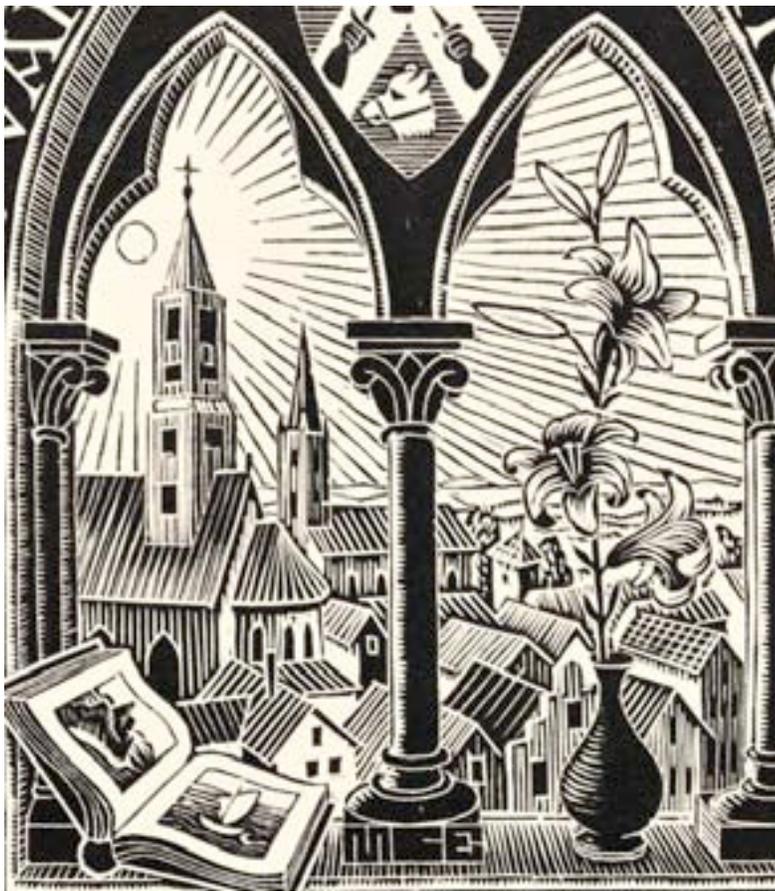
Flying Unicorns

(B.371) 1950 wood engraving (4½" X 3")

Escher's friends and publishers, L. & K. Asselberg, who owned The Unicorn Press, commissioned this marvelous print from the artist for their personal collection and to present to their friends and colleagues in commemoration of the 1951 New Year.

Each flying unicorn exhibits a different degree of shading, creating six different levels of intensity. Breaking away from traditional symmetry, the darkest unicorn kneels in repose and thus fits seamlessly with his companions.





The Vaulted Window (Ex Libris J. C. de Bruyn van Melis en Mariekerke-Mackay)
 (B.341) 1946 wood engraving (3" X 2½")
 The foreground bursts towards the viewer in the book on the window ledge and we are gradually carried backward past the lily-vase and over the rooftops of a Dutch town toward the shining sun which crowns this scene with concentric sunbeams.

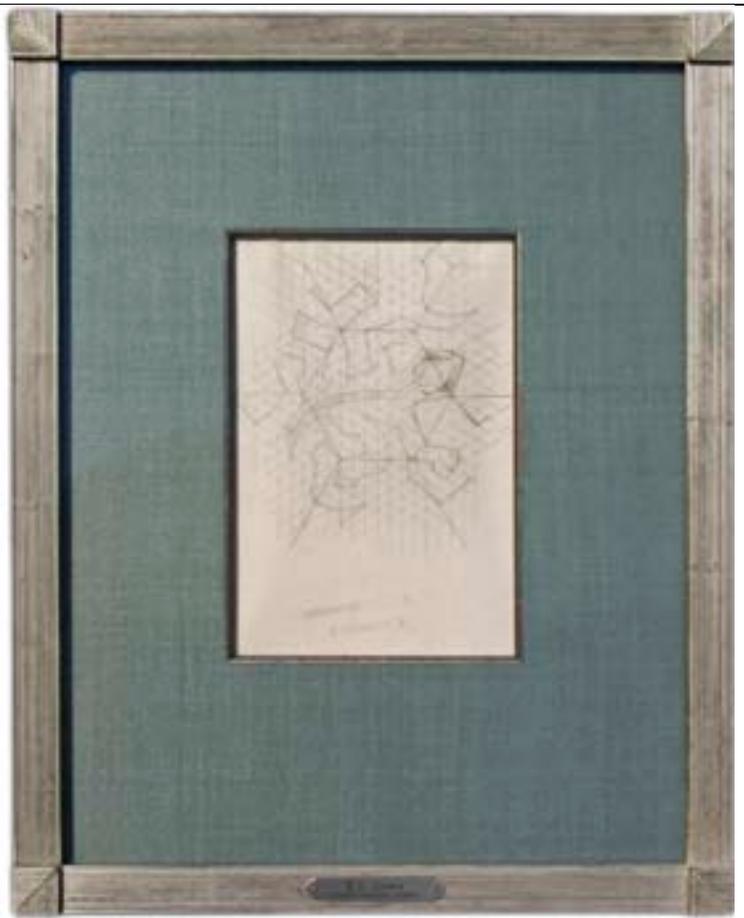


Four Miniatures

(B.68a, 68b, 68c, 68d) 1921 woodcuts, edition of 222 (each print ¾" X ¾")

These are the smallest woodcuts Escher ever created. They were originally surrounded by type in Escher's first published work, "Flor de Pascua," which is a collection of images and ideological tracts. The curious alarm clock reads 4:00, and each flower exhibits a bold symmetry characteristic of Escher's work.



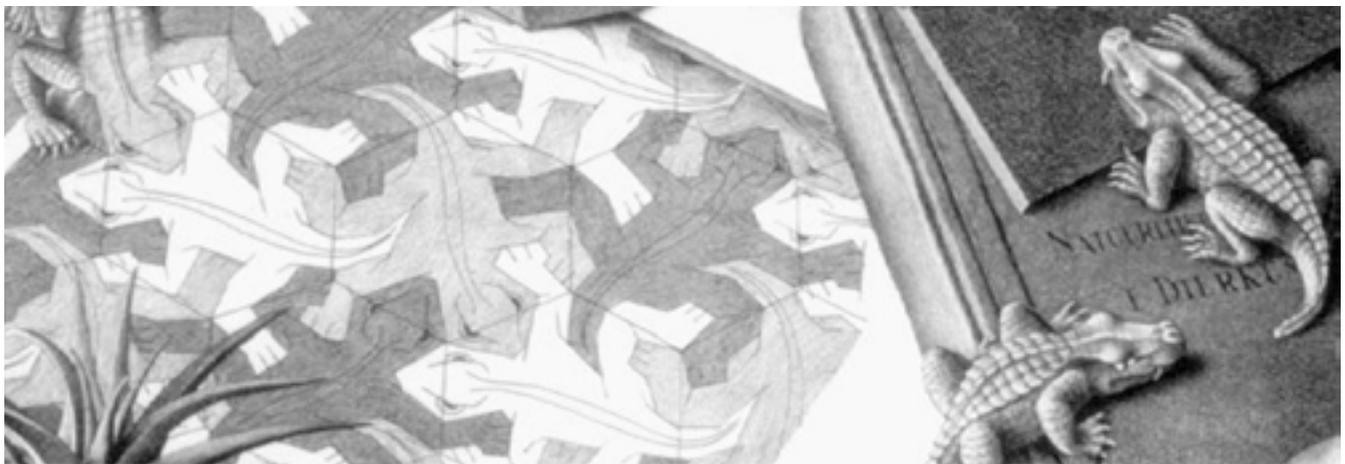


Reptiles

Pencil drawing c.1943 (9" X 6")

Formerly in the collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation (Stichting) and on loan to The Gementemuseum, The Hague, Holland

"Reptiles" is undoubtedly one of Escher's most memorable creations, and we are privileged here to see the underpinnings of this great work. The artist carefully drew his triangular grid for these creatures and overlaid his pattern with a hexagon that was the key to the symmetry of this design. We can see clearly Escher's careful placement of critical points that described the lizard, and he pays great attention to the eyes of the beast. It is the eyes, after all, that give the reptile its character, and these appear dimensional even in the flat notebook drawing Escher was recreating. The lettering at the bottom of this sheet is clearly the same book title found in Escher's final lithograph, so we can make an absolute connection between this drawing and the master print. Additionally testifying to the authenticity of this rare work, the drawing is noted in the margin, "T-129-x-1972," which is the inventory number under which works from Escher's personal collection were cataloged at the Gementemuseum, The Hague, whilst they were on loan from the Escher Foundation. This is believed to be the only drawing on offer and exhibition which is directly related to such an important Escher print.



M. C. Escher: "Reptiles" 1943 lithograph (detail)

© The M. C. Escher Company B.V. Baarn, Holland



The Terrifying Adventures of Scholastica

(B.188) 1932 woodcut from "De Vreeselijke Avonturen van Scholastica" (4" X 6") (edition of 285, from the cover of the book)

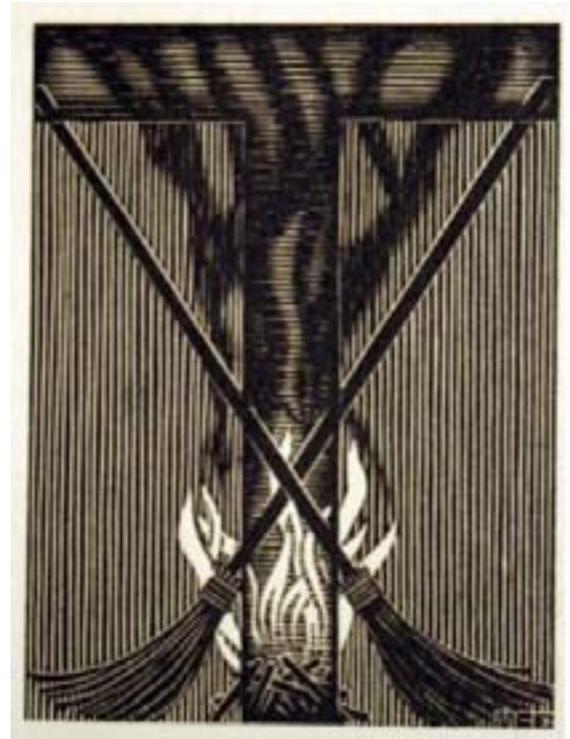
Escher was masterful at combining typography with his images, so here we see Scholastica flying through the air – and through the book’s title! - on a broomstick. One might ask, “is she a witch, or simply a woman led astray by her passions?” Scholastica’s adventures are, indeed, terrifying, but they are also exquisitely exciting and irresistibly passionate. Escher himself was drawn to explore beyond the ordinary veil of reality, and so it is fitting that he wished to illustrate such a story. The text by fellow Dutchman Jan Walch gave Escher much to explore in his graphic imagery that is always full of metaphors, dramatic contrasts and depth.



Four Graphic Artists (Escher Crossword)

(B.381) 1952 Woodcut (4" X 3")

Escher’s art is often based on puzzles or designs that he called ‘my little games.’ Here Escher has brought together the names of four graphic artists in a crossword pattern similar to the blended words at the beginning of Escher’s masterpiece ‘Metamorphosis.’ This print was used on the cover of an exhibition catalog for a show featuring Escher’s work along with three other Dutch printmakers, with whom, he said, he had nothing in common.



Magic Brooms (“T”)

(B.193) 1932 wood engraving (3"X 2½")

(from ‘Scholastica,’ edition of 285 with text verso as usual) Stare at these brooms and they are likely to catch fire... grab for them and you might fly off into the night and find amazing adventures!



Orvieto, Porta Rocca

1922 ink drawing, signed, titled, and dated May 17, 1922 (11" X 9")
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to The
Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland, and noted with their catalog number, verso

This dramatic drawing was created by Escher on his first trip to Italy, and it is full of intense patterning and repeating shapes. We are confronted by the magnificence of the towering mountain and stare directly into the brilliance of the sun. In this drawing Escher captures the extreme perspective he used to great effect in his 1930 lithograph "Castrovalva." The steep cliffs and wild plants are defined by dramatic lines and astonishingly modern designs reminiscent of Charles Burchfield's landscapes of the same era.

Testifying to the authenticity of this rare work, the drawing is noted on the reverse: "T-961-x-1972," which is the inventory number under which this work from Escher's personal collection was cataloged at the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, whilst it were on loan from the Escher Foundation pursuant to the artist's wishes.





**The Second Day of Creation
(The Division of the Waters)**

(B.105) 1925 woodcut (11" X 14³/₄")

Of all Escher's early work, this print is unique in both its concept and the complexity of its patterning. As the oceans separate from the skies before our eyes, a myriad of lines and shapes sweep us up in the power of creation and creativity. The composition shows both Asian influences and the power of the woodcut art. Escher brings to bear the great strength of black and white as he invokes the very essence of nature by stippled dots in the clouds, by sweeping lines in the waves, and by sheets of dashes in the rain. Each of these areas collides with the others in search of balance and harmony. We are present at the great miracle of transformation and witness to the unseen power of primal creation itself.

This rare edition was commissioned by VAEVO, The Netherlands Society for Education Through Art, whose red insignia stamp can be seen in the upper left corner. The original edition of three hundred examples was Escher's first great commission and has almost entirely been lost.





Water: Interlocking Fish in Blue and Green

(B.385) 1952 color print and drawing noted X385(2)-x-1971 (each 6" X 5½")

Drawing ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland.

This drawing is remarkable in that it is one of the only Escher drawings in private hands that relates directly to a matching print.

Here, Escher has brilliantly designed fish that interlock in a design that visually ripples like water flowing in a rocky stream. Eugène and Willy Strens were print connoisseurs and collectors who commissioned Escher to create a set of four prints representing the ancient elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. These prints were presented to Strens' circle of friends and colleagues as treasured gifts celebrating the coming of a new year, and today they are revered as the very best of Escher's small-format work.

E is an Ezel (Donkey)

(B.392) 1953 wood engraving (4"X 2½")

"The Society for the Promotion of Graphic Arts" ("De Grafisch") created a small portfolio of prints in which its members crafted prints showcasing a graphic alphabet. Escher created this wonderful print which has more aspects than one might expect, as is common with Escher's work. When one realizes that in a woodcut all shading, all detail, and all sense of volume can only be created by carving a black line somewhat thicker and thinner then the energy and detail in this print become all the more remarkable. The background is a wall composed of Escher's initial 'E,' which reverses and interlocks in both light and dark shades as it creates a tilted plane in space. Through this wall a donkey – in Dutch, 'ezel' – pokes his head and brays, casting a shadow over the E's. The sound a donkey makes is 'EEEEEE,' so we also have here a unusual audio pun in which the sound of the subject is echoed in this print's composition! Escher's choice of a donkey to illustrate his name is rather telling, for a donkey is stubborn and somewhat awkward, perhaps he could even be considered an outsider in the animal world... and the sound this creature makes, like Escher's art, may not be typically picturesque but it is certainly demands our full attention and sends us an unmistakable message.





The Scapegoat

(B.69) 1921 woodcut (4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " X 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")

This is one of Escher's earliest important woodcuts. Here we are given a startling introduction to his passion for balanced opposites in both designs and themes. Good and evil all seem to flow from the same central point and create harmony.



Theosophy

(B.76) 1921 woodcut (4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " X 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")

Theosophists hold that everything, living or not, is put together from basic building blocks evolving towards consciousness. This rooster, crowing with the radiance of sunlight, perhaps reveals these truths to the land, oceans, and heavens.



Beautiful (Diamond)

(B.82) 1921 woodcut (4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " X 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")

This is the earliest print in which Escher illustrates the perfection that is often hidden within natural forms, whilst also showing a masterful rendering of black and white patterns. The symmetry is extraordinarily complex and balanced in design and shading.



The Borger Oak (B.29)

1919 signed and dated linocut (4" X 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ ")
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation
and previously on loan to the
Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland.



This dramatic linocut can be considered Escher's first landscape print, full of details that characterize the artist's later works. We see dark on light at the bottom of the print, whereas dark on dark designs are outlined above. The sun radiates its light in concentric circles alternating bands of light and dark. In the foreground, the hills roll in waves of black and white. Works from Escher's earliest period are of the utmost scarcity, and this signed and dated proof print occupies a critical place in the artist's development.



Other World

(B.348) 1947 wood engraving and woodcut in black, brown, and green (12½" X 10¼")

Signed and noted 'eigen druk' (self-printed)

Certainly one of Escher's greatest prints, "Other World" presents us with three simultaneous realities within a single room. Escher's own description of this print was rather straightforward. He wrote, "Each plane of the building, which unites nadir, horizon and zenith, has a threefold function. For instance, the rear plane in the center serves as a wall in relation to the horizon, a floor in connection with the view through the top opening and a ceiling so far as the view to towards the starry sky is concerned." These co-existing realities might also reflect our own changing perspectives and the ambiguity of perception. The precisely patterned walls assure us that the rendering is exact and accurate, so we feel on firm ground as we explore these contradictory views of the universe. The figurine on the ledge adds an element of myth and magic to the scene, and perhaps the hanging horn gives us a chance to cry out or sound a triumphant blast if we can recognize and embrace all we see here. To capture all of this by carving, inking and printing three woodblocks is a triumph of perception and printmaking.



The Well (WE ARE COMING OUT OF IT!)

(B.345) 1946 wood engraving (4½" X 4")

This is considered the most powerful and complex of Escher's small-format prints. The grid-lined walls and dramatic zenith perspective are reminiscent of the woodcut "Other World," which Escher was working on at approximately the same time as this print. We see hands climbing through a twisting octagonal well toward freedom – toward sunlight, birds, a tree in full bloom - and the security of a home. Of course, the well's bucket might fall on us at any moment. The entirely unsigned edition was commissioned by the Nederlandsche Ex Libris Kring (an artists' and print collector's society in the Netherlands) to honor the Dutch underground after the Second World War.

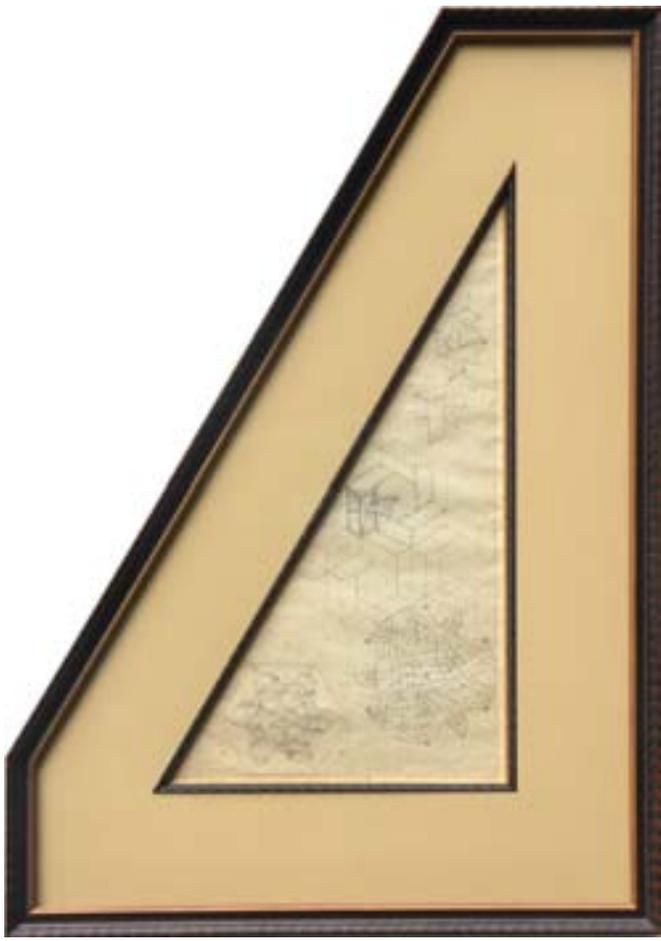


M. C. Escher with the Lion of the Fountain, 1925

The Lion of the Fountain in the Piazza at Ravello

(B.214) 1932 lithograph, signed and numbered 17/24 (8½" X 9")

This was a curious subject for Escher, and we can only imagine that he was drawn to the strange appearance of the lion as well as the wonderful patterning of his coat. Whilst living in Rome, Escher spent many summers in the lovely hill-town of Ravello on the Amalfi coast, and some of his most beautiful Italian landscape prints were created in this vicinity.



Isometric Graph with Interlocking Fish and Flying Envelopes Pencil drawing, ca. 1955-1956 (16" X 9")

ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland
 Escher brought to life three separate symmetry motifs in this most unusual drawing on triangular graph paper. The six birds appeared as a wood engraving vignette in 1954 (B.398), the hexagonal fish were the subject of a wood engraving in 1955 (B. 406), and the little flying envelopes appeared both in a small print commissioned by the Dutch Post Office in 1956 (B.412) and again in Metamorphosis III of 1967 (B.446). This unique frame follows the shape of Escher's drawing.



The Book and Burning Basket

(B.329) 1943 wood engraving (3"X 2½")
 Van Dishoeck was a Dutch publisher who knew Escher well, and the print that Escher created for him is considered one of the artist's finest small prints. Here we see both personal icons and mysteries. The frame is engraved 22k gold leaf.



FINIS

(B.205) 1932 woodcut (2¼" X 3")
 This unusual triangular print ended the story of Scholastica, and so this little devil may be contemplating the fate of the woman who was drawn toward magic, or perhaps he is watching us all as we design our mortality.



A Reader Banishes Troubles

(B.325) 1942 wood engraving (3"X 2½")
 A windmill can be a symbol of change, and may be a vision for this monk. The verse above translates as "A Reader Banishes Troubles" and on the window frame is inscribed the inspirational motto: "Work and Persistence."



The Peacock

(B.160) 1931 signed woodcut (7" X 5½")

Frontispiece for "XXIV Emblemata"

one of only 25 signed examples (there were also 275 unsigned examples)

The peacock's radiating feathered tail follows a pattern quite similar to Escher's much later prints of Circle Limits and Path of Life. To illustrate such symmetry from nature is a strong statement of Escher's perception of beauty and order in the world. Escher combines image, design and typography into a unified and dramatic creation. The patterns in the border are also quite remarkable, with complex geometry and interlocking reversals of black and white. This is a wonderful example mid-century graphic art, and a classic visualization of high art deco design.

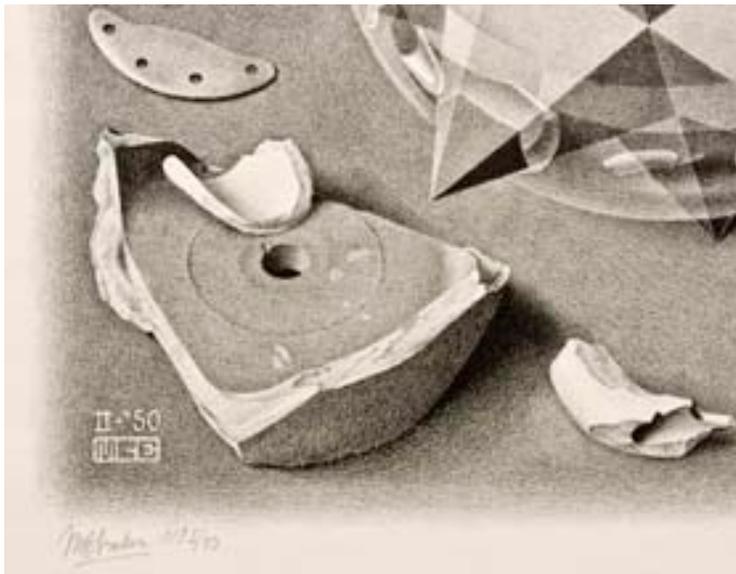
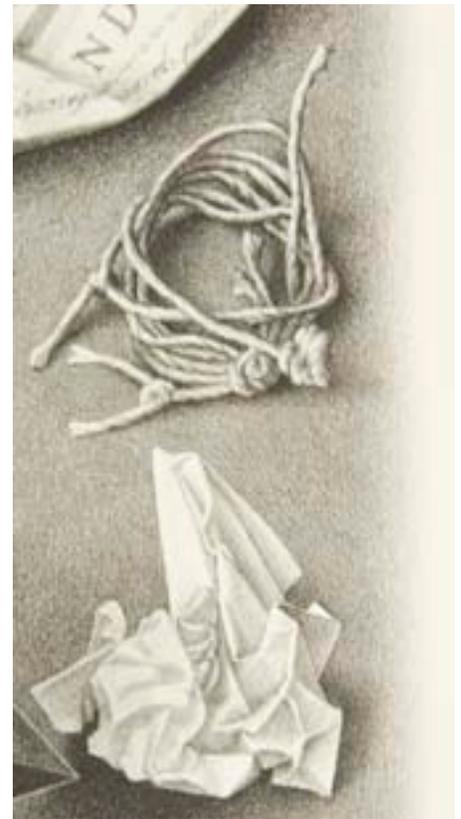


Hieronymus Bosch's "Hell"

(B.278) 1935 signed lithograph #6/20 (10" X 8½")

This is Escher's only work copied from another artist, fellow Dutchman Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1561), whom Escher credits in the lower left of the image. Escher was fascinated by Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," painted in 1510 (shown at the right, now in the Prado museum). In Bosch's masterpiece, Paradise is on the left, The Earthly Garden in the center, and Hell is at the right, inhabited by allegorical creatures such as the hollow man Escher depicted who is inhabited by drunkards who revel in the pleasures of the senses. Escher has taken some liberties with Bosch's composition, not by changing the subject, but simply by moving various elements slightly in order to make a more unified and picturesque scene.

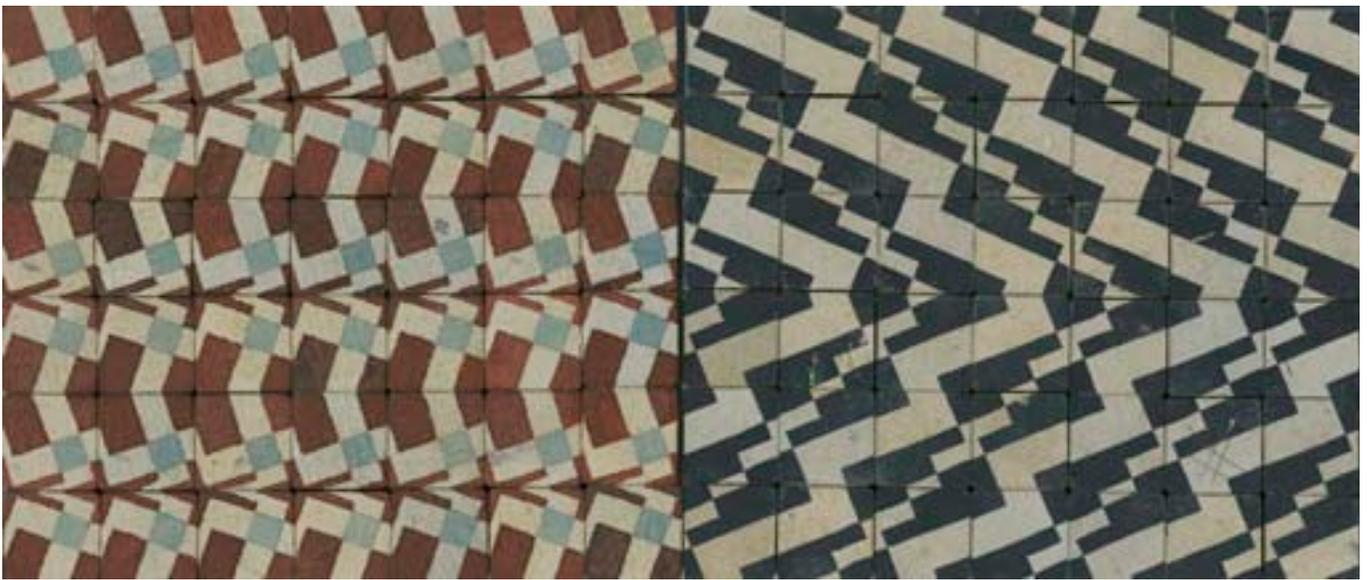




Order and Chaos

(B.366) 1950 signed lithograph, numbered 5/43 from the rare first edition (11" X 11")

We see here a crystal sphere, or perhaps a soap bubble, which contains geometric star which pierces its skin. This shape is a stellated dodecahedron, the same figure Escher populated with dinosaurs in his lithograph 'Gravity.' Surrounding this sphere, and quite literally reflected in it, is an assortment of seemingly chaotic rubble: a broken pipe, an eggshell, a cough-drop package, some pottery and glass, and what we might call a sublime still life of paper and string. But what we often perceive as chaotic is perhaps not so random after all. For example, if you were to take one of these discarded objects and examine it under a powerful microscope, you would see perfect little interlocking crystals and molecules. We don't see these orderly patterns.... but they are there, disguised as chaos! Surprisingly similarly, if we look at Escher's tessellating prints we might see perfect birds and fish interlocking, at times even people fit together, and we can find identical horsemen marching along. We never see such creatures in their perfect forms, but Escher can illustrate their harmony and perfection brilliantly. Is it too far a leap, then, to believe that all of creation, and we as humans, may follow some perfect invisible pattern, and perhaps we fit together in some unknown way like the little men tumbling down the stairs in Escher's lithograph 'Cycle?' Escher himself explained this with a rare philosophical remark: "I try in my prints to testify that we live in a beautiful and orderly world and not in a formless chaos, as it sometimes seems." This comment positions "Order and Chaos" as one of the keys to understanding all of Escher's art.



Combinatorial Tiles

42 Unique printed and hand-painted linoleum block tiles, with two linoblock printing blocks, in the artist's original fabric-lined metal box ca. 1940 (presented by M. C. Escher to his friend Bruno Ernst, author of 'The Magic Mirror of M. C. Escher')

The black sides stamped from two linoblocks, painted on the reverse in brick orange and blue, numbered on the edges 1-2-3-4 & 1-2-3-4 Illustrated in Doris Schattschneider: Visions of Symmetry, page 46, with extensive commentary

The illustration above shows two arrangements of the tiles. The set consists of 42 linoleum tiles, black and ivory on one side and colored on the reverse. The 42 tiles divide into two sets of 21 tiles of a single pattern and 21 tiles that are the mirror reflection of that pattern. The combinations and patterns that these tiles create are astounding, and illustrate Escher's deep love for visual geometry. Related to tessellations, these tiles also explore combinatorial mathematics. Escher kept these tiles in this green cigar box which he lined with decorative fabric. The box with blocks and tiles is photographed below with several of pencils belonging to Jetta and M. C. Escher.





Encounter

(B.331) 1944 signed lithograph (13½" X 18 ¼")

White and black figures emerge from a flat gray mist in the background, pattern becomes form, and the figures which are created become so real that they leave the plane and seem to march forward into the real world. This is a perfect blending of contrasts and also an intriguing type of storytelling. Some see optimists and pessimists evolving from common ground, meeting at last and finding their inevitable balance. Unquestionably, this is one of Escher's masterpieces of graphic storytelling.

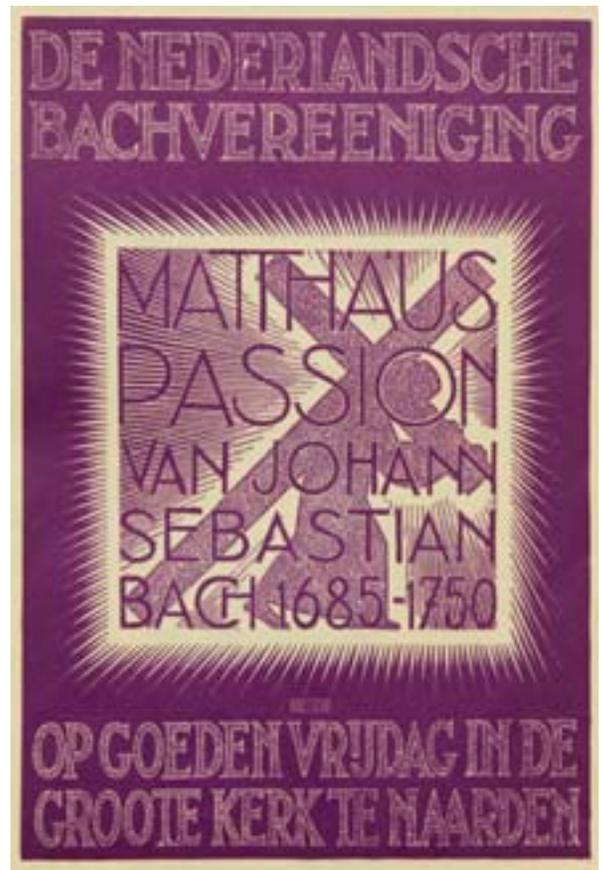


Crystal

(B.353) 1947 mezzotint (5¼" X 6 ¾")

Signed and numbered 4/25

Escher hand-printed this rare mezzotint in an edition of only 25 examples, creating a complex study of perfection within the natural world. Escher produced only eight mezzotints, each in very small editions. This technique allowed the artist to create the most subtle shading imaginable, and in 'Crystal' the rounded rock's shapes and the crystal's translucent surfaces are a tour-de-force of the printmaker's consummate skill. The translucent crystal has flat planes and sharp edges, whilst the rocks show contrasting properties in being rounded, opaque, and irregular. Escher finally abandoned the mezzotint technique since it proved overwhelmingly laborious and only a small number of prints could be created from a mezzotint plate before it showed signs of wear and could no longer print the subtleties and details seen in this print.



St. Matthew's Passion

(B.302) 1938 woodcut (later printing) on cover of the program of the Dutch Bach Society (6" X 4")

(The entire booklet with the libretto of Bach's composition is complete within the frame)

Escher has used several devices to strongly focus the viewer's attention: radiating lines converge at crossed diagonals in the composition, and there is a letter-circle surrounding the head of Christ. The pointillist patterning in the design and the positive/negative radiating lines in ivory and violet are especially interesting elements of this dramatic print. The overlapping letters in Bach's name shows Escher's concern with innovative use of typography. Escher revered the work of Bach for its structure and dramatic balance, and he wrote that he would often play Bach's music while he created his prints. As a young man Escher played the cello, and later in his life he said that his favorite Bach composition was The Twenty-fifth Goldberg Variation. In all of Escher's work, this is only woodcut printed in violet ink.



The Hilltown of Pontone, above Atrani on the Coast of Amalfi, Italy

Color drawing, signed with monogram, dated May 24, 1931 (12" X 9")
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan
to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland, and noted with their catalog number, verso

One of the only signed color drawings in all of Escher's work, this landscape can be considered one of the finest unique pieces in private hands today. The terraced hillside above Atrani may have been the inspiration for the landscape behind Escher 'Waterfall', and similar geometric terraces can be seen in the artist's woodcut 'Tetrahedral Planetoid.' The distant hills are dramatic in their majesty, and stand in startling contrast to the lush hills of the town.

Testifying to the authenticity of this rare work, the drawing is noted on the reverse: "T-962-x-1971," which is the inventory number under which this work from Escher's personal collection was cataloged at the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, whilst it were on loan from The Escher Foundation pursuant to the artist's wishes.



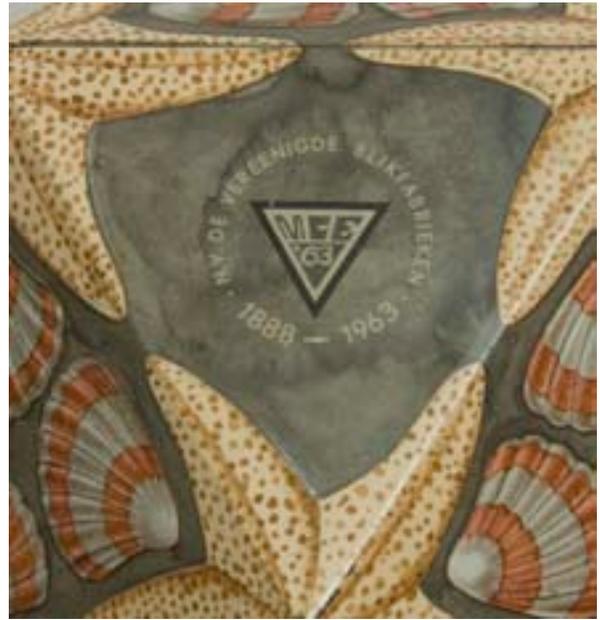
Table Still Life
(Ex Libris Dr. P.H.M. Travaglino)

(B.321) 1940 wood engraving (2½" X 3")

This is Escher's first commissioned woodcut or ex libris print following the transformation of the artist's work that occurred when he moved from Italy back to Holland and began focusing on illusionary and transformative imagery. This is a masterpiece in miniature: here we see Escher's printmaking skill reach new heights in expressive power. The table pushes forward in the picture plane and the objects depicted show an astonishing range of materials and textures.

We see glass, metal, wood and paper; even the transparency of liquid and the delicate wisp of smoke rising about the ashtray. It is, perhaps, the wood grain that has the most complex patterning, carved with crystal clarity illustrating Escher's complete mastery of the art of wood engraving. Dr. Travaglino was a psychologist, and we can only imagine the impact that Escher's work had on him, since the artist had finished his monumental masterpiece "Metamorphosis II" in the month prior to completing this miniature.





The Icosahedral Box

1963 metalwork box (illustrated in "M. C. Escher: His Life and Complete Graphic Work" page 151 (6"X 6"))

Designed by Escher and manufactured to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the company "N. V. De Vereenigde Blikfabrieken"

Escher was asked to design a very special box for the anniversary of this company, and he originally turned down the idea since decorating a normal box seemed rather boring. When he presented the challenging idea of creating a 20-sided box the company agreed, though the complexity of the design was more difficult than anything done before. Escher's design of starfish and shells appears so natural it is easy to overlook the intricate symmetry of this design, which is particularly brilliant in the way that the five-sided starfish match the structure of the box, surrounding three shells on every side. Originally the box was intended to hold a small amount of chocolate, but since this icosahedron has such a large interior volume the company had to supply much more chocolate than they had ever intended. Most of the original edition of this box has been lost, and today a box in this condition is a treasure for both collectors of fine boxes and Escher artwork.



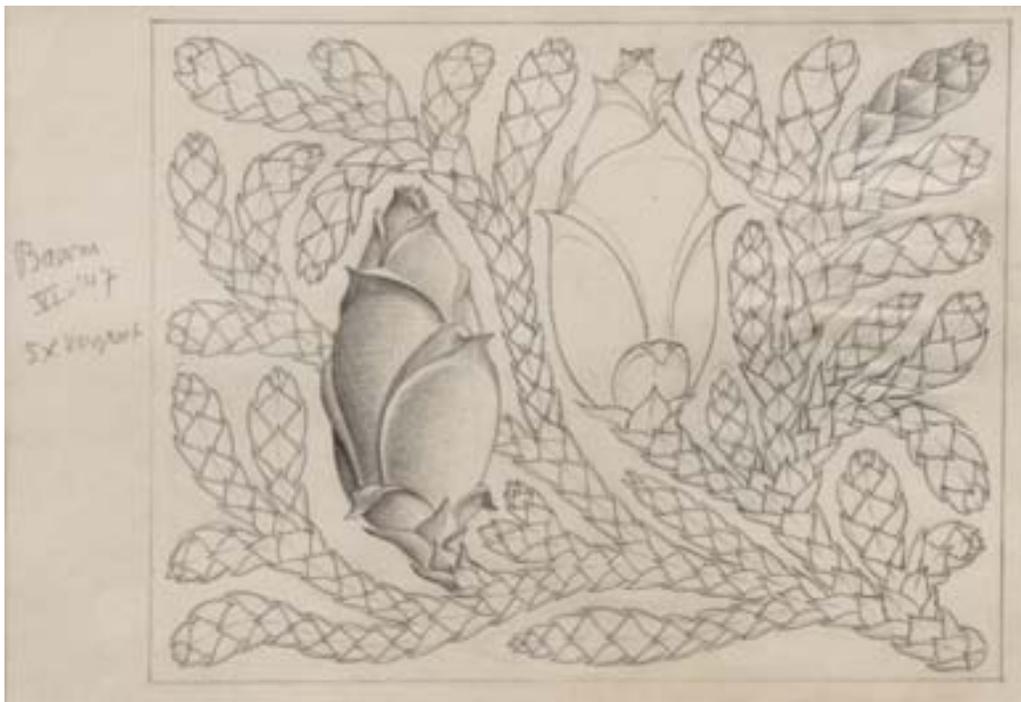
Cactus

(B.181) 1931 signed (initialed) woodcut (7" X 5½")
from the portfolio "XXIV Emblemata"

one of only 25 signed examples of this rare woodcut (there were also 275 unsigned examples)

At the top of this print is carved in Latin that might be translated as, "Stinging Grows From the Pinch of Pain." This epigram, taken together with the Dutch poem below and Escher's dramatic graphic design of a cactua give the viewer a rich and multi-faceted approach to understanding his complex idea. The poem can be translated as:

*"Painfully scorched in the sad dry earth
How can I be detested for my malevolence?"*

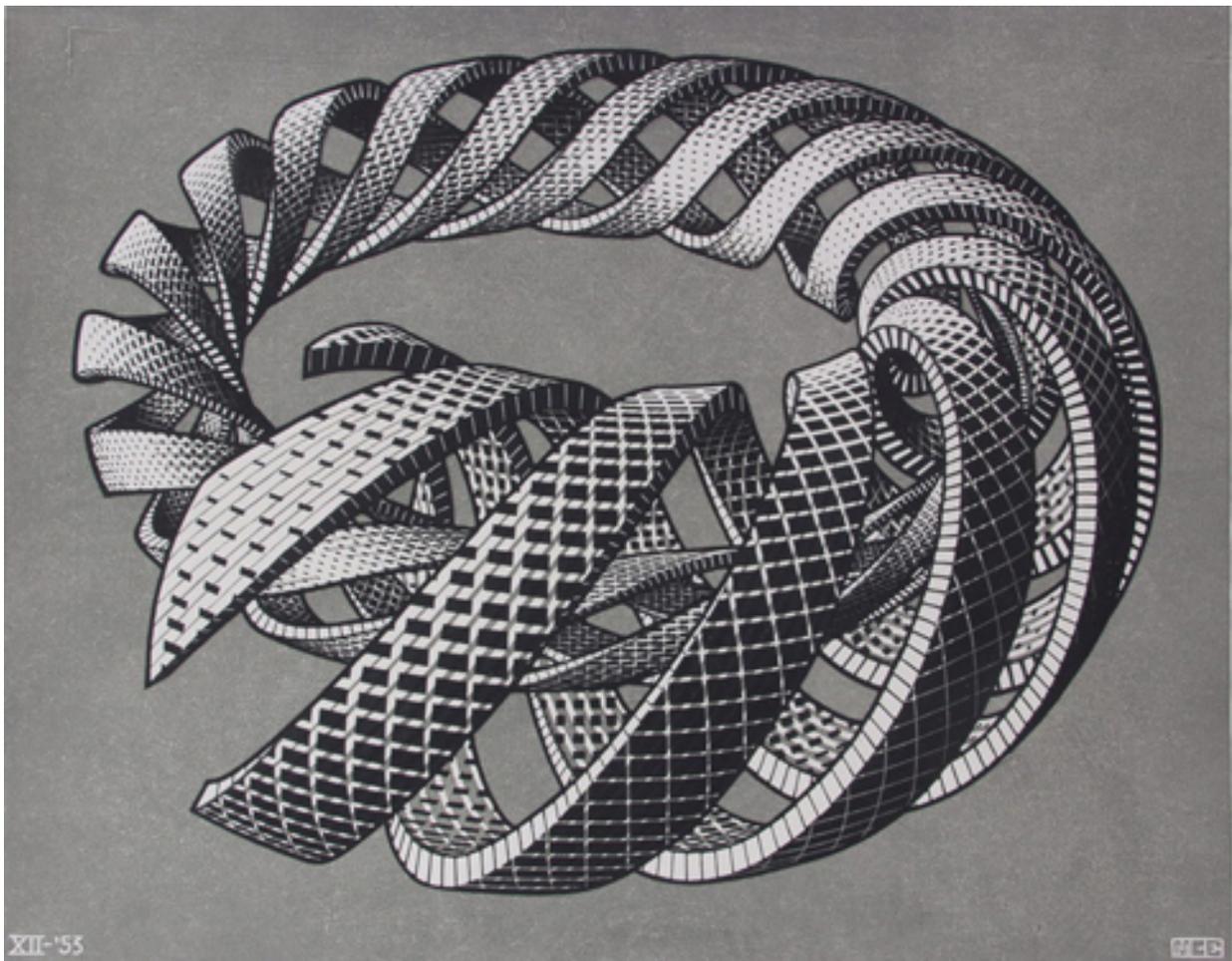


Deconstructed Flower

Drawing, dated June, 1947 and annotated "Baarn" (5" X 9")

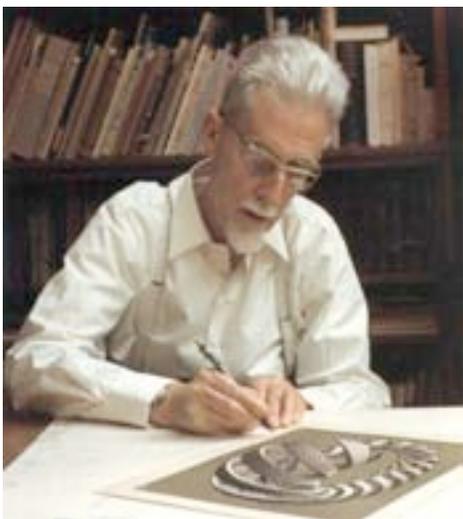
ex collection of the M. C. Escher Foundation and previously on loan to the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland

We see a flower fully formed, surrounded by the outlines of its structure. Escher's intense fascination with the patterns of nature is shown nowhere more beautifully than here in this delicate and powerful study. The positive and negative forms of the flower are surrounded by intricately patterned branches whose leaves reflect brilliantly the symmetry so frequently found around us which is often overlooked and made visible in many of Escher's finest artworks.



Spirals

(B.390) 1953 wood engraving in black and grey, signed, dated June 7, 1970, and inscribed to Hans deRijk (Bruno Ernst) (10½" X 13") Here Escher has illustrated the evolution of a perfect and complex object, an unwinding banded cone floating against a grey background. Escher's inspiration may well have been his desire simply to make this difficult object exist, and to undertake the task of actualization with his chisels, ink and paper, guided by his imagination, experience, and craftsmanship. Creating such perfection is a sublime art and understanding it fully challenges our senses and our intellect. Escher's spiral cornucopia is constructed of four parallel bands, each shaded with a subtle and systematic arrangement of lines and lozenges. Escher's technique is deceptively simple, since the print is created by pressing two inked woodblocks onto a sheet of paper. How these two blocks create the three shades in the print – black, grey, and white – is a surprisingly complex and highly technical puzzle, as is the precise geometric arrangement of spiraling lines and shapes. Escher's inks make visible simultaneously the inside and the outside of the bands which lead us toward infinity. The curves both wrap around and spring out of loops which we can imagine having no beginning and no end; this is clearly part of a growing and evolving thing, somehow both organic and mechanical, an illustration of a object as well as of a creative idea. The photo below shows Escher inscribing and signing this example of Spirals in June, 1970 for his friend Hans deRijk , author of 'The Magic Mirror of M. C. Escher'.





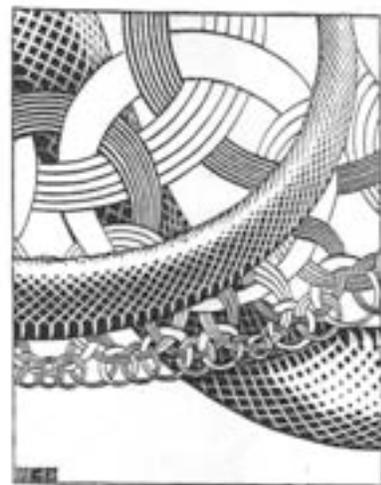
Ringsnakes

(B.448) 1969 woodcut in brown, green, and black (19½" X 17 ½")

Signed and noted 'eigen druk' (self-printed)

This is Escher's last print, his masterpiece. After a lifetime spent making things visible that we see with our minds as well as our eyes, Escher faced a monumental struggle to bring his last artwork to completion. His health failing, he feared he would not live long enough to carve and print the three woodblocks that were required to create this masterpiece. "Ringsnakes" is complex in structure, execution, and meaning; expressing the duality of natural and perfect forms, the unity of all creation, and a sublime realization of the infinite. Each ring intertwines with others, both larger and smaller. Only where Escher's rings reach their largest size can they be inhabited by living creatures. The linked chains of "Ringsnakes" illustrate a pathway to and from infinity, interwoven with serpentine creatures whose writhing undulations unite them as they circumnavigate the cosmos and weave together perfection with the every-changing power of life.

"Ringsnakes" stands as the triumphant legacy of an artist who labored tirelessly in solitude and with endless diligence to express the wonders our eyes perceive and our mind struggles to comprehend.



Study for Ringsnakes

(B.447) 1969 woodcut proof (4½" X 3½")

Roman Memories

by M. C. Escher's eldest son, George Escher

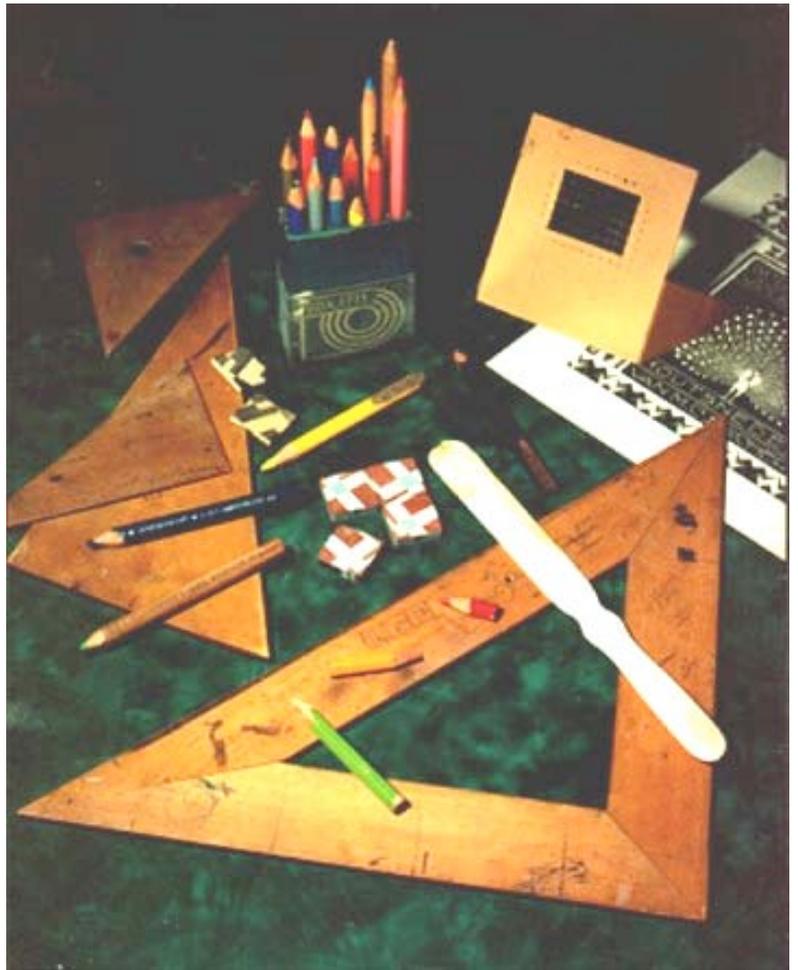
Father's hands are the feature of him which I most vividly remember. Looking at their precise movements, neatly arranging tools, sharpening gouges and chisels with rhythmic motions, preparing the wood to a smooth, velvety finish, I could sense the pleasure that this activity gave him.

As I became older he explained carefully his preference for planks of parallel-grain pear wood, because of the challenge presented by the tendency to split if improperly cut. He hinted at a feeling of cowardice when he was forced to use end-grain pear or boxwood to create fine details.

How many hours he spent lovingly caressing the grainy surface of lithographic stones with a grease pencil, trying to approach ideal transitions from light to dark grey!

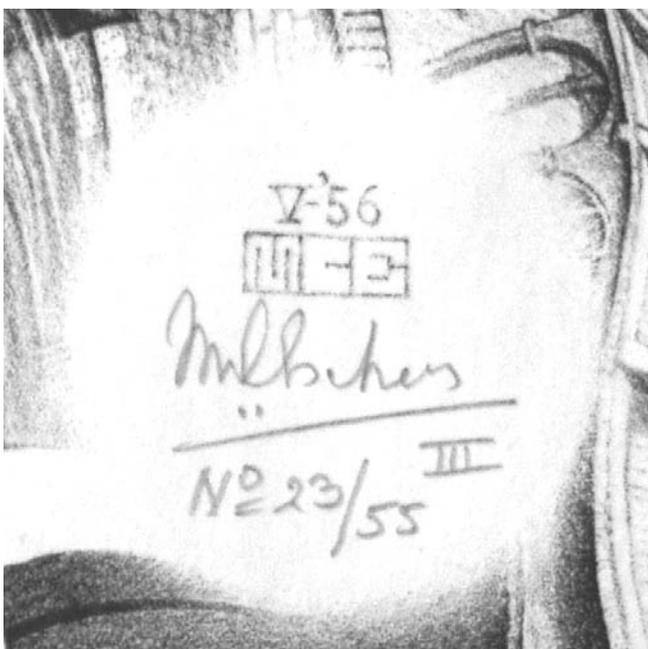
Printing a woodcut, if not repeated too often in a row, was also a pleasure. That ritual, seen over and over again during my life, kept its feeling of magic to the last. It was not only the visual aspect that held me entranced. The delicious strong smell of printing ink, the swishing, slapping sound of the putty-knife spreading ink on a glass plate, the loud crackle of the ink roller, the soft rubbing sound of the ivory spoon pressing the paper down on the wood; they all were essential preliminaries to a spectacular finale. Father would lay down his spoon, grasp carefully a corner of the paper, lift it a little to check if the black surface was uniform; then, after slowly peeling the sheet from the wood, he would triumphantly hold it up in the air for inspection: a sparkling crisp new print.

"Roman Memories" by George Escher was published in 1985: "Mostra Maurits C. Escher," Istituto Olandese de Roma and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the author.



'Artifacts from M. C. Escher's Studio'
Photograph of objects in the Artists' Market collection

The center of M. C. Escher's 1956 lithograph "Print Gallery" showing the date of the block's completion, Escher's printed monogram, his pencil signature, and the numbering of this print from its third edition



M. C. Escher's studio in Rome, c. 1931: his wife, Jetta, is seated reading, with their simorgh figurine on the table before her. The floor tiles were designed by Escher. In the foreground we see Escher's woodblock and printing materials for his Emblemata Peacock. This woodcut can also be seen in the photograph of studio tools above and in this exhibit. Escher's carved chair at the left is also part of the Artists' Market's permanent collection.

Paths to Perception

A Search for Meaning in M. C. Escher's Prints

“I think I have never yet done any work with the aim of symbolizing a particular idea, but the fact that a symbol is sometimes discovered or remarked upon is valuable for me because it makes it easier to accept the inexplicable nature of my hobbies, which constantly preoccupy me.”

– M. C. Escher

To express the deepest mysteries or fundamental truths of creation and consciousness is a quest worthy of the highest arts. To understand even a small piece of the puzzle of perception is a task to fill a lifetime. When we begin to see the patterns that underlie the paradoxes of existence, then we catch a glimpse of revelations we may never fully comprehend.

M. C. Escher said little about the meaning of his artwork and the attraction of his images was a great mystery to him. Nevertheless, he was compelled by what he described as ‘a hopeless mania’ to create pictures of objects both perfect and impossible, of scenes quite fantastic and yet completely believable, and to describe in great detail things we might not otherwise be aware of. I believe that Escher’s artwork continues to resonate in the century after it was created because his pictures illustrate themes that are fundamental to our consciousness. This essay will explore several of Escher’s prints that hold keys to understanding why the artist was intrigued by such unusual imagery and why his creations continue to fascinate such a wide audience today.

In M. C. Escher’s first great illusionary lithograph, “Cycle” from 1938, we see a boy running from a tower and down some steps. His arms are rather awkwardly waving and he’s smiling, perhaps in secret reverie. Where is he coming from and going to? His journey is short and yet this passage encompasses his entire world. As he descends the stairs a transformation occurs that is as miraculous as any myth. In a few steps he metamorphoses into marble and what was once an actor becomes his stage. Beyond the tower is a serene landscape, perhaps part of the Tuscan countryside or maybe a small portion of paradise. This is the setting for Escher’s story: an extraordinary adventure in a miraculous world.

“Cycle” can be seen as an archetypal image of the universe created from our own being. Is everything our imagining? Where does our interior landscape end and the countryside begin? What is the essential difference between body and stone, and why can we find soul in one and not the other? By illustrating such fascinating questions, perhaps Escher proposes that everything from the distant hills to our outstretched hands is a part of a complex, ever-changing and often invisible cycle.

One might ask whether Escher actually intended for his pictures to have such plots and for philosophical connections to be drawn from artworks that are complex, often rather technical, and only occasionally overtly picturesque. I propose that such mysteries are the essence of great art, and are inherent in the nature of revelation. The artist can be a messenger bringing each viewer a looking glass through which one may discover things unknown to either the author or his audience.



M. C. Escher “Cycle” 1938 Lithograph

M. C. Escher created his first print in 1916 while World War I was ravaging and re-ordering Europe, and his final woodcut, "Ringsnakes," was completed in 1969, the year of the Apollo moon landing and Woodstock. It would be hard to underestimate the cultural and sociological changes that occurred during that half-century, and while I doubt that it was Escher's intent to create commentary on these events by making pictures unlike any that had been seen before, it can be said that his images reflect the complexity, ambiguity, and restructuring of twentieth-century society.

While philosophers wrote of existentialism and surrealism, printmaking gave Escher a vocabulary that enabled him to express ideas that he could articulate in no other way. Even though Escher did not write extensively about the meanings of his prints, and even though he himself may not have been fully aware of the implications of his imagery, still his prints gain power by having been created during a particularly dramatic era of transition by an exquisitely gifted artist who searched beyond the outward appearance of his subjects in an effort to illustrate the miraculous patterns that unify and bring order to a complex and incomprehensible universe.

Just as no single description can fully explain history, no one viewpoint can show the entirety of a subject. Cubist painters combined profiles and perspectives within a single image in order to present a more comprehensive view of their subject, however the result frequently obscured the original portrait. Escher's visions are grounded in the strict mechanical rules of architecture and engineering, and his fantasies are as real as the world he saw around him while still capturing the unexpected consequences of changing realities. Escher masterfully illustrated these themes in his 1947 woodblock print "Other World," a triumph of both technical craftsmanship and visionary imagery.



M. C. Escher "Other World"
1947 woodcut and engraving
in brown, green, and black

Three similar figures perch within three windows. This is a simorgh, a creature that came to us through Middle Eastern mythology as the embodiment of human form within the figure of a bird. The legendary simorgh was believed to be so old that it had seen the destruction of the world three times over. Escher actually owned this figurine; it had been a gift from his father-in-law, who acquired it in Azerbaijan and gave it to his daughter and Escher when the newlyweds lived in Italy. Escher kept this small treasure in his home throughout his life and featured it in several important artworks. In this print we see three views of the same creature within three windows that are reflections of one another, connected within a fantastic room constructed with the lines and grids of a mechanical world drawn on graph paper. This precision reinforces the reality of the scene and sets the stage for our voyage beyond this world and into another.

Through the windows we see three scenes that each makes perfect sense and yet is disconnected from the others. In mid-century, when Escher created this print, so many cities had been made unrecognizable by war, and so many people looked out their windows and saw once-familiar scenes that had become alien and unknown. Perhaps Escher felt that his world had been transformed into another world, or many worlds only unified by ambiguity.

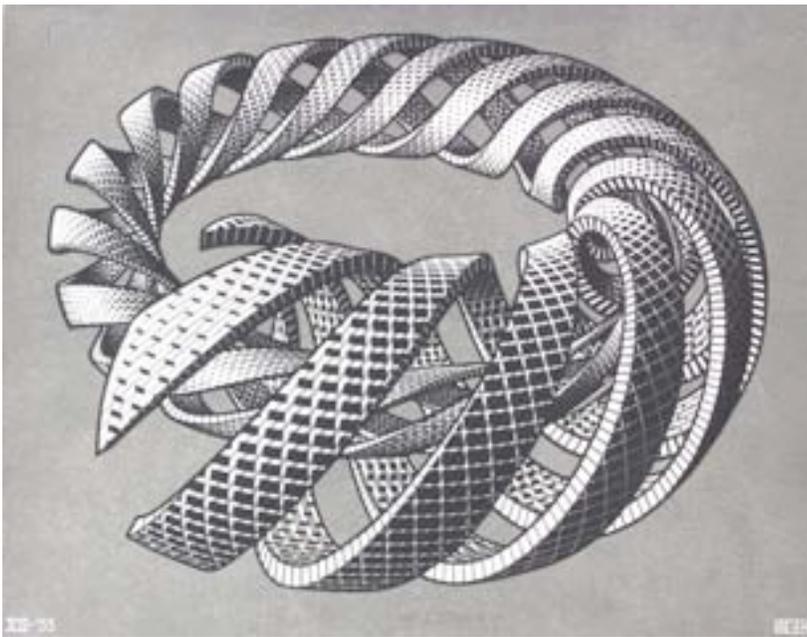
From the top of the picture we can look down on the creature and view a cratered moonscape from above, as if we were floating in the heavens. Gazing straight ahead we can look out toward the horizon over the pockmarked landscape and into the dark sky beyond. A comet flashes across the blackness leaving a spray of stars in its wake. The Earth hovers above the horizon, near the center of the picture, commanding our focus. Our planet is distant, far removed, and the magical creature has turned away and looks at



M. C. Escher's Simorgh figurine

us, the viewer, instead of out towards the planets. This messenger confronts us, and it may be our destiny to make sense of these worlds if we dare venture beyond these walls.

And now look up from the bottom of this strange and wonderful picture. We are staring out into the infinite cosmos, where we can see the rings of Saturn and the spiral arms of a distant nebula. Just what is out there we don't know, but we know we are part of this greater universe part of this cosmic adventure. We have come a long way, yet there are deep mysteries before us. Three horns hang in archways, rather like shofars, should we be ready to sound them and go forth. Perhaps the trumpet-player is the simorgh, but there is ambiguity in that since two creatures face towards horns but one – the one nearest earth - faces away. The world might change in the blink of an eye and strange sights might be seen through familiar windows. We envision journeys that fill us with excitement as well as trepidation. We have discovered something that is difficult to know or to express, and I believe we have heard the artist's voice.



M. C. Escher "Spirals" 1953 two-color wood engraving printed in grey and black

The artist can give substance to that which is visible to him alone. To express the complex beauty of a perfect shape might be seen as the function of mathematics more readily than the task of a printmaker. An equation, after all, is a way of understanding the relationship between things, and geometry is the most precise way to describe the fundamental structure of forms. In his 1953 wood engraving "Spirals" Escher has illustrated the evolution of a perfect and complex object, an unwinding banded cone floating against a grey background.

We see similar shapes within a nautilus shell and in the spirals of distant galaxies, but it is a difficult task indeed to make all of this visible by carving channels in a block of wood. Undoubtedly, these spirals are a somewhat surprising subject for an artwork, requiring months of planning and tedious exacting woodcarving and printing. This is a design intensely challenging in both concept and execution, and it is this complexity which may be at the heart of "Spirals" beauty. Escher's inspiration may well have been his desire simply to make this difficult object exist, and to undertake the task of actualization with his chisels, ink and paper, guided by his imagination, experience, and craftsmanship. Creating such perfection is a sublime art and understanding it fully challenges our senses and our intellect.

Escher's spiral cornucopia is constructed of four parallel bands, each shaded with a subtle and systematic arrangement of lines and lozenges. Escher's technique is deceptively simple, since the print is created by pressing two inked woodblocks onto a sheet of paper. How these two blocks create the three shades in the print – black, grey, and white – is a surprisingly complex and highly technical puzzle, as is the precise geometric arrangement of spiraling lines and shapes.

Escher's inks make visible simultaneously the inside and the outside of the bands which lead us toward infinity. If we search for the very beginning of this growing form, we can find the tip of the spiral placed precisely between two bands at the right, its extreme apex exquisitely visible just before our view is blocked by the circling outer rind. The curves both wrap around and spring out of loops which we can imagine having no beginning and no end; this is clearly part of a growing and evolving thing, somehow

both organic and mechanical, an illustration of a object as well as of a creative idea. It is as if an ever-evolving spiral has been frozen for a moment so that we may observe it close-up. We witness here a small piece of the infinite created from two blocks of wood, cut with chisels, covered with ink and pressed to paper by Escher in his studio. Lines and spaces of black, grey and white create something impossibly perfect and fantastically dimensioned on a white sheet of paper within a picture frame.



M. C. Escher “Crystal” 1947 mezzotint, signed and numbered 4/25 and appear lighter in the final printing. To create an image such as Escher’s ‘Crystal,’ is triumph of both vision and technique as well as a complex symbolic act.

“So it appears that one can even be symbolizing without knowing it,” wrote Escher. We might wonder what Escher’s intentions were as he worked tirelessly to create a mezzotint print of a crystal floating among rocks in 1947 (the same year as “Other World.”) Mezzotint is an ancient and frustrating technique, perhaps the most technically challenging craft a printmaker might attempt. First a metal plate must be roughened and textured evenly so that one achieves a velvety surface that, if rubbed with ink and pressed to paper, would print the deepest tones imaginable. From this blackness the printmaker must burnish and polish his image, for smoother surfaces will hold less ink

Escher himself was perhaps unaware of what compelled him to create this image, but considering the effort involved in bringing these shapes out of the inky darkness, he must have felt strong urges to see his vision appear on paper. The central image is a cube-octahedron; that is, a double four-faced pyramid perfectly intersecting a cube. It is a wonderfully complex structure, difficult to realize in its solid form and almost impossible to create with transparency in mezzotint the way Escher has done.



Cube Octahedron

Where do we find such perfect crystal forms? One answer lies in the background of this print, in the smooth and irregular rocks that are strewn at random as if they were washed up on some imaginary shore by the tide. If we were to look closely at these rocks, perhaps examine them with a high-powered microscope, we would indeed see atoms and molecules arranged with the complexity of a cube-octahedron and more. These miraculous forms are hidden from our sight, yet always present if only we can look closely enough. There are wonderful contrasts here as well as harmonies: the crystal is translucent, reflective, and made up of perfect lines and planes; the rocks behind are solid opaque, irregular lumps that hide their inner structures. The fact that crystalline perfection is part of the rocks is as much a mystery as the fact that fish can sometimes fit together with birds, a boy can become a building, and three worlds can be made visible within a single room. Escher wrote of this: “The laws of the phenomena around us – order, regularity, cyclical repetitions and renewals – have assumed greater and greater importance for me. The awareness of their presence gives me peace and provides me with support. I try in my prints to testify that we live in a beautiful and orderly world, and not in a formless chaos, as it sometimes seems.” So there we have it: the essence of Escher’s philosophy in his own words.

Fundamental forms such as crystals and atoms are known to us and yet often lie beyond our sight. The search for harmony, logic, and the universal rules of order is both alluring and terrifying. As Faust found, there are some secrets that are better left unknown, and some mysteries best left behind the shadows. And so we find serpents weaving through perfect interlocking rings in Escher’s final creation, his 1969 woodcut “Ringsnakes.” After a lifetime spent making things visible that we see with our mind

as well as our eyes, Escher faced a monumental struggle to bring his last artwork to completion. His health failing, he feared he would not live long enough to carve and print the three woodblocks that were required to create this masterpiece. “Ringsnakes” is complex in structure, execution, and meaning; expressing the duality of natural and perfect forms, the unity of all creation, and a sublime realization of the infinite.



M. C. Escher “Ringsnakes” 1969 three-color woodcut

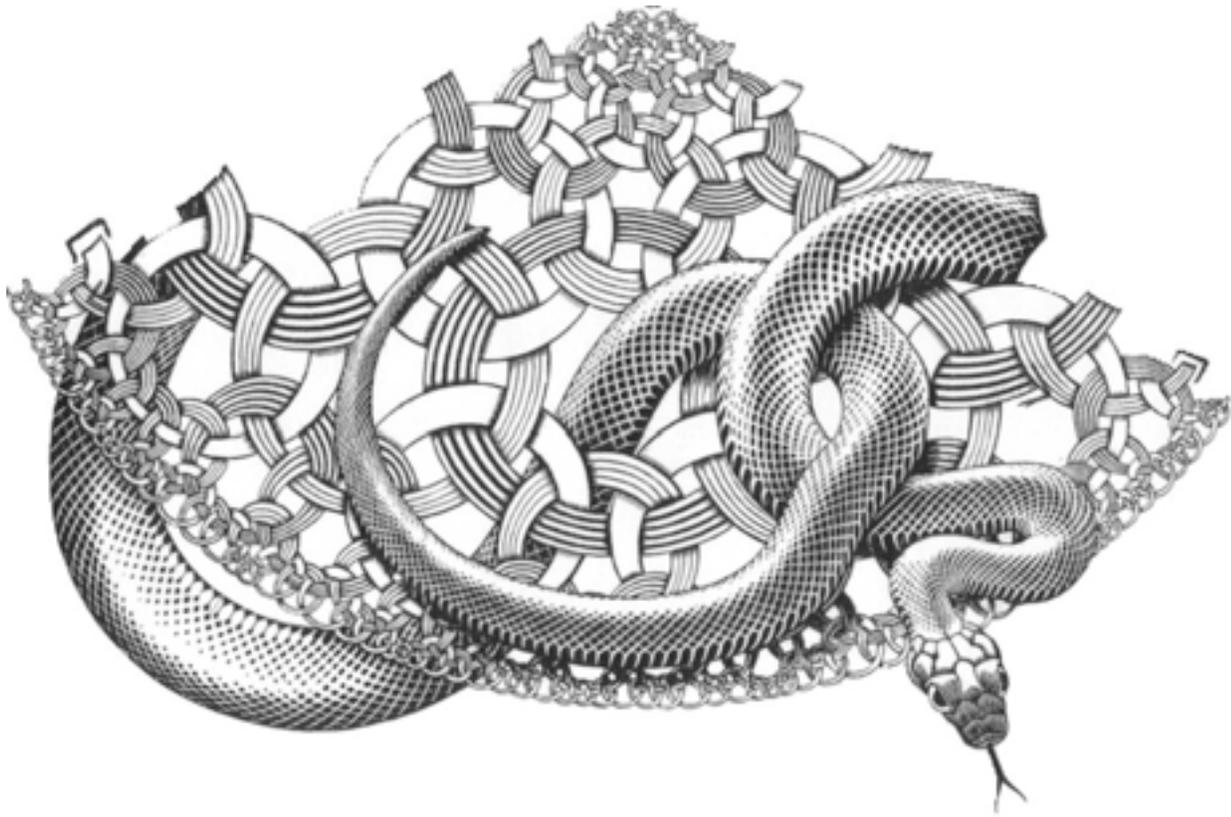
Escher frequently expressed the infinite in his art. His woodcut ‘Smaller and Smaller,’ for example, presents us with ever-diminishing lizards as we approach the center of the design. Traveling in the other direction, the figures in Escher’s series of ‘Circle Limit’ woodcuts reduce in size towards their edges. “Ringsnakes” combines and completes these transformations, creating a cycle that is unified and universal. Whether we begin at the center of the figure or approach from its outer edge, first we find the smallest rings. These may be seen as the seeds of creation. Escher, empowered with the wisdom of experience, did not have to carve impossibly tiny rings to give us the sense of the infinite; the smallest circles serve as symbolic links of a never-ending chain. Each ring intertwines with others, both larger and smaller. It is the nature of many things to be both growing and shrinking simultaneously. As we advance in wisdom and age, so also we may decline in innocence and lose the possibilities of youth. Mists rise from the seas and fall as rain. In mythology, a phoenix can be reborn from its ashes and a serpent might swallow its own tail and

regenerate. In the universe of rings that Escher creates we can watch evolution unfold. We might see this as an allegory of creation from the first dust of atoms at the edge of space to the complexities of a living planet. As it happens, only where Escher’s rings reach their largest size can they be inhabited by living creatures. And so, when the world is ripe, when nature’s web is fully grown, there we find snakes.

From the serpent in the Garden of Eden to the cobra on Cleopatra’s crown, the snake has always been a powerful symbol of temptation, wisdom and duality. It is said that Moses turned his staff into a snake to overpower Pharaoh, and the Egyptian replicated his magic, producing snakes on both sides of their epic struggle. Snakes can have wondrous powers. Related to the phoenix, the mythological ouroboros was a serpent that swallowed its tail to be continually reborn from its own essence. The shape of the ouroboros is closely related to the never-ending patterns Escher describes in many of his prints. Escher’s snakes circle endlessly, seeming to carry with them the gift and burden of wisdom as well as the contradictory powers of our desires. If the snake can be seen as a symbol for all that is conscious and alive, both wonderful and terrifying, then it is appropriate that in this print they weave in and out of such perfect and conceptualized rings. We can see the universe as composed of both the essential formulas that govern molecules and of our cryptic consciousness that struggles to understand itself. We are rather chaotic humans within a universe where perfection is invisible yet pervasive. The linked chains of “Ringsnakes” illustrate a pathway to and from infinity, interwoven with serpentine creatures whose writhing undulations unite them as they circumnavigate the cosmos and weave together perfection with the ever-changing power of life.



The Ouroboros



The 120° segment of M. C. Escher's woodcut 'Ringsnakes' which he printed three times around to create the final image

To create this circular woodcut with maximum symmetry and a minimum of woodcarving, Escher carved wedge-shaped printing blocks that completed the print with three impressions. Since "Ringsnakes" is printed with three colors, each color required three printings covering one-third of the image at a time. The edges of each block were fashioned irregularly so that their seams are hidden by the image's borderlines. Escher pressed three impressions from each wood block – three times around this wheel of creation – printing nine inked segments making three layers of color into one unified picture telling a story that Escher worked a lifetime to create.

We can never know how much of this message Escher consciously intended, but we do know that this final woodcut inspired him to continue work as the frailties of age crept over him. "Ringsnakes" stands as the triumphant legacy of an artist who labored tirelessly in solitude and with endless diligence to express the wonders our eyes perceive and our mind struggles to comprehend. The patterns Escher composed give us paths along which we can discover even more than the artist himself may have been aware of, for the doors he opened ultimately reveal what we find reflected in the mirrors of our own perception.

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This essay is dedicated to Hans deRijk, who has shared Escher's magic with the world through his prose and has shared his friendship so very generously with me. Special thanks always to my wife, Esta, who stayed awake while I wrote the first draft of this essay and has been my constant companion on this journey.



M. C. ESCHER AND HIS CHEESE SANDWICH

Ceramic sculpture by Brigit Beemster of County Sligo, Ireland
Permanent collection of Artists' Market,
photographed by Jeffrey Price with Escher's final print, 'Ringsnakes'

"M. C. Escher, as a little boy, selected the quantity, shape, and sizes of his slices of cheese so that, fitted one against the other, they would cover as exactly as possible the entire slice of bread.

This particular trait never left him."

As told by George Escher, the Artist's Eldest Son