

## Art on a Plate, Part 1

### Collagraph Experiments

#### Jane Wild

Collagraphy is a printmaking technique that uses collage to create the printing plate. Unlike other methods of printmaking it is very intuitive as you work directly with your materials, allowing you to explore and experiment.

A collagraph plate can be used to make a relief print; the raised surface is inked and the paper is then pressed firmly against the plate and can be rubbed by hand.

A collagraph plate can also be used to make an intaglio print; the entire plate is inked and then the surface wiped clean so that the ink remains below the surface. Much greater pressure is needed to force the paper into the channels containing the ink so some form of press is required to produce a print. An etching press would be wonderful but you can get some very good results using a pasta machine.



#### Equipment and Materials – all from local art suppliers

Cutting mat

Metal ruler

Scalpel or craft knife, scissors

Pencils for sketching and transferring

Mountboard or solid grey cardboard as the base material for the plate (any heavy card that is not too thick will do. Card constructed from layers that can be pulled apart is great)

PVA glue or acrylic gel medium

Button polish or Shellac

Old brushes

Palette knife or old credit card

A variety of thin textured surfaces, such as fine meshed fabrics, lace, scrim, netting, tin foil, dried leaves, pressed flowers, textured papers, embossed wallpaper etc. string, threads, sand etc.

Paper punches (optional)

Acrylic texture mediums you have in stock, such as modelling paste, glass beads, gesso

Acrylic paint and acrylic printing medium/gel medium or printing inks

Piece of plastic, glass or a plastic bag to use as a palette

Paper towels or muslin for wiping the plate

Paper for printing on: heavy cartridge paper, printmaking, hot pressed watercolour etc

Pasta machine (the craft one!) to use as a press; a mangle is another option

Small piece of wool or felt

It's a good idea to start with an experimental plate, as this will give you an idea of what to expect from your materials. Cut a small rectangle or square of mountboard, which must be narrower than the width of the rollers of the pasta machine. For example, the rollers on my machine measure 14 cm (5.5 in) so I wouldn't cut the card any wider than 12.5 cm (5 in). You're ready to start now. If you prefer draw a simple design to work to, divide the board into a grid or work freely.

Decide which materials you would like to work with. Try to get a variety of textures and start cutting and tearing them into different shapes and sizes. When you have a good selection, put them to one side for the moment and consider the board itself. You can cut into the surface of the board and remove sections, puncture it or scratch into it but don't cut right through it.

Start attaching the textured pieces to the board with watered down PVA glue or acrylic medium. Make sure that the highest point of the surface you create is no higher than two thicknesses of mountboard. Otherwise you run the risk of tearing the paper. Leave the plate while the glue dries out completely - this may be overnight.

### Ideas for plates

**Right:** Scrim, torn lace, thread and lokta fibre were fixed to the plate with PVA glue.

**Below:** The mountboard was cut into and torn away in places and various punched, cut and torn papers and threads were applied to the surface. Finally some PVA glue was added, sprinkled with sand in some places.



**Right:** Several Golden Acrylic Mediums were applied to the plate with a credit card and then drawn into with the end of a paintbrush. Clockwise from the left: Gesso, Coarse Alumina, Extra Coarse Clear Granular Gel, Coarse Pumice Gel and PVA glue.

**Below, left:** When the plate is completely dry, coat it back, front and sides with acrylic gel or PVA glue thinned with water. When dry, apply another coat and leave to dry again. This will strengthen and protect the plate.

**Below, right:** Coat the plate back, front and sides with Button **Polish** or Shellac and leave overnight to harden.



Before you start printing, cut your paper to size. Allow enough paper for a small border around the print but make sure it is slightly narrower than the width of the pasta machine rollers.

Leave the paper to soak in a container of water for at least ten minutes and then place it between two sheets of blotting paper to remove the excess water. It should be damp not wet.



Cut a piece of felt or wool slightly narrower than the width of the rollers and slightly longer than your longest plate. Before you print with ink, you can make an embossed or Blind Print by running the plate and a piece of paper through the pasta machine. Place the piece of felt on your work surface, cover the felt with a piece of damp paper and then place the plate face down on the paper.

With the pasta machine firmly attached to the work surface and the rollers at the widest setting, start to feed the felt, paper and plate between the rollers. This is quite tricky and you have to be ready to encourage the plate forward slightly as it rolls through or it will hit the base of the machine. Test it out first with a scrap of mountboard to get the idea. Keep winding the handle smoothly.

You can see from the result below that this blind print will give you an idea of just how textured the print will be.



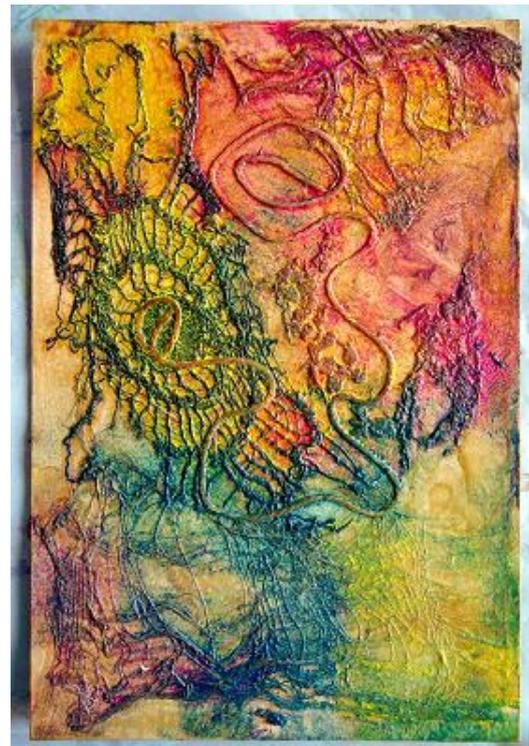
Squeeze out some ink or paint onto a piece of plastic or glass. I used yellow, magenta and blue acrylic paint and mixed it with Daler-Rowney acrylic printing medium to a fairly runny consistency. Tear small pieces of mountboard to spread the paint onto the plate and use a brush to work it into the grooves and texture.

Use a wad of muslin or paper towel to wipe the ink from the surface of the plate.



As you can, see there is quite a lot of ink left in the grooves and texture, right.

The print below (intaglio print) shows the variety of texture you can get from just a few materials. I printed on heavyweight cartridge paper.

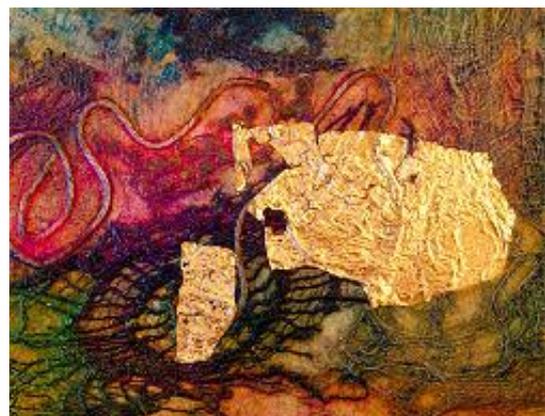


If you don't have a handy pasta machine (although they are often very cheaply priced on ebay or in charity shops) you can also take a print from a collagraph plate by burnishing the back of the paper. Use plenty of pressure and work over the paper several times with a wad of cloth or the back of a spoon.

The resulting relief print (below) is quite different although there is still a degree of embossing and the appearance of texture.



This was a semi-successful attempt at transferring a small piece of imitation gold leaf while printing. The plate (detail right) was inked and the excess removed. Then I placed a piece of imitation gold leaf on the inked surface, brushed it lightly with PVA glue and covered the plate with damp paper before running it through the pasta machine.



The result is interesting as the bits of leaf that didn't transfer have acted as a mask - worth pursuing, I think.

The plate looks good too – as you can see below. It is a perfectly valid option to frame the collagraph plate when sufficient prints have been taken.



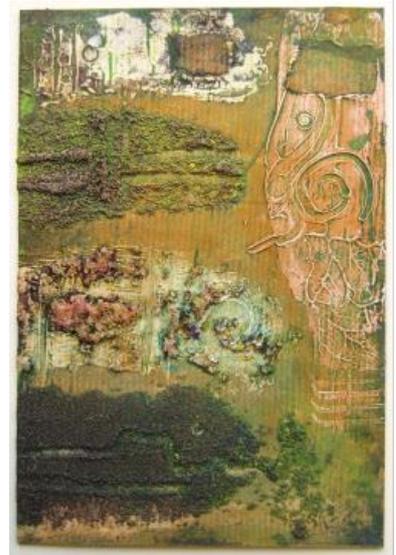
Below, you can see two sets of experimental plates, on the left, and the resulting prints. The plates were made with cut and torn papers. I used quite a flimsy computer paper to print on and it wasn't dampened. The texture you see on the print is from a microfibre cloth which was used instead of the felt.



This plate (right) was made earlier with acrylic gels. The resulting prints, which can be seen below, were made on heavyweight cartridge paper.

Do experiment. Try it with fabric and do try to run to earth a pasta machine. It is well worth the effort.

In the next article, we shall explore the collagraph further and pay particular attention to working to your own specific design theme.



Jane Wild is a textile artist who is equally happy working with paper. She co-authored the book *Paper, Metal and Stitch*, published by B T Batsford where more of her amazing ideas for paper can be found. Her current preoccupation is with faces and figures, mostly worked in charcoal.