

#NWConnect: Interview with wood engraver, Peter Lawrence

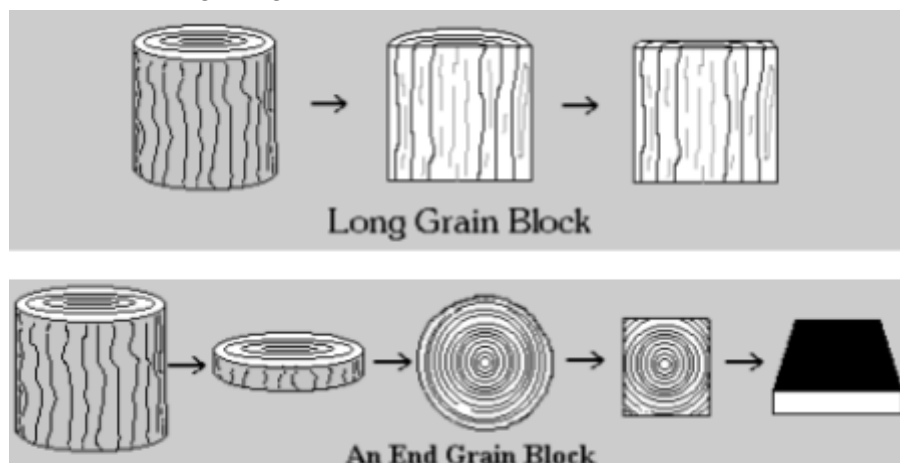
Kimberly Glassman (KG): Hello everyone! We have Pete Lawrence here from the Society of Wood Engravers to talk to us about his work and the work of the Society in general. Pete was introduced to the Society of Wood Engravers (SWE) when he started helping hang their annual exhibitions in the 1980s. In 1991 he began his own engravings and joined as a subscriber in the mid-1990s. He was then elected as a member in 1997 and joined the SWE as a designer in 1998, and then finally became a chairman from 2006 until 2011. We are very excited to have you, so thank you Pete for agreeing to do this podcast with us!

Pete Lawrence (PL): Thank you for inviting me.

KG: No worries! So, just to start, can you please tell us about your practice as a wood engraver and maybe explain a bit more about the process of wood engraving and what it is?

PL: Yes, wood engraving is a unique form of producing a print - an image on paper. It goes back to the times in the 1780s-1790s when, who we like to call the 'founding father of wood engraving', [Thomas Bewick](#), was working up in Newcastle. He realised that, although his boss [Ralph Beilby](#) was working on metal engraving with very sharp tools, he could engrave on boxwood and produce a very fine image, which would replicate the kind of detail that you get by working on metal.

So if you could imagine, it gave the effect of metal tools used to do silversmithing and copper engraving, but working on the end grain of boxwood. End grain means it is cut across the grain. And boxwood, because it is the slowest growing tree and therefore if you look at a round of boxwood you will see that the rings are incredibly tightly packed together. It has grown 200 years to get to a size of 7 or 8 inches. So by taking a block out of that and engraving, you can engrave across the grain in a very detailed manner to replicate the kind of detail that people were getting on metal.



<http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~fa106x/Wood/wood.htm>.
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So really, wood engraving is to do with the tools, the metal tools that we use, the very small, fine, sharp tools and the techniques which they produce, which is cutting into the wood, taking away what you don't want and leaving the image behind. So if you imagine, what you are doing when you print that image is you are printing the top surface of the wooden block, which is called a relief print - which is the opposite to an [intaglio print](#) - like an etching where you are cutting into the metal, or the acid is cutting into the metal, and you are forcing down into the grooves in order to take the print.

That is what a wood engraving is, but it is not to be confused with a woodcut. Easily confused because often those two terms, wood engraving and woodcuts, have been used in books over many years. In fact, many wood engravers refer to their own blocks in the old days as woodcuts. But woodcuts are done on the plank of the wood. You can imagine a tree being cut 'that way' (gestures vertically) and if you imagine a print from someone like [Edvard Munch](#) where you can actually sometimes see the grain of the wood. So the wood is coarser, the grain is more open, and you have to cut with knives and gauges - V-shaped, U-shaped gauges. And if you think of the [Japanese woodcuts](#), famously, which were all done with knives. They are cutting away the wood that they don't want - so it is still a relief print, but it is done on the plank of the wood and therefore not in so much detail as we can do on a cross endgrain of a boxwood block or one or two other woods which I can go into later if you want. So that is basically what a wood engraving is, going back to the 1780s-1790s.



Geschied (The Scream), 1895, lithograph on tan card, Rosenwald Collection © Munch Museum/Munch Ellingsen Group/ARS, NY 2009, 1943.3.9038.



The Kabuki Actor Ichikawa Omezo I in the drama Shibaraku, woodblock print, Utagawa Toyokuni, about 1819, Japan. Museum no. E.4829-1886, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

And just to say that what Bewick discovered, what he realised (and what many others very quickly realised through the 19th century), was that if you took your block, which you would cut and put it into a press, you could then ink up the type (which is a metal type that is standing proud so that the metal type is inked up) and put with the [galley of text](#) - they type into a galley. You can put your wood engraving with it and by inking up the two together, you can produce a page of type and image all in one pass on the press. This is quite different from having to combine letterpress printed pages with intaglio printed images, which have to be bound into the book. So, in the 19th century, there was a huge explosion of books, pamphlets, posters, and everything else with pictures, which could be cut with great detail and printed at the same time as the text, which was a huge revolution. That is a little bit of the history of how wood engraving started and moved into the 19th century.

KG: It is really fascinating! I wonder, with the advent of being able to print in one go the text and the image, how did that lead to the contemporary practice of wood engraving? It seems, from what I have seen in the work in your online catalogue, that they are mainly image-based without the text.

PL: That's right. Well there are still of course some letterpress printers, and some famous ones like the [Whittington Press](#) and the [Fleece Press](#) and so on who still print with metal type and use wood engravings an awful lot for their images. In fact, if you go to our Society's website you will see a book called [2020 Vision](#), which is being produced at the moment by the [Nomad Letterpress](#) run by Pat Randle. So we still have a lot of use in our small world for engravings that go with metal type.

But you're right, throughout the 20th century, of course, metal type has been used less and less. The real revolution that we're referring to, which is the start of the SWE in 1920, was when they took back control as it were - that's a famous phrase isn't it? They took back control of the means of production. So they became again artists, engravers, and printers all in the same person.

This is a contrast to the 19th century because during that time the demand for wood engravings was so huge, it was very quickly realised that the artist could not keep up with being the artist and engravers. And so a whole industry started of what we call trade engravers. So, in other words, the artist drew the picture and then the trade engraver actually cut it. One very famous example, which is *Alice in Wonderland*. If you look at the corner of the pictures in every *Alice in Wonderland* illustration you will see the name [Dalziel](#), which is the name of the engraver. Not [Tenniel](#), who of course was the illustrator.



George Dalziel
(1815–1902) or Edward
Dalziel (1817–1905)
After John Tenniel's *The
Blue Caterpillar*
Drawing (pen-and-ink on
paper), 1865
The Newberry Library,
Chicago. Call # Case
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So in the 1920s, they really focused on two things. One was still using wood engraving for illustrations because there were still presses that used metal type and so on. But also, of course you could photograph prints by then and you could reproduce them quite easily. Certainly when you get up to the latter half of the 20th century an awful lot of wood engravings were actually reproduced by photographic means. But the artists actually took back the idea of being the artist and the engraver. And so there were more and more wall prints, as we would call them.

So in the [82nd Annual Exhibition](#), we will see lots and lots of wall prints and some illustrations as well. Wall prints were really unknown until the 1920s, so it was part of the revolution in the 1920s, when the SWE started, they would produce these one-off prints, which would actually compete, if you like, with etchings, watercolours, and other sorts of things you might hang on the wall.

KG: It is fascinating that it has emerged as this independent art field. I mean, the high art / craft divide has a long history, but engraving itself was this two-person endeavour: artist versus craftsman. Now it is kind of linked together. I think it is extraordinary also to speak to the skill that you all exhibit with every piece that you create. And speaking of the skill that you have developed, I am wondering - before you became as involved as you are with the Society in the mid-1990s (we know how you started with hanging their portraits), what drew you into wood engraving as an art form itself?

PL: I went to art college in Bristol in 1969. I know I don't look that old, but I am that old. And I was there for four years, and my tutor was a man called [Peter Reddick](#). Peter Reddick is a very famous wood engraver. He engraved, I think, all of the [Thomas Hardy novels](#) and other books for [The Folio Society](#). In fact he was working on those projects in his own time or in the holidays when I was a student of his. So my first introduction to wood engraving was when I was doing a course in illustration.

Now, doing a course in illustration in 1970 didn't mean that you did any wood engraving. Because of the changes to art education in the 1960s after the '[ColdStream](#)' report, those of us who went to art college at the end of the 60s and into the 70s, weren't taught what one might call 'traditional' skills, i.e. calligraphy, wood engraving, letterpress printing, typography, etc. At least if we were, it was more on the sideline.

But I saw an exhibition of Peter Reddick's work in Bristol and there were these exquisite black and white images framed on the wall, which were illustrations for a Thomas Hardy book. And the very next day, I went into college and said: 'Excuse me Mr. Reddick, sir, what are those pictures? How do you do them?' And he very kindly took me through the process, invited me to his house and showed me the wood, the tools, the press, and everything. It was sort of an invitation from him that I might like to have a go because I liked to do very small black and white pen drawings. But, of course I was 20 years old or something and I said: 'There's no way I could do that. It is far too detailed. I can't even see the block and it clearly takes forever to do because you have to make these really small marks.' So I kind of

pushed it to one side. But after I left college in the 70s, I started to collect books on engraving because I just loved the look of them, but not really thinking that I would ever do it.



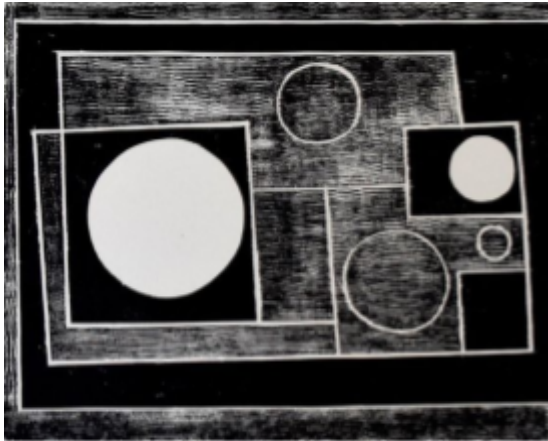
Peter Reddick, Illustrations for a Folio Society edition of 'The Return of the Native'. Signed and dated in pencil (1970/1971). 11.8 cm x 16.7 cm, wood engraving, V&A. E.92-1981. © Victoria & Albert Museum.

I got a job as a book designer in Oxford, moved to Oxford from Bristol in 1978 and took a job working as a book designer and then started carrying on collecting the odd wood engraving. And then I thought, 'I just got to have a go!' And it had nothing to do with my day job as a book designer or graphic designer. But of course I did have some skills that I could transfer to engraving. I phoned up Peter Reddick, my old tutor, in 1985 because I saw he was running a weekend course and went on his course. Whether he remembered who I was or not, I don't know. So, what is that? 15 years after he showed me how to do wood engraving I decided, 'I'll have a go!' And then it was another 5 years before I did my second wood engraving because I had a family and I'd work, freelance cartooning and all sorts.

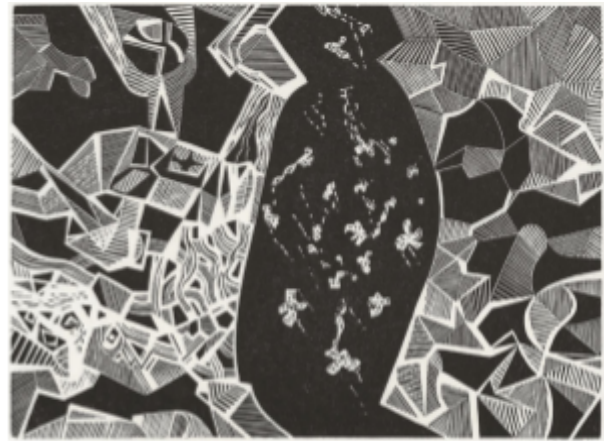
So that is how I got into it. I just loved the small black and white work and the exquisite detail and craftsmanship involved. So that is how I got into engraving and then through the 80s and 90s. When I started engraving more seriously in the 1990s there was a period somewhere around about 1994 or 1995 where I had done a few engravings, although very traditional sorts (landscapes and animals and so on), things that engravers tended to do. And then I suddenly thought one day, 'what is my own voice, what is me?'

And then, the obvious dawns on you sometimes, doesn't it? Well, it should be obvious - which is that, if you got the wood, and the tools and the technique... you can do anything! You don't have to do subject matter or you don't have to work in a style which is familiar as a wood engraving. So that is when I did my first abstract wood engraving, which was a bit scary for some reason, I don't know why. Just that I didn't really see many precedences for doing that kind of work. And that was influenced by [Ben Nicholson](#) and [St. Ives' artists](#), and a man called [Geoffrey Wales](#), a wonderful engraver who did illustrations through the 40s and

50s but by the 1960s, when he was doing more of his own work, did more and more abstract engravings for himself. He was the only person I knew at the time who had done anything abstract and I thought: 'Well, if he could do it then I'll have a go.' So that's how it started.



Ben Nicholson, *Five Circles*, 1934, Original Hand Signed, Dated and Numbered Woodcut. 34.9 x 44.9 cm. Private Collection.

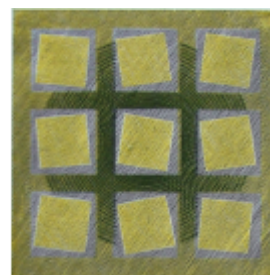


Geoffrey Wales, *River Channel 6/25*, 1969, Wood engraving. 16cm x 21cm, signed and titled. Original print unframed. Emma Mason.

KG: It is definitely the most fascinating part of your work because, historically, looking at wood engraving and being as this aid, something that is read almost like a narrative, which was very pictorial but also told a story or at least helped towards the text like when you were talking before in being able to print them together. But the craft itself has kind of evolved to have more artistic freedom and to have these individual artistic voices, like your own. Is that also what led you to move a bit away from the black and white and introduce a bit of colour like you do in your piece [Duo Yellow](#), which seems to be a new process or additional element to your practice?



Peter Lawrence, *Duo Yellow*, woodcut, 250 x 200mm. The Society of Wood Engravers.

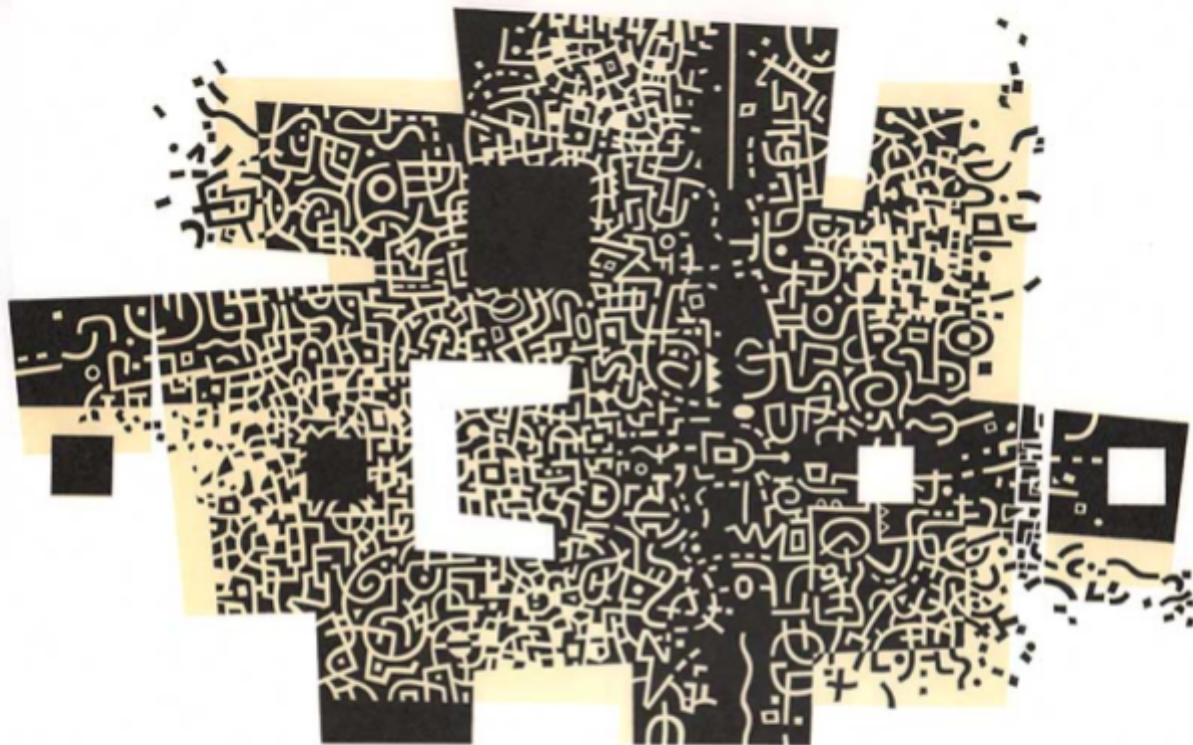


Edwina Ellis, *SQUARESBY 2*, 224 x 404mm Edition of 3.

PL: Colour in wood engraving is always a thing for discussion. A famous engraver, [Edwina Ellis](#) who is absolutely phenomenal because she actually engraves four separate blocks which overprint to create the colour. So, in other words, printing a block in yellow and printing a block in blue obviously gives you the green grass. So this means working out in your head how the colours are going to combine in order to produce a colour print. That's extremely complicated and very very unusual.

Most colour engravings, like colour woodcuts, would be done by separating areas of the image and printing one area in one colour, another area in another colour, or a key line block printed in black and then filled in with colours. So these could be done on the same block or more likely on separate blocks, which you then have to register.

My colour engravings are very minor, really. Sometimes I like to have a second colour and these are all done, apart from *Duo Yellow* which I will come back to, all the other ones, like [Kind of Blue](#) and [Dark Matter](#), are all done as [reduction prints](#). So if you can imagine, once you've got your drawing on the block, if you cut away everything that you want to be white, I then printed that block in colour - say a pale yellow or a pale blue - and then you carry on cutting and then overprint that again in register in black. So obviously, the white areas are still there, but the second lot of cuts that you've made, you see the colour coming through - and that is a reduction print. So you end up with the block at the end, you can't print that image again because you've cut it away from the same block. That's about as much as I can manage really with two colours and if someone said I was not allowed to do colour anymore, I'd be happy with black and white, to be honest. But it's nice to experiment with these things.



Peter Lawrence, *Dark Matter*, 250 x 400mm. The Society of Wood Engravers.

But with the *Duo Yellow* and another one called [Dark Energy II](#), which has a little bit of yellow within the black image - that is coloured in afterwards by hand. So that is not printed, the colour is not printed. It is not a two-coloured print at all, it is a black image which is then hand-coloured. And of course hand-colouring images goes back to centuries like hand-colouring maps or whatever so, that is how that's done. Somebody had thought I had cut just those tiny little bits of yellow and printed it as a separate block, but I'm not that crazy - I'm not that mad!

Reduction blocks are an easy way because the registration is that much easier if you are working still from the same block.

KG: I did notice the bits of colour you used in your work but obviously the overwhelming composition aesthetic in your pieces are this very balanced black and white detailing, especially in the kind of larger scale abstract works looking at [Two of a Kind](#) or [The White Horse II](#), which are in your online catalogue. I was just wondering where does this beautiful balance that you achieve come from and what is your thought process when creating these abstract works? Because it is communicated beautifully, I am just wondering how you get there?

PL: Well, that is very kind of you to say. When I am working on something that is purely abstract, absolutely abstract with no reference at all to the real world, as it were, these are just works of imagination. So they start with little doodles or little sketches of shapes and so on. And then I build it up to the size that I think that print is going to be. And then there are lots, and lots, and lots of preparatory drawings to work out first of all the shapes, but also what is black, what is white, and how many tones? And then, of course, how do you distinguish tones one from another?



Peter Lawrence, *The White Horse II*, 300 x 370mm. The Society of Wood Engravers.

In Simon Brett's book, [*Wood Engraving: How to Do It*](#) (2010), he talks about edges. If you imagine two shapes next to each other, how do you distinguish one area from the next one that it's up against? Imagine like a map where you are colouring in different countries in different colours, so you can see where one border is, where you can move from one country to the next. Well, in engraving you need to distinguish one area from another somehow. One can be lighter, one can be darker. But also you can use different textures: mark-making. And I just love mark-making. So balancing the shapes, the black and white shapes is one thing and then actually separating all of those shapes into different marks is another. If you look closely at the prints, you will see that the same mark-making is repeated across the image. So maybe there are five different ways of creating a tone, and they will be balanced as well across the image and hopefully it will enable you to distinguish one from another.

Really I am a designer who does wood engraving. So I never thought I needed to be restricted to using just one block. If you are laying out a page of a book, you might have a block of text in one part of the page or spread, and then a photograph in another part and then a headline somewhere else. So you are working with these elements and you are balancing, when you are designing, different sizes and different weights and different emphases and how much white space you leave on the page. And I think, I suppose, I just transfer those skills or thought processes to engraving. So I hope that the whole image works as a kind of considered abstract design, a balanced design. And then when you look into it more closely, you will see more detail.

There is another strand of those abstract pictures, which actually have elements of real images within the abstraction. So an engraving like [*Transform*](#) you will see there is probably about twenty little pictures within the 'apparently' abstract picture. And that comes from doing collage. When you do collage, you cut and paste different things in different places that apparently are in congress. Or you have got them together in a kind of surreal combination and maybe they work, or maybe they don't and you play around. That's another way I got into doing these more varied kinds of engravings - mixing abstraction with bits of realism.



Peter Lawrence,
Transform, wood
engraving, The Society of
Wood Engravers.

In the case of *The White Horse* picture, I hope it works as a whole from a distance as a unified image and then when you go closer, you can see it's a new idea really in trying to combine abstraction and realism in the same picture. So, there is a real horse in there somewhere and there is another real horse on the hillside and other things which you can recognise, obviously, as being realistic like a man walking a dog. But the whole thing is within, I hope, an abstract design.

I'm not really sure I answered your question because I can't really remember what it was [chuckles].

KG: Oh it is all fascinating! Just learning more about your work and how you get there I think has given us great insight into - well, when you look at your works, you do get the overall impression that it is abstraction but then when you look closer you do get those realistic elements and I do think that your work is quite emblematic of what the Society does because as you have stated, wood engraving today is kind of considered by many as a refuge from our digital age; that is stands in opposition. But also, given the current state of affairs, we are finding ways to engage with your very tactile work in a digital way and I was just wondering what you thought about that and how would you encourage us to still engage with engraving virtually but also relate the importance of having this kind of tactile art production process?

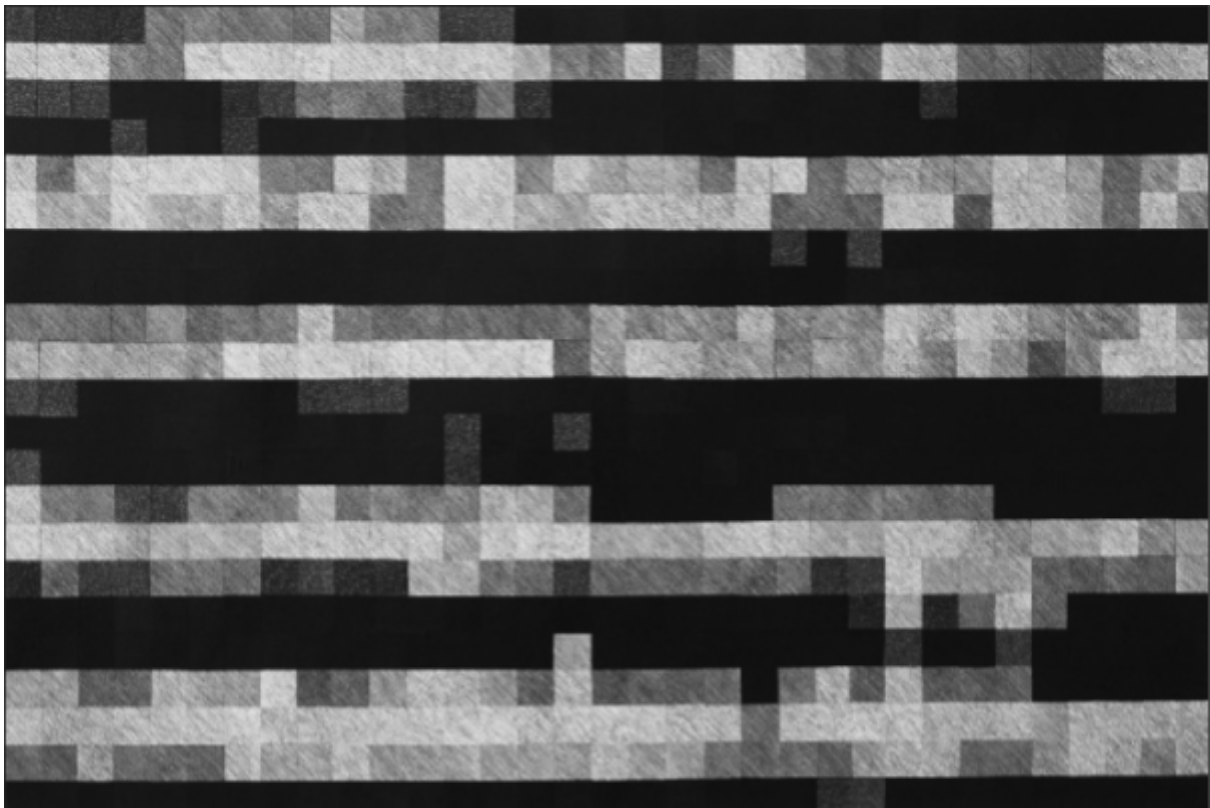
PL: Well I think if you are going to do wood engraving, you have to love working with your hands. You have to love the idea of bringing your eye and your brain and your hands together. Now, we are sitting here talking to each other, looking at each other and we can use our elbows or our little fingers or whatever to press the keys. But with engraving, you have to have a certain level of hand skills. It is not to say that technique overrules everything else because there are some fantastically technically brilliant wood engravings that are done that can look rather dead and rather boring. So you still have to bring life to the image. But you have to start with the idea that if you are going to do wood engraving, in the end you have to work with your hands, you have to work fairly slowly, painstakingly, and you have to spend quite a lot of time to produce an image.

Which is not to say that the computer does not come in some way or other. All of our images, for instance. Of course, we have to cut in reverse. So a simple thing of reversing your drawing on the computer so you can see what it is like the other way around and all that kind of thing is very simple. Lots of engravers, I'm sure, use technology to create images in one way or another. I use it in a very limited way. I mean, it has so many fantastic uses in terms of being able to share images with other people, and so on and so forth. But within the actual craft or art of engraving, the fun is to do it yourself really, to do everything yourself.

And it's an antidote to the computers in the sense that, at least as I see it, it is obvious but maybe people don't always realise it. You can't put the wood back once you've cut it away. So, in other words, every mark you make, the end product is an accurate, realistic representation of the process that you went through, for good or bad. So the marks that you didn't mean to make or the mistakes that you made that the artist might notice but maybe

other people don't - it's all there. Whereas, of course, with everything we do digitally we can undo.

I will just refer you to [Leonie Bradley](#)'s image in the 82nd exhibition. I know Leonie is working very deeply with digital images and engraving, so if someone wants to explore that - she is a very good person to look into. Certainly computers are going to be around aren't they in wood engraving? But I think wood engraving is going to carry on.



Leonie Bradley, *Input*, 440 x 660mm. The Society of Wood Engravers.

KG: Yes and I mean, on that note, 100 years, 1920 to 2020. I mean, that is a monumental feat.! What is next for The Society of Wood Engravers? What's going on?

PL: Well certainly since the refounding of the Society in 1984 after we had a bit of a dip in the 60s and 70s when other forms of printmaking like screen prints and colour printing and all that kind of thing became much more fashionable. But since 1984, what we have done in the last 10 or 20 years is expand this society's reach across the world much more. And we are finding younger people in China, America, and New Zealand. Anywhere where someone wants to get into wood engraving and the SWE is kind of a focal point for those artists. There aren't similar societies. There is a society in America called [The Wood Engravers Network](#), but around the world there aren't so many wood engravers that they can form their own societies.

So we've encouraged more and more people from around the world to send in their work into our exhibitions. And two years ago, for instance, in 2018, I was invited to go to China to

teach wood engraving and I spent a couple of weeks teaching some very very exceptionally good woodcut artists who had never ever done any wood engraving because there is no tradition for wood engraving in China. And so if you can imagine wood engraving taking off in China, gradually those people will teach one or two other people, and so on and so forth.

So I think what the Society will carry on doing is having our touring exhibition around the UK. But it will be hopefully, and I am sure it will be, populated by prints from around the world. And what is so fascinating about that, if you look at the work of [Grigory Babich](#) in Moscow, you can see that his engravings are absolutely wonderful but they have none of the British Bewick tradition. And why should they? He comes from a Russian tradition, which means that you can take the tools, you can take the wood, you can use the techniques and then produce whatever you want. So I think it is going to be exciting to see more and more prints coming from overseas. So I think that is something that we are definitely going to try and develop more. And also our website and our online presence I'm sure will grow over time.



Grigory Babich, *Portrait of Prince Odoyevsky*,
The Society of Wood Engravers.

As for the future of wood engraving. It is interesting, I mean things do go in fashions, don't they? And wood engraving has come in and out of fashion once or twice already in my time. But given that some of the best known and best selling books that are out there at the moment - [Philip Pullman](#)'s series (*His Dark Materials*), which are illustrated by [John Lawrence](#) or [Chris Wormell](#), both members of our society. And of course the *Harry Potter* covers, which have been recently redone by [Andrew Davidson](#). These are all wood engravings. These are wood engravings used on some of the biggest selling, popular books that you will see in the window of Waterstones in Oxford and that is a remarkable thing, isn't it? For a technique which not necessarily people know too much about. But it's the class of those engravings that you can't replicate with drawings or any other way, which makes them stand out.

KG: Well, we just wanted to say a huge thank you from The North Wall for agreeing to have a podcast with us. We are so honoured to help celebrate your 100 years and we are *very* excited to see what you do next. So, thank you so much for joining us.

PL: Thank you for inviting me.