

## M.C. Escher

Maurits Cornelius Escher was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, 1898. He was born in Leeuwarden, in Holland. Escher was the youngest of his parent's five sons. His father was a civil engineer, and served as Chief Engineer for a government bureau. His family home was a grand house named 'Prinsessehof' and later became a museum and a place where Escher's work was exhibited.

In 1907, aged 9, he learnt piano and carpentry. He wasn't successful in school, and never officially graduated from secondary school after failing his final exam. His first drawing classes were at secondary school, taught by F.W. Van der Haagen. This teacher taught him linoleum cut technique and developed his graphics, art was the only subject he didn't get poor marks in.

In 1913 Escher met Bas Kist in religious school. Kist was to become a lifelong friend and like Escher, was interested in printing techniques. One of Escher's earliest works is of his father. In 1917 Escher and Kist visited Gert Stegeman, an artist with a printing press in his studio. Some of Escher's early works was printed on Stegeman's press. During this year Escher became interested in literature with his friends, and began to write poems and essays.

In 1918 he started private lessons and studies in architecture at the Higher Technology School in Delft. In order to study he gained a deferment on his military service. But when he enlisted in 1919 he was refused entry and so couldn't continue school. He found this difficult, and there are many drawings and a start in woodcuts from this period in his life. Also, at this time he began to receive praise from the media.

Escher attended the School of Architecture and Decorative Arts from 1919 to 1922 in order to pursue his career in architecture. Here he became very skilled in woodcut technique, and was instructed in graphic techniques by S. Jessurun de Mesquita, who he met after a week in the city and was persuaded to continue with his drawings after Jessurun de Mesquita had seen them. Escher was influenced by this man's strong personality, and started a full-time study of 'the graphic and decorative arts'.

He visited the Riviera and Italy with his parents in 1921. He was unimpressed by the tropical flowers of the Mediterranean, and instead studied the cacti and olive trees in his detailed drawings. The sights he experienced during this visit influenced some of his later drawings. That year he also sold in mass numbers his print 'St Francis (Preaching to the Birds)'. He claimed to have worked on this woodcut 'like a madman'. But he felt he needed inspiration and decided to go to Italy.

He moved to Italy in 1922 and settled in Rome in 1924. During the spring of 1922 he roamed the Italian countryside, drawing landscapes, plants and insects. He visited Granada, and studied examples of Moorish decorative styles. After travelling around Italy, he settled in Siena for a few months. Here he worked very hard, and enjoyed the town and atmosphere, describing it as 'blessed'. It was here in August 1923 that he held his first solo show, 'Circolo Artistico'. In the next year, on June 12<sup>th</sup>, he married Jetta Umiker, the daughter of a family he lodged with.

With his wife he spent days working at the Alhambra Palace, sketching as much as possible. These sketches later became a basis for much of Escher's future work. After this trip he became obsessed with the idea of a regular plane. He wrote a lot about this subject, saying, "It remains an extremely absorbing activity, a real mania to which I have become addicted".

In 1924 he held his first solo exhibition in Holland. During this time his pictures were labelled as mechanical and reasoned, and there are some of Escher's most striking landscapes to be found from this time. During his time in Italy he also visited Sicily, Calabria, Corsica and Spain.

In 1933 the printroom of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, bought 26 of Escher's prints. In May of 1933 Escher made 19 drawings of Corsica which later became wood engravings and lithographs. During this year he also created some prints for 'The Terrible Adventures of Scholastica', a horror book.

In 1934 he and his family visited the seashore, and Escher and his wife went on to see Belgium, Bruges and Ghent. During this time his work was gaining recognition and success in America. His print 'Nonza' received third prize at the Exhibition of Contemporary Prints at the Art Institute of Chicago. They went on to purchase the print, Escher's first sale to an American museum.

Escher travelled to Amsterdam after staying at his parent's house at The Hague in 1935. He spent a lot of time on a detailed portrait of his father. The finished lithograph was only given to family members.

In 1938 Escher continued his plane-filling techniques, shape and transformation experimentation. He tried to create the impression of infinite extent by making edge figures more vague and making the figures smaller as they reached the centre, or the border. His famous print 'Night and Day' was of two birds flying in opposite directions, one of his 'most beautiful motifs'.

Escher was very personally touched by the Nazi persecution of the Jews. The Nazis killed his old Jewish teacher, Samuel Jessurun de Mequita, in 1944. Escher helped to transfer some of Mequita's work to the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam. He organised a memorial showing for Mequita at the Stedelijk museum in 1946.

After the war he took part in an exhibition with artists who had refused to take part in the Nazi regime. After this he earned several new commissions, one was to make 400 copies of a print for schools.

In 1946 a new technique, mezzotint, interested Escher. He liked the technique because the result was subtle, delicate lines and shading, but the process was long and painstaking. 'Dewdrop' is one of the most famous of Escher's mezzotint works.

In September 1954 he had a large solo exhibition at the Stedelijk museum, on the occasion of the International Mathematical Conference. Here he met H.S.M. Coxeter, a Canadian professor.

In October of the same year he exhibited in the Whyte Gallery, situated in Washington D.C. Here he sold more than 100 prints.

On April 27, 1955, Escher was knighted. He received the Knighthood of the Order of Oranje Nassau. The day began with him working on a woodcut on his studio, when he received a visit from an alderman and the town clerk. He was given a silver cross inlaid with enamel. He wrote about this event to his son Arthur, detailing the day's events. "I had not dressed up in anything special but was working on my woodcut in my old cord trousers and shirt-sleeves". He described how the alderman was unsuccessful in pinning the badge to him: "He was too nervous- or the safety pin would not go through my lapels. At any rate, your dad is a knight, if not of the garter. Why in the world should they want to decorate me is a complete mystery. I can only hope it is not a complete mistake."

In 1957 he started a wall mural in the city of Utrecht in Holland. He spent that year and the next working on this project.

On March 17, in 1971, Escher died, aged 73, in the Hilversum Hospital.

Escher's work intrigued mathematicians and psychologists because of his visual perception. Since the 1960s some young people felt that his images complemented and were similar to experiences brought on by taking hallucinogenic drugs. Escher wrote of his work: "By considering and analysing the observations that I had made, I ended up in the domain of mathematics. Although I am absolutely innocent of training or knowledge in the exact sciences, I often seem to have more in common with mathematicians than with my fellow artists."

Escher was also greatly admired by the Surrealist artists. They felt his work was surreal and considered him to be a surrealist. His work became more Surrealist from around 1940, with prints of bizarre buildings where he used optical illusions. One of the images he used was staircases, which can be perceived as going upward and downward at the same time in the same direction.