

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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PRINTS BY M. C. ESCHER (1898-1972)

This exhibition of thirty-nine prints by M. C. (Maurits Cornelis) Escher is arranged chronologically, beginning on your left as you enter the room.

Escher was born on June 17, 1898, in Leeuwarden, Holland. He made his first prints from linoleum blocks while still a student in secondary school. In 1919 he entered the School of Architecture and Ornamental Design in Haarlem. Here, his absorbing interest in the possibilities of woodcut was stimulated by the presence of his teacher S. Jessurun de Mesquita, who by Escher's own account was the most important source of inspiration during his student years. From 1922, the year that Escher terminated his formal studies, until 1941 he lived outside of Holland. After traveling in Italy and Spain, he settled in 1924 in Rome where his residence extended over a ten-year period. During this time he made excursions into Southern Italy, Sicily, and Corsica. In 1934 Escher left Italy to live in Switzerland. Two years later he moved to Belgium, staying near Brussels until 1941. In that year he returned to Holland and established himself permanently in Baarn, a small village near Amsterdam. His last work, a large color woodcut, Ringsnakes, was completed in 1969. Escher died at the age of seventy-three on March 29, 1972.

Early in his career Escher worked for almost three decades in relative obscurity producing an arresting series of prints that eventually brought him world recognition. Space and the ambiguities of visual perception are the key elements, present even in his earliest prints,

though not as fully conceived as in the famous images of his mature period. Escher considered his early efforts, those produced during the years 1922-1935, to be of no value except as practice exercises. Yet study of these early works reveals that he was already exploring space and visual perception. Even though he experimented with other techniques, Escher's chosen medium was the woodcut. He made his first lithograph in 1929 and in 1931 his first wood engraving.

In the 1935 woodcut, Saint Peter's Rome, a sense of vertigo is induced, as the viewer finds himself high above the repetitive patterns of the floor. Far less bound to observed reality is the 1947 woodcut, Another World, one of Escher's most frequently reproduced works, which depicts the interior of an impossible building. The five visible walls, pierced by arcaded openings, interact in various combinations so that space can be apprehended in many ways.

Escher's work has received increasing attention in recent years. The first scientific analysis of his designs was Caroline H. Macgillarvy's Symmetry Aspects of M. C. Escher's Periodic Drawings (Utrecht: A. Oosthoek's Uitgeversmaatschappij NV, 1965). Another publication The Graphic Art of M. C. Escher (New York: Meredith Press, 1967) contained explanatory remarks by Escher on his prints. The most recent study The World of M. C. Escher (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972) appeared this summer; two art historians, a mathematician, a sociologist, and the artist contributed essays for this book.