

San Fernando Valley State College

THE VIBRATO OF NATURE AS EXPRESSED IN BIRD FORMS

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

Printmaking

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Theme of the Project

The "Vibrato of Nature" as exemplified in bird forms was a fascinating theme which offered an opportunity to present the drama of rhythmic movement and the beauty of color and plumage. The objective was to capture the spirit and essence of this subject in a series of six intaglio prints. The theme became more profound with the consideration not only of the superb engineering of the forms but also the influence of birds on human interest and imagination since early times.

An Explanation of the Procedure

The project for thesis performance began with several days of quick sketching of the birds at the Los Angeles Children's Zoo. The final designs for the bird series were expressions of the gesture and action of these first quick sketches. The purpose was to simplify the basic forms and

elements and dramatize the conception.

After the layouts for the series had been made, the principal forms were cut from the drawings and rearranged as collages for more vigorous composition. All of the plates were in process at the same time and all were completed at the same time. A different procedure was used for the first etching of the collage designs on each of four plates and the same procedure on the other two. The basic methods for the first etch were: sugar lift technique, soft ground transfer, Wilhold glue lift, printing ink transfer, and wax crayon etch. After the initial etch on each plate, the steps were identical on all plates. The integration of color was achieved by the use of woodcuts and stencils. A complete analysis of the methods and technical steps is described in the thesis. Photographs of the final prints and procedure diagrams for Plate Number One are included.

Conclusions

Drawings and studies made of the birds at the zoo were important in the development of the project. It is felt that there is no substitute for the animated model in the interpretation of the spirit and essence of the subject. Furthermore, many sketches and compositional schemes were most valuable in the solution of design and technical problems. Even though the conception changes and develops on the metal plate, the knowledge gained in the

preliminary studies pays dividends in the execution of the Idea.

The method of working on all six plates and completing all of them at the same time was an exciting and efficient way to work. It was a great time-saver for multiple processes could be carried on simultaneously.

Discoveries are always possible and add further incentive to the printmaking adventure. A graphite paper transfer design on aquatint, used in the sugar lift technique, produced a white line treatment which was advantageous. On another plate, the graphite paper transfer, without aquatint on the metal, caused an etch resembling line drawing on soft ground. Other promising experiments for further study originated in the development of the "Vibrato of Nature" series.

The discipline encountered in the control of the design factors in this medium cannot help but strengthen the performance in the fine arts. It is believed that other students will agree that the printmaking experience is rewarding and contributes to a more vigorous approach in other media.

PART I

THE THEME

A Statement of the Implications of the Subject

The "Vibrato of Nature" as exemplified in bird forms was a compelling subject which found expression in the intaglio print medium. The rhythmic and pulsating movement, the plumage, and the color ensemble presented a wealth of inspiration for a series of prints. Fascination with the theme prompted a review of the paintings and engraving of John James Audubon who presented so powerfully the drama of life and action. The wood engravings of Thomas Bewick, beautiful as they are in texture and values (color, in his terminology), seem passive by comparison. It was the purpose to capture the intense vitality of the subject and convey the emotional quality of the vibrato.

The theme has more depth than may seem on first thought. The superb engineering of the forms is a source of wonder and a reminder of Robert Burns' phrase--"the sovereign statute of order." Birds have captured human interest and imagination since primeval times. According to history, they have not only entered into human sentiment, mythology, religious symbolism, and scripture, but they may have inspired man in his earliest conception of music and

certainly in his age-old desire for conquest of flight.

In order to express the spirit of the theme graphically and to better know the subject, scientific data was read on the physiology of birds and the topics of migration, behavior, habits, and plumage. (The references are recorded in the bibliography.) The fact that there are many unsolved areas of investigation and mystery gives the theme even greater dimension. In a related statement, Dr. K. Simkiss, zoologist at the University of London, writes: "What one can be sure of is that field and laboratory workers in cooperation will continue for many years to provide information on the ability of birds to fly."¹ Another scientist points out that "mystery and much wonder remain for those with minds open to the marvels of the natural world."²

The Formulation and Development of the Project

The project began with several days of quick sketching of the birds at the Los Angeles Children's Zoo. Photographs were taken also, but only to serve as memory notes. Since the models never remained static, the dynamics were expressed in the gesture sketches in a few seconds without irrelevant detail. Although photographic research is often used in drawing living forms, it is believed from this study that there is no substitute for the animated model in the interpretation of the spirit and essence. Pertinent to this conclusion are the thoughts of Henri Matisse:

The future painter must feel what is useful for his development--drawing or even sculpture--everything that will let him become one with Nature, identify himself with her, by entering into the things--which I call Nature--that arouse his feelings. I believe study by means of drawing is most essential. If drawing is of the Spirit and color of the Senses, you must draw first, to cultivate the spirit and to be able to lead color into spiritual paths.³

The final drawings of the bird series for six zinc plates, eighteen by twenty-four inches, were actually extensions of the action character of the first quick sketches made on location. The endeavor in organization was to simplify the basic elements and dramatize the expression.

PART II

AN EXPOSITION OF THE PROCEDURE USED IN THE SERIES

The Inception of the Over-all Plan

All of the six plates in the series were begun at once in order to gain freedom in execution and unity of presentation. The objective was to maintain this freedom during the procedure from the initial etching of the basic forms through the successive steps towards completion. After the designs for the series had been made, the basic forms were cut from the drawings, rearranged for more dynamic composition, and then glued as collages to heavy drawing paper. Greater movement and dramatic character were achieved by this method. A different procedure was used for the etching of the collage designs on each of four plates and the same procedure on the other two. Following the first etch on each plate, the steps were identical on all plates. After the etching of the six plates was completed, the integration of color was effected by the use of woodcuts and stencils. All plates were in process, and all completed at the same time. This method was a stimulating and efficient way to work.

PART III

AN ANALYSIS OF THE BASIC METHODS AND TECHNICAL STEPS

The process used for each plate precedes the photograph of each print of the bird series, "The Vibrato of Nature." The progressive steps and the acid solutions for Plate Number One are described fully, but noted briefly for the other plates because of similarity. The final editions were printed with Charbonnel Noir Taille Douce and colored International Printing Ink on heavy Rives BFK paper.

Plate Number One, Sugar Lift Technique for Basic Forms

1. Aquatint was laid. The design, transferred from the collage, was painted on the plate with a brush with a cooked solution composed of sugar, water, soap (not detergent), and blue ink. After this application had dried thoroughly, the plate was covered with thin varnish and then soaked in warm water until the sugar lifted. Some prodding with a Q-Tip and a paint brush facilitated the operation. The zinc plate was etched in a medium acid solution of nine parts water to one part nitric acid for two hours. It appeared that best results may be obtained with the sugar lift method by painting on a heavy coating of the sugar solution followed by a thin coat of varnish.

The plate was etched in twelve to one acid solution for two hours.

6. The plate was covered with hard ground, definite shapes of medium and coarse sandpaper were transferred into the ground through the electric press, and the plate was etched in twelve to one acid solution for one hour.

7. A heavy coat of varnish was applied to the plate and allowed to dry overnight. Lines were freely drawn with an etching needle following the rhythms of the forms, and the plate etched in nine to one acid solution for two hours.

8. The design of the etching (from a freshly inked proof) was transferred through the electric press to several mahogany plywood panels of one-eighth inch thickness. These served as color woodcuts with large simple forms in relief. For texture, Wilhold glue was applied with small cardboard strips to parts of the relief areas and the glue was allowed to dry overnight. To introduce more play of light, small patterns were gouged from the relief shapes. Colored printing ink was applied with a brayer over the surface areas and the background of the wood panels, small patches on the surface areas were wiped with a cloth to relieve the flatness, and the panels were printed successively on wet paper with the roller press.

ILLUSTRATION: Plate Number One, page 11. Diagrams of procedure, see Appendix.





Plate Number Three, Wilhold Glue Method for Basic Forms

1. Wilhold glue was applied to the collage design of basic forms on the plate and the glue drawn into with cardboard strips. After the glue dried overnight, the background and some areas in the design were varnished out and the plate was etched in nine to one acid solution for one hour. More texture variation might have occurred if the glue had been applied much heavier in places and thinner in others.

2. Soft ground textures of several types of net were laid and etched in nine to one acid solution for forty minutes. Since the etch was not bitten enough and unification of the textures was needed, a second soft ground of crumpled tarlatan was laid to unite the elements and etched in the same acid solution for one hour.

Steps three through nine correspond to those used on Plate Number One: (3) aquatint, (4) scraping and burnishing, (5) hot tar etch, (6) sandpaper on hard ground etch, (7) line etch through heavy varnish, (8) printing of two mahogany plywood panels in color, and (9) printing of the color woodcuts and the zinc plate.

10. For greater contrast of values, aquatint was applied to the basic forms, some areas were varnished out with varied free brush strokes, and the plate etched in nine to one acid solution for one and one-half hours.

11. After shapes in the rhythmic pattern had been scraped and burnished, the color woodcuts and the zinc plate were printed for the final edition.

ILLUSTRATION: Plate Number Three (horizontal), page 16.



Plate Number Four, Printing Ink Transfer

1. Printing ink was applied with a roller to the collage shapes, allowing some ink to go into the background. The inked collage was transferred to the zinc plate through the press and the plate allowed to dry overnight. With no varnishing of areas, the plate was etched in nine to one acid solution for one hour. The resultant etch showed a texture of varied weights of dots and splashy lines. This was a very simple and forceful method to achieve a dynamic transfer.

2. No soft ground textures were needed.

Steps three through nine correspond to those used on Plate Number One: (3) aquatint, (4) scraping and burnishing, (5) hot tar etch, (6) sandpaper on hard ground etch, (7) line etch through heavy varnish, (8) printing of two mahogany plywood panels in color, and (9) printing of the color woodcuts and the zinc plate.

10. After some areas had been scraped and burnished, the color woodcuts and the zinc plate were printed for the final edition.

ILLUSTRATION: Plate Number Four, page 18.



Plate Number Five, Soft Ground Transfer for Basic Forms

1. A soft ground was laid and the collage design was transferred into the ground through the press. Light areas were varnished out on the forms and the background, and the plate etched in nine to one acid solution for ten minutes. The plate was removed from the acid, more areas (mostly the light gray) were varnished out, and the plate etched in the same acid solution for twenty minutes.

2. A soft ground texture of burlap was applied to bring out the bird forms and etched in nine to one acid solution for one hour.

Steps three through seven correspond to those used on Plate Number One: (3) aquatint, (4) scraping and burnishing, (5) hot tar etch, (6) sandpaper on hard ground etch, and (7) line etch through heavy varnish.

8. Two color stencils were made, but manipulated for a printing of three colors.

9. The zinc plate was printed with black ink over the color proof.



Plate Number Six, Wax Crayon Etch

1. The lines of the forms were drawn on the plate on the heated stove with a wax crayon using free and broken lines of varying degrees. After the plate had cooled, large shapes in the background and some areas on the forms were varnished out, and the plate etched in nine to one acid solution for twenty minutes. This was a very effective method of expediting a rhythmic and spontaneous design.

2. Crumpled tarlatan textures in soft ground were applied, light areas varnished out on the forms and the background, and the plate etched in nine to one acid solution for one hour.

Steps three through seven correspond to those used on Plate Number One: (3) aquatint, (4) scraping and burnishing, (5) hot tar etch, (6) sandpaper on hard ground etch, and (7) line etch through heavy varnish.

8. Two color stencils were made and printed.

9. The zinc plate was printed with black ink over the color proof.



PART IV

CONCLUSIONS

The adventure in intaglio printmaking fires the imagination with the wealth of possibilities for continued exploration. The requirements of the medium, although sometimes exacting, provide a creative experience in the execution of the Idea. Technical facility is not the end in itself; the artist's concept is the ultimate goal.

The opportunity for discovery is always present. Several promising experiments for further study originated in the development of the "Vibrato of Nature" series. The observance of the discoveries of others in the printmaking studio enriches one's experience and stimulates further invention and new directions. The discipline encountered in the control of the design factors in this medium cannot help but strengthen the performance in the fine arts.

Good materials are rewarding. Remarkable contrast can be seen in the results of the printing of the same plate first with average and then with superior ink and paper. While the beginning proofs of the first "states" may be satisfactory with student's printing ink and inexpensive paper, it is believed, in the concluding stages of an etching, that quality ink and paper should be used

in order to evaluate the results and heighten the potentialities of the plate. The use of Charbonnel Noir Taille Douce and heavy Rives BFK paper for the final proofs revealed that the etch of the plates was decisive and complete.

In support of these activities, considerable research was done on the history and methods of etching and engraving. A detailed seminar study of the role of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century print was extremely valuable. The most important single development in the nineteenth century was the discovery and implementation of photography and the photographic process which eliminated the draftsman and finally eliminated the engraver. While this scientific progress could have caused the end of printmaking, actually photo-mechanical processes freed printmaking from its former reproductive role and led to its status as a creative and independent art in its own right. Therefore it comes as no surprise that Bernard Gheerbrant, Director of Galerie La Hune, Paris, draws this conclusion:

. . . a printmaker, who has no other medium of self-expression than his technique, can prove himself to be as essential as the famous painter if he identifies himself with the deeper meaning of his time.

FOOTNOTES

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2. John H. Storer, The Flight of Birds (Michigan: Cranbrook Institute of Science, 1948), p. xi.
3. Jean Leymarie, Herbert Read, William S. Lieberman, Henri Matisse, Retrospective 1966 (Switzerland: Press of the Imprimeries Réunies S.A., 1965), p.7.
4. Gabor Peterdi, Printmaking (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), p. 137.
5. Bernard Gheerbrant, "Editorial," Artist's Proof, Issue Number 6, Fall-Winter, 1963-64, Volume 3, Number 2:8.

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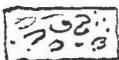
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"Prints as Pictures," Studio, 66:258-9, December, 1963.

"Poor Man's Paintings My Foot," Studio, 157: 104-8,
April, 1959.

Gheerbrant, Bernard. Editorial," Artist's Proof,
Issue Number 6, Fall-Winter, 1963-64, Volume 3, Number
2: 8.

A P P E N D I X



STEP 1. Sugar Lift

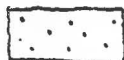


STEP 2. Soft Ground Textures

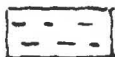




STEP 3. Aquatint



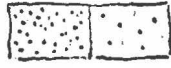
STEP 4. Aquatint, Scraped and Burnished



STEP 4. (continued) Textures, Scraped and Burnished



STEP 5. Hot Tar

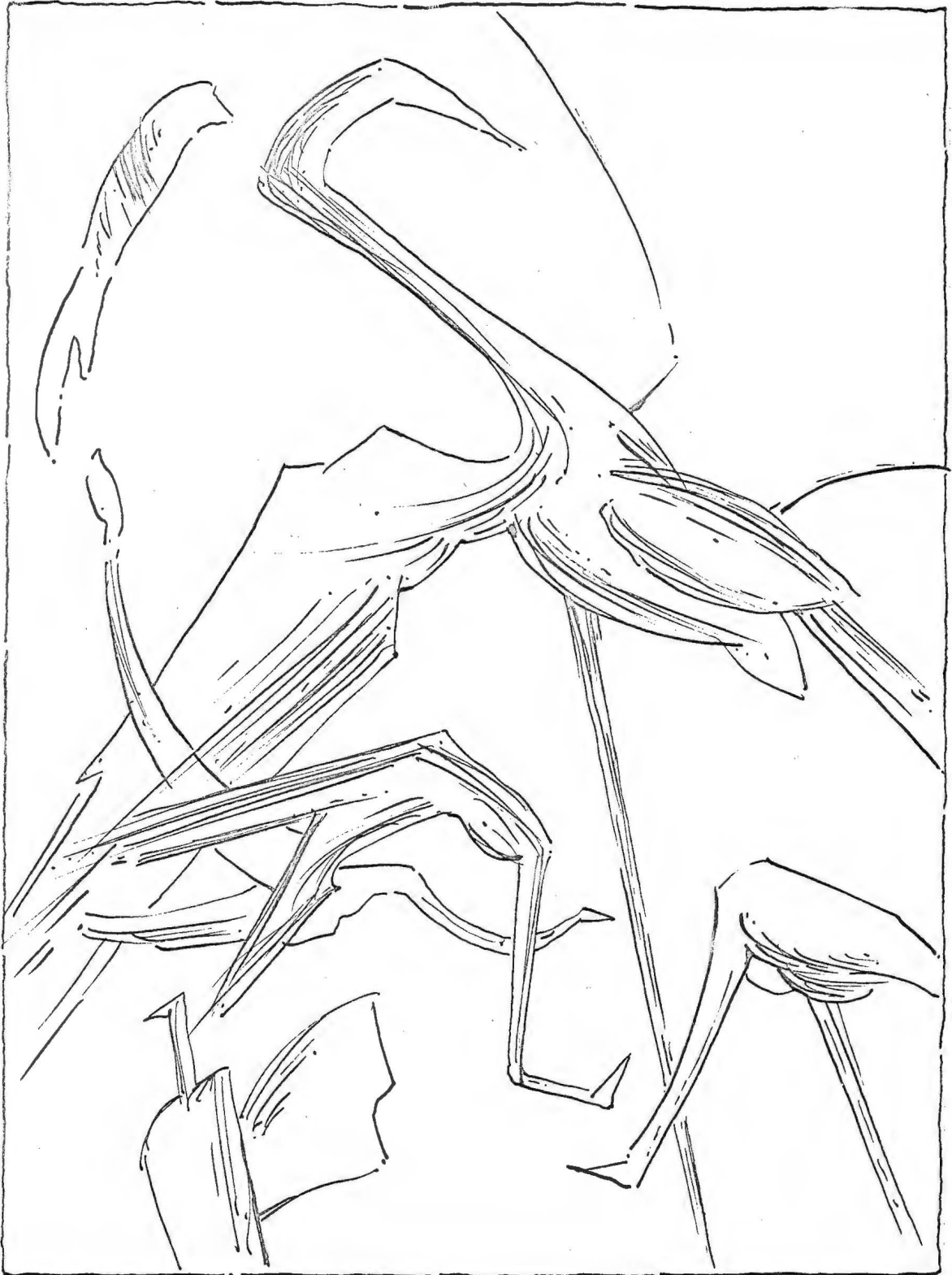


STEP 6. Medium and Coarse Sandpaper
in Hard Ground

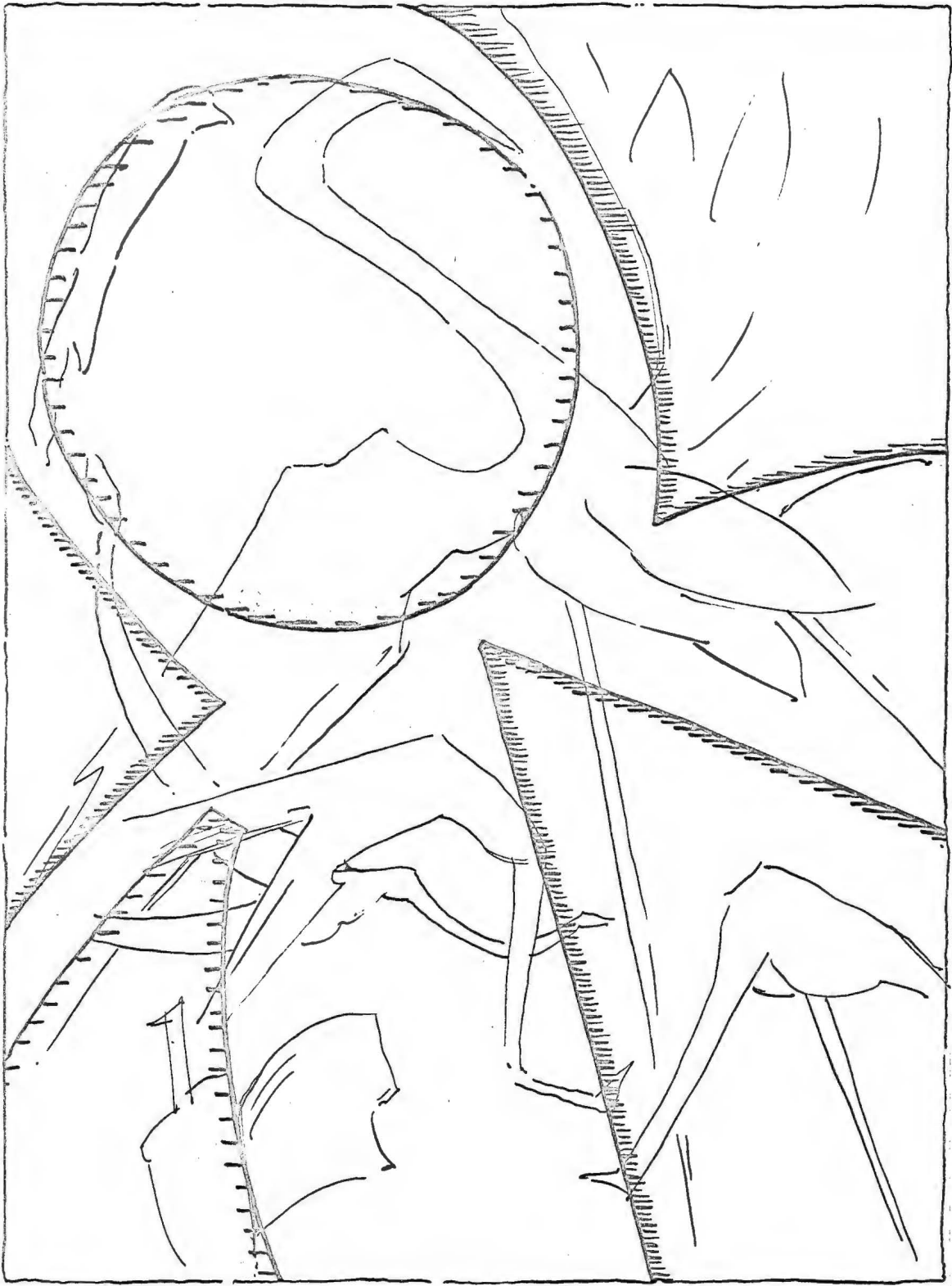




STEP 7. Lines Drawn into Heavy Varnish



STEP 8. Two Color Woodcuts



Light Yellow-green



Deep Blue