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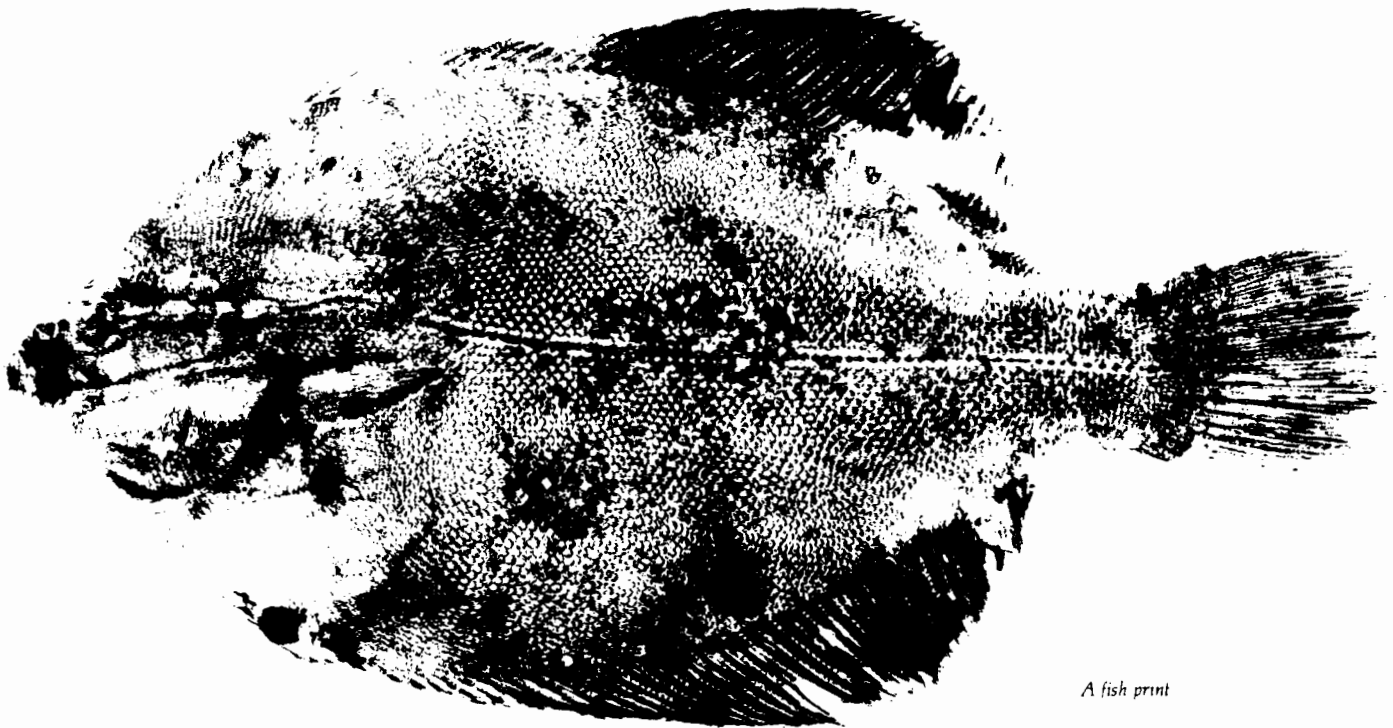
GREGORY GRAMBO

FISH PRINTING

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Fish Printing



A fish print

Gregory Grambo

Many years ago, Japanese fishermen found a way of recording their catches. Their method was more precise than a drawing, for it was a print taken directly from the fish. The Japanese called this process *gyotako* (from *gyo* meaning fish and *tako* meaning print), and the fish print exists today in Japan as an art form. Use a modified version of the process the Japanese originated. It will allow your students to create attractive pictures which also provide highly detailed information about the external structure of the fish.

Begin the activity by discussing how the beauty of the fish, a living organism, is going to be preserved as a print. Encourage students to touch the fish and become familiar with its shape. Where is it smooth? Where rough? Are there any bumps or depressions on the fish's body? Point out the fins and gills, and ask students about their functions. If you have provided different kinds of fish for the activity, get the students to compare scales, mouths, eyes, and tails, as well as fins and gills.

Putting Fish to Paper

To make the prints, the children will need brayers, or rubber rollers (soft ones are best), absorbent paper (like rice

paper or newsprint), water-based block printing ink in various colors, pieces of plastic or another non-absorbent surface for rolling out the ink, and cardboard on which to put the fish. For a class of 36 students, 6 setups should be enough.

Since the process involves exerting pressure, there may be a tendency for the fish to split open. One way of insuring that it remains intact is to use a frozen fish. Though its stiffness will mean some loss of detail in the prints, the frozen fish will be more durable than a fresh one—and less smelly.

As the first step in making the print, the children put the fish on a sheet of cardboard. Next, they take a sheet of plastic or some other non-absorbent material like glass, ink it lightly, and roll the ink out with a brayer (see Figure 1) until they can hear a squeak. They are now ready to ink the fish carefully—and gently—covering the fins, gills, and scales. (See Figure 2.) The raised surfaces of the fish, which will accept the ink, will be the surfaces that print. After inking the fish, the children put the paper on top of the fish and rub it, thus causing the ink to adhere to the paper. This last step requires lots of care because any movement of the paper will cause the ink to smear.

To check whether the transfer of ink to paper has taken place, hold the paper firmly to the tail section and lift the paper from the head. (See Figure 3.) If the print is not sufficiently inked, the children can put the paper back down and

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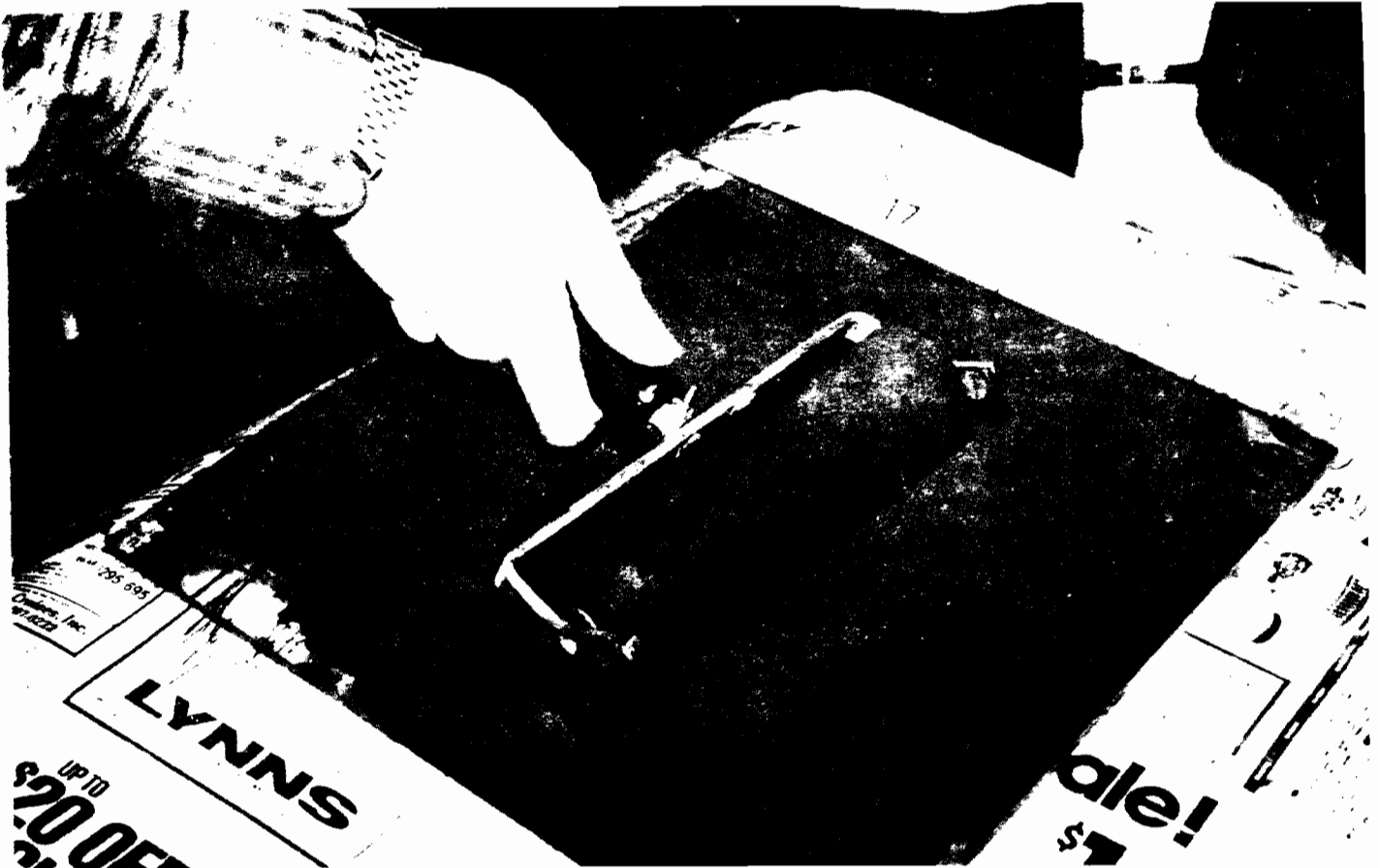


Figure 1. Rubbing the ink on a non-absorbent surface.



Figure 2. Inking a fish.

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rub some more. The same step can be repeated to see if the tail section is printed. When students have a properly inked print, they remove the paper from the fish and set the paper aside to dry. If you are short of space, students can make a pile of fish prints, separating individual prints with sheets of newspaper. (See Figure 4.)

If students have trouble with the fins' folding up, try putting a little ball of clay under each fin to hold it in place. The eyes probably will not print at all, but they can be painted in later.

Other Fishy Ideas

Encourage experimentation with different kinds of paper and various colors of ink—a fish done in blue on newsprint may look surprisingly different from one done in red on rice paper. And using various inks on one fish can produce some fascinating monsters. You can also expand the activity in a number of ways. Students can dissect the fish to examine its internal structure. They can use the printing technique on other specimens like tree bark, sea shells, or leaves. They can write stories for English class about their monster fish (or record catches). But, whether or not you extend the activity, students are sure to enjoy making the fish prints. It's a process that allows even students who have little confidence in their artistic ability to produce pictures they can be proud of.



Figure 3. Checking a print to see if it's properly inked.



Figure 4. Drying a finished print between sheets of newspaper.