

# *M. C. Escher and the M. C. Escher Foundation*

by

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The Dutch graphic artist Maurits Cornelis ('Mauk' for his friends) was born on June 17, 1898 in a mansion house called 'The Princessehof' in Leeuwarden, the capital of the province Friesland in the Northern part of Holland. In Arnhem, the city where he spent most of his youth, he attended secondary school. Mauk had difficulty in keeping up with the class and his marks (especially for mathematics!) were not very good, though he liked to draw. His art teacher took an interest in him and instructed him how to make prints, especially linocuts. Mauk's parents wanted him to find a respectable profession; a career in architecture seemed very suitable, and he started to attend courses at the Higher Technical School in Delft. Because he failed in his final examination at secondary school he was not allowed to continue studying in Delft. To acquire some practical experience, his father advised him to go to the School for Architecture and Decorative arts in Haarlem, which he did from 1919 until 1922. There, he met the Dutch artist Samuel Jessurun de Mesquita, his teacher in drawing and graphic arts. He taught him many aspects of woodcut technique and encouraged him to experiment. Escher focussed his attention entirely to 'the graphic and decorative arts, in particular woodcuts'.

After finishing his studies, Escher travelled frequently. He went to southern Spain where he visited the beautiful Alhambra, a thirteenth-century Moorish palace in Granada and was greatly surprised and inspired by the geometric patterns of majolica tilings and stucco designs that decorate these buildings. The country that fascinated him most though, was Italy. In the beginning of 1923 he stayed in a hotel in Ravenna where he met a girl named Jetta Umiker, whom he married almost a year later. The couple decided to move to Rome and lived there from 1923 to 1935. Every spring Escher made long journeys through the country. It is known that he has been near Viterbo, in the Abruzzi, on the island of Corsica, in the towns of Calabria, on the coast of Amalfi, and in Sicily. On these journeys he recorded on paper whatever interested him. During wintertime the best drawings and ideas were worked out in prints.

The rise of fascism made his life less bearable in Italy and the Eschers moved to Switzerland in 1935. Two years later Escher moved to Ukkel, near Brussels and from there he returned to Holland. He settled in Baarn, a lovely town in the center of the country. In 1970 he moved to Laren. He died on 27 March 1972 and was buried in Baarn.

In 1936 Escher made his last study trip: he returned to the Alhambra. This second visit meant the starting point of a complete change in style and themes. The Moorish interlocking geometric designs, that for religious reasons show a total absence of any human or animal form, appealed strongly to him. Principally, these designs could continue to infinity. Escher wanted to bring the abstract patterns to life by using animals, plants and people, because the impact of something recognizable seemed stronger.

The visit to the Alhambra was not the only attribution to his development in the new direction. His departure from Italy also contributed to this. To him the landscapes of Switzerland, Belgium, and Holland were less striking than those in the southern part of Italy and in Tuscany. The change in his artwork is so clear that we may speak of two periods: the work done before, and that done after 1937. The first group is dominated by the representation of visible reality, the Italian landscape and the architecture of the Italian cities and towns. The second group consists of compositions derived from his inventive imagination. From 1937 onwards Escher travelled only as a form of vacation. His prints were created in his studio. He no longer expressed his observations of the world around him. Instead, he concentrated on the inventions of his own imagination. These images dealt with the regular division of the plane, limitless space, rings and spirals in space, mirror images, inversion, polyhedra, relativities, the conflict between the flat and the spatial, and impossible constructions. Escher excelled in pure geometry. Occasionally during the earlier years he had made moves in this direction, but only now did the ideas take shape. He felt that until then he had merely been doing finger exercises.

Escher has become world-famous for his unusual lithographs and woodcuts. In his work his keen observation of the world around him and the expression of his own fantasies can be recognized. His art shows extraordinary manipulations of space, time and perspective, rearranged according to Escher's own ingenious logic. Simultaneity of perspective is commonplace, infinity is approached, positive and negative are interchangeable, and fascination is the result.

The M.C. Escher Foundation was founded by Escher himself in 1968. At that time the objective of the Foundation was to control his artistic inheritance and to publish books about his work as well as to organize exhibitions. Unfortunately his entire collection was split up in 1980 and nearly half of the collection was sold to an American dealer. At present the M. C. Escher Foundation, of which George A. Escher, the oldest son of the artist, is the honorary chairman, deals with all the exhibitions, books, scholarships, and publications. The main objective is to familiarize the public with the work of M .C. Escher. Exhibitions have been held the last five years in the main museums of Brasil (200,000 visitors), Mexico, Prague, Hong Kong, England, Shanghai, and Greece.

For this centennial year an exhibition took place in Washington, D.C. with more than 300,000 visitors. More exhibitions are planned, of course, in Holland, but also now in Rome and Ravello. For next year exhibitions are planned for Argentina, Peru, Chili, Texas, and probably Milano.

The M.C. Escher Foundation has also organized for this centennial year an international 'ex libris' (bookplate) contest. Many international graphic artists have sent their work and these will be shown during a huge retrospective exhibition that will take place in Rotterdam and Baarn. This year also a biography will be published, written by the famous Dutch biography writer Wim Hazeu, and the first copies will be distributed in Baarn, during the opening of the jubilee exhibition on October 3 of this year.

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