

Robin White

b.1946

Diploma of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

In 1982, Robin White and her family moved to Kiribati to work with the local Bahai'i community. Kiribati is a group of small coral atolls scattered across the Equator directly north of New Zealand.

White wanted to make art that related to her new environment, which she described as: "A raw, rough place, with no pretty additions to make life easy". She was confronted with a radically different culture, and had to set about learning a new language.

In the hot tropical climate, White also had to adapt to her new environment as an artist. Materials like oil paint and canvas had to be imported, and she soon realised that painting was not going to be an option. Needing a medium that she could use in a small space, and that was easily transportable, she began to make woodcuts. She took inspiration from the medieval woodcut tradition, in which a simple story or parable is often told using a careful juxtaposition of text and image.

The Fisherman Loses His Way consists of four images: scenes from the life of a young man who is clearly modelled on the residents of Kiribati. White focuses attention on the relationships between the fisherman and the other villagers. She eliminates unnecessary detail, using strong lines, curving linear rhythms and graphic contrasts to intensify the impact of the four scenes.

The gestures of White's figures are highly deliberate, almost static, and they have a quality of calm, stoic dignity. They remind us of the early Italian Renaissance fresco paintings by Giotto and especially Masaccio. Masaccio's figures in *Rendering Of The Tribute Money* (c1425) have a massive sculptural presence comparable to White's. And like Masaccio, White has taken the people around her – the citizens of Florence, in Masaccio's case – and created a timeless parable of hope, trust and faith.

Notice the way you can see the grain of the wood in the surface texture of these prints. The woodcut is the oldest printmaking medium in Western culture, dating back to the

12th century. The process itself is quite simple. First, draw a design on a wooden block or plank. Next, cut out your design, cutting away the areas that are to be left blank and leaving a raised design to be printed. Roll ink onto the raised area, then place a sheet of paper on top of the inked block. Finally, apply sufficient pressure – either in a special press or by hand – to transfer the ink to the paper.

Virtually any kind of wood that can be cut is suitable for making woodcuts: Albrecht Dürer used pearwood, and Paul Gauguin used boxwood. Gauguin, who lived in Tahiti in the 1890s, reinvigorated the woodcut tradition with his bold experimental approach to the medium. Later, it became popular with the German Expressionists who exploited its broad, chunky lines and stark, dramatic effects.

Jill Trevelyan

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp
www.govettbrewster.com
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

Taylor, A. and Coddington, D. (1981). *Robin White, New Zealand Painter*, Martinborough.

Pond-Eyley, C. and White, R. (1987). *Twenty-Eight Days In Kiribati*, New Women's Press, Auckland.

Web search:

Albrecht Dürer
 Paul Gauguin
 Giotto
 Masaccio

