

ART, CRAFT, AND THE MAKING OF BOOKS

Deborah Mattson  
MFA- Printmaking  
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Imagine three artists – friends and collaborators—commiserating together over the state of the world. One has taken a break from artistic practice to write a book on man-made climate change, which everyone ignores. The second has a successful career as a painter and stained glass artist, but has to deal with the irony that none of his friends can afford his work; his only buyers are the very wealthy and the Church, which he no longer considers relevant. The third, the most successful of the three, has become so preoccupied with social injustice and income inequality he is on the verge of quitting art for politics: “Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization,” he says.<sup>1</sup>

These artists are not fictional, but they are no longer living. John Ruskin, Edward Burne-Jones, and William Morris have all been dead over one hundred years. I mention them now because so many of their ideas about art, design, and the influence of artists on society are still relevant. My own life has especially been influenced by the ideas of William Morris, whom I have always admired for the breadth of his design work, his refusal to be pigeonholed into a single type of artistic practice, and his steadfast commitment to the idea that the act of making art is one of the greatest positive influences on both the life of an individual and society at large.

William Morris lived at a time when British manufacturing became urbanized and industrialized. Objects that for centuries had been hand-crafted in small shops throughout the countryside were instead mass-produced in factories, and people were no longer artisans and creators but laborers in polluted factories, doing repetitive, meaningless tasks all day and going home to live in squalor. Much of Morris’ life work was an attempt to recapture the production of cloth, furniture, tapestries and books and transfer it back to the hands of craftspeople who not

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, Paul. *Why William Morris Matters Today: Human Creativity and the Future World Environment*, 8. London: William Morris Society, 1991. Ruskin’s book was *Storm Cloud of the 19th Century*, based on lectures he gave in 1884. Morris’ quote is from “How I Became a Socialist”, first published in *Justice*, June 16th, 1894.

only would put their human imprint on made goods but find their own lives enriched by the practice and accomplishment of creating beauty. “To build and to make was, Morris believed, to give structure and substance to man’s sense of wonder at the world in which he lived.”<sup>2</sup> For Morris, artists and designers had obligations: to create beauty without ruining the natural environment and without widening the gap between those who wanted to own beautiful objects and those who had to labor to make them without being able to afford them: “How can you care about the image of a landscape when you show by your deeds that you don’t care for the landscape itself? Or what right have you to shut yourself up with beautiful form and color when you make it impossible for other people to have any share in these things?”<sup>3</sup>

What made Morris different from the Arts and Crafts aesthetes of his era was his insistence that the artist was a worker, and that the satisfaction of practicing one’s craft was the greatest advantage of an artistic vocation. Peter Smith discusses what he calls Morris’ politicized theory of art:

In contrast with other wealthy aesthetic types of Victorian society Morris campaigned for revolutionary change in a way that challenged the privileging of cultural labor. The idea of art as a term which defines a bourgeois profession separated from a critical evaluation of the concept of work in its widest sense was rejected...Insofar as artists belong to a privileged social order and enjoy the blessings of leisure and distinction they are caricatured by Morris... the tendency in Morris is to play down “individualism” as a bourgeois construct. In this way the artist—just like everybody else- is the bearer of the historical process, a subject rooted in material conditions.<sup>4</sup>

As a printmaker I am part of a tradition that has often been anonymous and usually at the service of other disciplines: surface design and decoration, illustration and publishing, the tasks

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<sup>2</sup> Bennett, Phillippa. “Rejuvenating our Sense of Wonder: The Last Romances of William Morris.” In *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Phillippa Bennett and Rosie Miles, 221. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Faulkner, Peter, and Peter Preston. *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, 30. Exeter, England: University of Exeter Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Peter. “Attractive Labor and Social Change: William Morris Now.” In *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Phillippa Bennett and Rosie Miles, 148-9. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010.

of mass-producing images and disseminating ideas. Paper is an inexpensive substrate and printers have been known to give their work away; pasting it to walls and handing it out at street corners. Perhaps because of my background as a product designer, I view printmaking as another opportunity to create an object, to produce multiples of a graphic idea I consider meaningful. To me, creating a book is the perfect artistic opportunity: the combination of a designed object with designed graphic content. Bookmaking was the last artistic endeavor of Morris himself; he founded the Kelmscott Press at the end of his life. “I had better remind you why Morris decided to take an interest in printing. It was, he said, so that printed books might once again illustrate the position that ‘a work of utility might be also a work of art, if we care to make it so.’”<sup>5</sup> As a printmaker, I am a producer: the book is something manufactured, but within the tradition of craft, and something useful.

Marshall McLuhan’s book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is an exploration of the effects of moveable type and the printing of books on human civilization. Before the mass production of books, the most important sources of knowledge were the oral transmissions of tradition, religion, and poetry, and the observation of nature. With the proliferation of books came the idea of portable knowledge, the awareness that knowledge was something to be edited, applied, and individualized.<sup>6</sup> Creating books appeals to me because it allows me to be an editor, a curator, a producer, and it is gratifying to know that my artistic work can be multiplied and packaged in its own portable container.

As a book artist I am concerned with the presentation and organization of visual information. To organize observations in book form is an attempt to bring order and focus to what can seem chaotic and haphazard. The French poet Mallarme said, “Everything exists to be

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<sup>5</sup> Dreyfus, John. *Morris and the Printed Book*, 27. London: William Morris Society, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. 186-7. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

put in a book.” Morris likened books to buildings; the reader enters and inhabits them. “In the lectures he gave on good book design in the 1890s Morris is forever linking the space of the book to a building he loves. What is the thing most to be longed for? A beautiful House. What is the next thing to be longed for? A beautiful Book...the constructedness of the book- what it feels like to inhabit it as a reader- becomes as vital as the content.”<sup>7</sup>

My first intention with the artist’s book *Shingebiss* was simply to tell a story that has fascinated and comforted me since I was a child. It tells the story of a small water fowl (illustrated as a pied-billed grebe) who survives the winter (personified as the evil North Wind) by resolutely following his day to day routine no matter what: he goes out, finds water, and proceeds to fish, refusing to succumb to fear. *Shingebiss* is an indigenous Ojibwe folktale, told in the Great Lakes region for hundreds of years, and it takes place in a particular environment. The subject matter of several of my books has been the sense of place one recognizes when predominant features of an environment are observed and cataloged. The American environmentalist Wendell Berry asks a series of questions he believes are necessary as a curriculum to study and preserve our environment, starting with “What has happened here? What should have happened here?” continuing to my favorite: “What is the nature, or genius, of this place?”<sup>8</sup> In re-telling this story I am attempting to answer some of Berry's questions about this geographical location of the Great Lakes region: “What happened here? What is the genius of this place?”

I have illustrated the story with black and white etchings and aquatints. Recurring visual themes of the illustrations are the black and white birch tree, and the black, grey, and white of

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<sup>7</sup> Miles, Rosie. “Virtual Paradise: Editing Morris for the Twenty-First Century.” In *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Phillipa Bennett and Rosie Miles, 235. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Berry, Wendell. *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth*, 81. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010.

the northern winter landscapes. The birch was an important tree in Ojibwe culture; its bark was used for dwellings, canoes, household objects, and paper.<sup>9</sup> The black lines and textures of the *Shingebiss* illustrations, as well as the embossed textures on the borders of the pages, are meant to evoke the appearance and textures of the ubiquitous northern Michigan tree. Some examples of these illustrations are in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Most of the Euro-Americans who live in Michigan today will not recognize the story of *Shingebiss*, much less recite it with the ease they could tell *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* or *Sleeping Beauty*. The printmaker Ladislav Hanka recognized his debt to indigenous Michigan culture with his series of etchings of Ojibwe marker trees: “The era when our present culture swallowed up the indigenous cultures is the defining moment in the history of the Americas—an inflection point, a fundamental fulcrum around which our common destiny still revolves... Marker trees are a living link to that earlier time, before the balance was tipped.”<sup>10</sup> I think that anyone who has lived through even a few Michigan winters can relate to *Shingebiss*: a small, seemingly insignificant creature who struggles through the ice and snow day after day, knowing that the harsh winter is another aspect of nature that will eventually come to an end.

The real meaning of *Shingebiss* is beyond geographical location and climate. It is not just about miles of birch forests, weeks of dark, sunless days, and treacherous lakes that stretch into the horizon. It has to do with fear, and how we live with fear. It is about setting oneself to the tasks at hand, while hoping for a better future. The simple story teaches that instead of being immobilized by fear, we can make decisions to do what is necessary. *Shingebiss* did not ignore his enemy, the North Wind, but he refused to be diverted from his own path of survival. For me, the story also became a metaphor as I worked through the processes involved in the making of

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<sup>9</sup> Glubok, Shirley. *The Art of the Woodland Indians*, 46. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Hanka, Ladislav R. *The Crooked Tree Prints*, 14. Kalamazoo, MI: Ladislav Hanka, 2016.

the book. Printing four etchings apiece on sheets of paper and then running those sheets through a Vandercook press to print the text several more times allowed for a huge amount of failure, and failures did happen. Very often during the process I found myself visualizing the little duck trudging through the snow, on the verge of freezing and starving. Not wanting to be outdone by a mythical duck, I kept pressing on myself.

In my second year as a graduate student I did a series of lithographs on ledger paper. I had “rescued” the paper from the trash at my job; computer spreadsheets had made the ledger paper obsolete. One of the lithographs, shown in Figure 4, was a series of small drawings depicting the transition of my own workplace from a local manufacturer employing traditional craftsmen to a marketing agency sending digital files overseas to be manufactured elsewhere. The presence of people in each “cell” of the paper diminishes until there is no one left but a 3-D printer on a desk where a person used to sit. This transition from traditional handcraft to digital craft has been the most defining issue of my career as a product designer, and in the professional workplace there is no turning back. Since I use digital crafting nearly exclusively as a product designer, I also wanted to complete a book project that incorporated a variety of digital processes. In doing so, I was not expecting to find answers or make judgments as to which processes are “better” or more satisfying, but to explore processes with the expectation of finding something positive in each method.

The content of this book project is a poem, *Measure Me, Sky*, by Leonora Speyer. It is a short poem addressing the feelings of insignificance one feels when contemplating the enormity of the natural world. I am intrigued by the personification of the sky, wind, and horizon as measurers of the human, since it is we humans who attempt to measure the sky and the earth. Measurement is also a recurrent action in most design work, including the digital processes used in creating the books.

The spine of *Measure Me, Sky* is ornamented with a small bird finial, its curved wings caught in a moment of flight. I chose this motif because the bird represents a creature that has truly mastered the sky, whereas humans are earthbound in their natural state. As a bird moves across the sky, the beating of its wings seems to mark out increments of measurement, and birds must have an awareness of the sky, wind, and horizon that humans will never understand. The graphic on the cover of the book (Figure 5) is meant to continue the theme of human frailty: it is a sextant, used by navigators to measure the distances between the horizon and celestial bodies, to calculate distance and location. Sextants are beautiful, sophisticated instruments for a human, but birds do not need them. We humans attempt to measure our world, but we are very small and we really have no control over it.

There are three versions of *Measure Me, Sky*, created with different combinations of hand and digital craft. The spine and ornament assembly was first created in the solid modeling program SolidWorks, and the graphics created in CorelDraw, using mostly the pre-existing vector artwork that came with the program. Version 1 of the book is all digital output, printed from the 2-D and 3-D files on inkjet and 3-D printers. Version 2 has a spine assembly from a higher quality 3-D printer, and the graphics were handprinted from woodblocks which were laser-cut from the Corel files. Versions 1 and 2 are both printed on purchased paper. Version 3 is handprinted on handmade paper and the spine assembly was fabricated by hand, although the bronze birds were cast from master patterns printed from the same digital files as the other two versions.

*Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand*, is a book by Malcolm McCullough exploring what it means to be a craftsperson in an age when the majority of design work is done through digitized means. McCullough's definition of craft could have been taken from a Morris lecture:



Craft remains skilled work applied toward practical ends. It is indescribable talent with describable aims. It is habitual skilled practice with particular tools, materials, or media, for the purpose of making increasingly well executed artifacts. Craft is the application of personal knowledge to the giving of form. It is the condition in which the inherent qualities and economies of the media are encouraged to shape both process and products.<sup>11</sup>

Yet when McCullough speaks of craft, he means the craftsmanship of digital work.

McCullough's book is fascinating to me because, as I have mentioned, I have been a participant in the transition of the design world to digital media. So many times I have been given a new software program, and a new set of expectations, from management: "This software will make your job so easy! Just learn a few keystrokes and the computer will do the rest! And it's *so fast!* And we can send the files to China overnight!"

As a designer and craftsperson, my first concern is not to make a process fast and easy. I did not learn letterpress typesetting because it is fast and easy. I want things to be beautiful, and I want them to be right. As McCullough states, the computer is a tool<sup>12</sup>, as a pencil or a printing press are tools. One has to learn how to use them, and the learning process is not necessarily fast or easy. In my experience, the greatest advantages of digital craftsmanship are the ability to examine design options without having to make a material commitment to them, and the ability to correct mistakes without having to start over. A good example of this is the bird finial on *Measure Me, Sky*.

Using traditional methods, the bird would have been carved out of wax, to make a casting. I am an inexperienced wax carver, and the bird is a small, delicate symmetrical object. I would have ruined many small wax birds. They would not have been symmetrical. It would have taken me weeks.

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<sup>11</sup> McCullough, Malcolm. *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand*, 22. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 81.

Fortunately, I am experienced with a digital modeling program; I have worked with it for about eight years. I was able to model the bird in a matter of hours, including the time it took to experiment with different wing shapes. When something looked bad I could retrace my steps and try again. I was able to model one wing and mirror it to the other side of the bird: symmetry assured. The bird was 3-D printed and cast (the printed model is destroyed in the process), and the abstract digital bird was stored as a computer file.

The wings of the first cast bird were so delicate they were damaged during the casting process. I was able to repair them, but they were no longer symmetrical. I liked the delicate, asymmetrical wings I ended up with, but I didn't want to risk further bad casts. It was a matter of minutes to change the thickness of the digital bird's wings, and the problem was solved. Two more birds were printed and cast. Another version was printed in plastic in Kendall's FlexLab, and the files were also sent to a 3-D printing agency to be printed in a better quality plastic. The three bird finials are shown in Figure 6.

McCullough writes: "Increasingly computing shows promise of becoming the medium that could reunite visual thinking with manual dexterity and practiced knowledge."<sup>13</sup> His book was written before the proliferation of 3-D printers (I have even seen 3-D printers in public libraries recently) and the websites that have emerged with them, where digital crafters upload thousands of designed objects, some beautiful, some ingenious, and some ugly and bizarre. I think these websites show that McCullough's prediction has come true. This democratization of designing and making pleases me, and I imagine William Morris with a MakerBot.

The three versions of *Measure Me, Sky* demonstrate different levels of digital application; they are different, but there are advantages to each. Version 1 has a poor tactile quality, but still contains all the visual information of the others. It was easy and inexpensive to produce, and the

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<sup>13</sup> McCullough, 50.

files could be printed out and the book assembled by anyone. Version 2 is still a digital product, except for the pages themselves, which because of their hand printed creation allow for variances in printing technique and color. Version 3 contains a great deal of handwork and tactile quality, it “feels” like a handcrafted product. It was also the most time-consuming and expensive, as one might expect.

Creating the versions of *Measure Me, Sky* was a totally different process from creating *Shingebiss*, an entirely handmade and printed book-object. What the creation of all the books had in common was my desire to use the processes of printing and handcraft to create containers for an intellectual experience, the reading of a story and a poem. It is my hope that the aesthetics and craft of my books will emphasize to the reader the value of that contained experience. In any case, the act of creating was valuable to me. I agree with McCullough: “In the end, we just want to practice our skills. To live well, we wish to work well,”<sup>14</sup> and with William Morris: “As part of the human race, we create. If we work thus, we shall be human, and our days will be happy and eventful.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> McCullough, 247.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, Peter. “Attractive Labor and Social Change: William Morris Now.” In *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Phillippa Bennett and Rosie Miles, 141. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010.

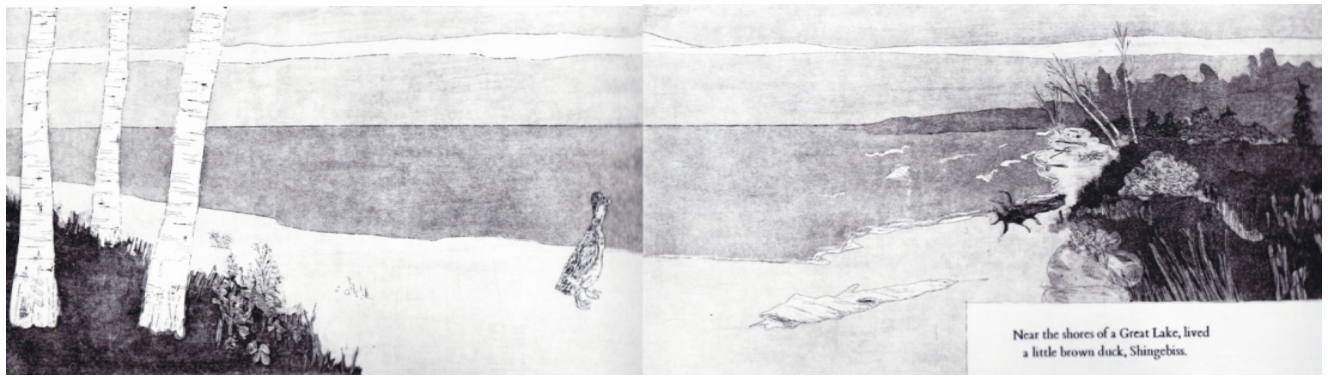


Figure 1. Pages 4 and 5 of *Shingebiss*.



Figure 2. Pages 14 and 15 of *Shingebiss*.

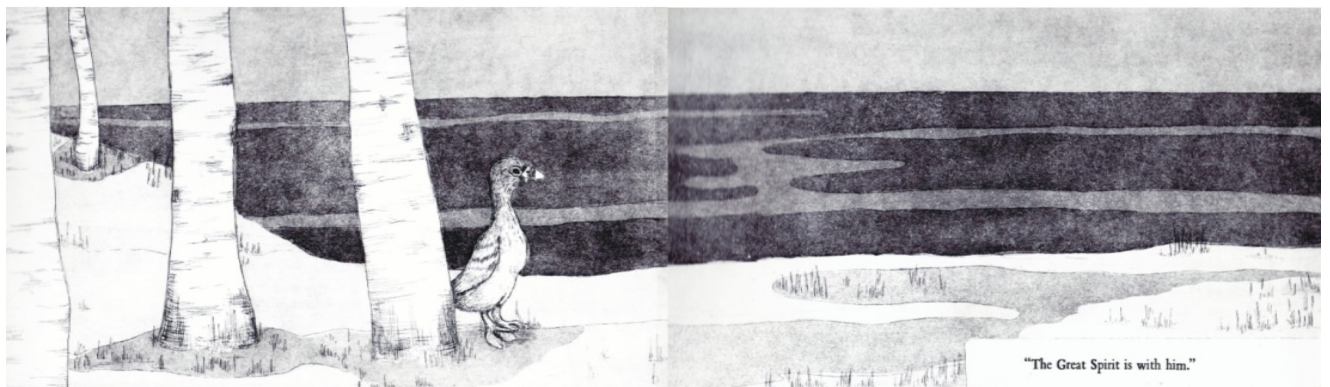


Figure 3. Pages 28 and 29 of *Shingebiss*.

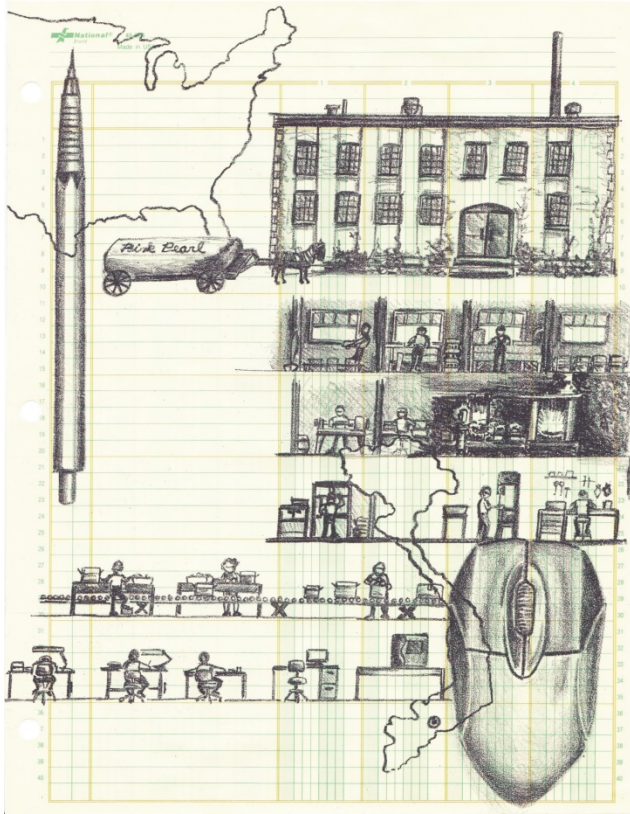


Figure 4. *Ledger Series #1*



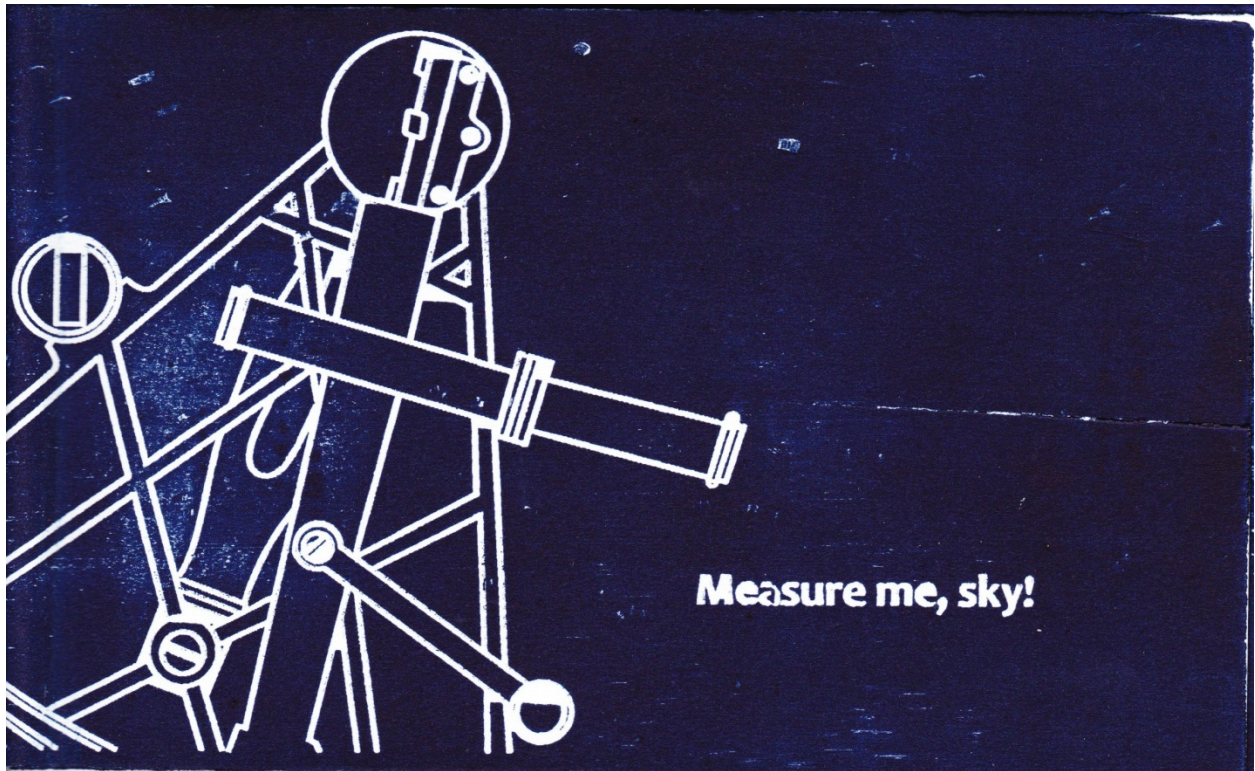


Figure 5. Woodblock print cover of *Measure Me, Sky!*



Figure 6. Bird finials for different versions of *Measure Me, Sky!*

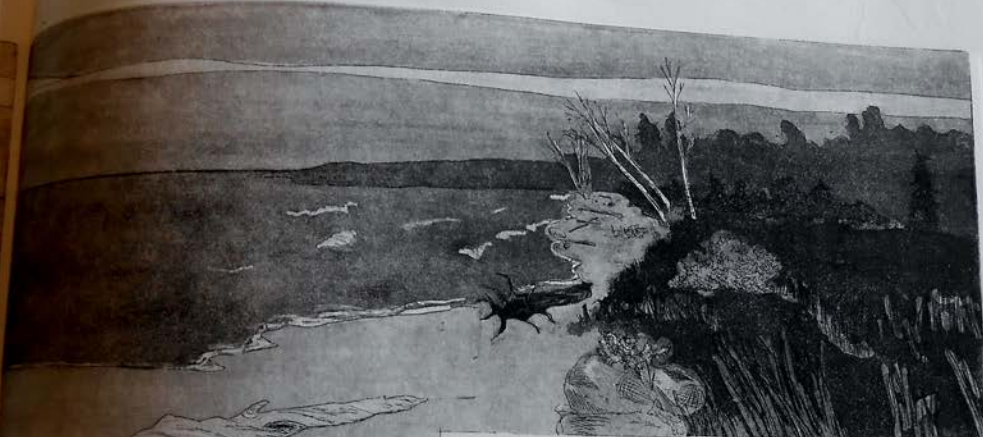
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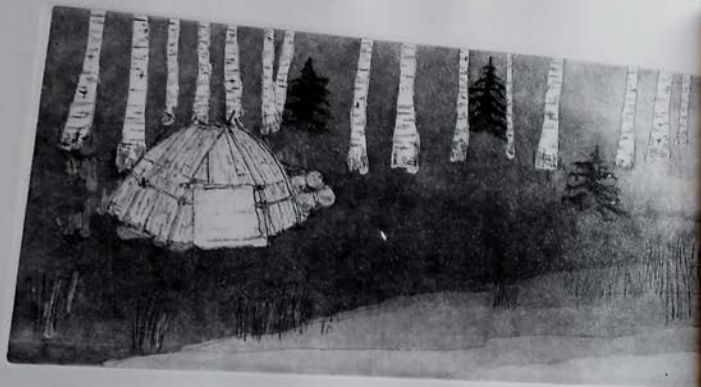


SHINGEBISS  
AN OJIBWE FOLKTALE

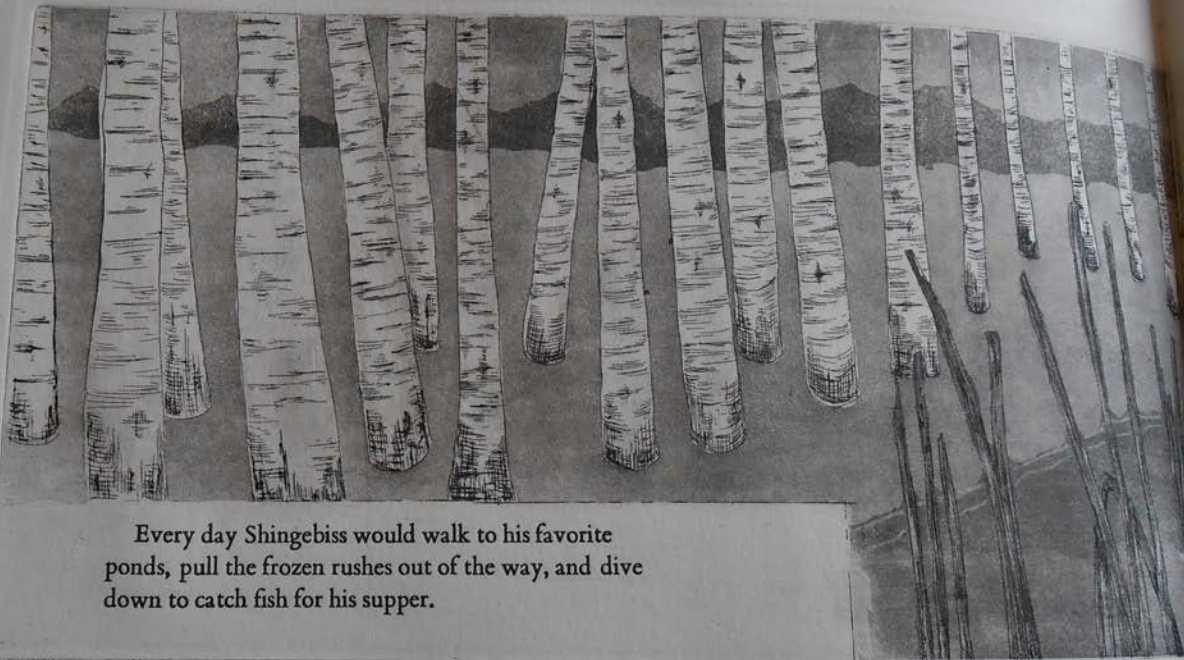




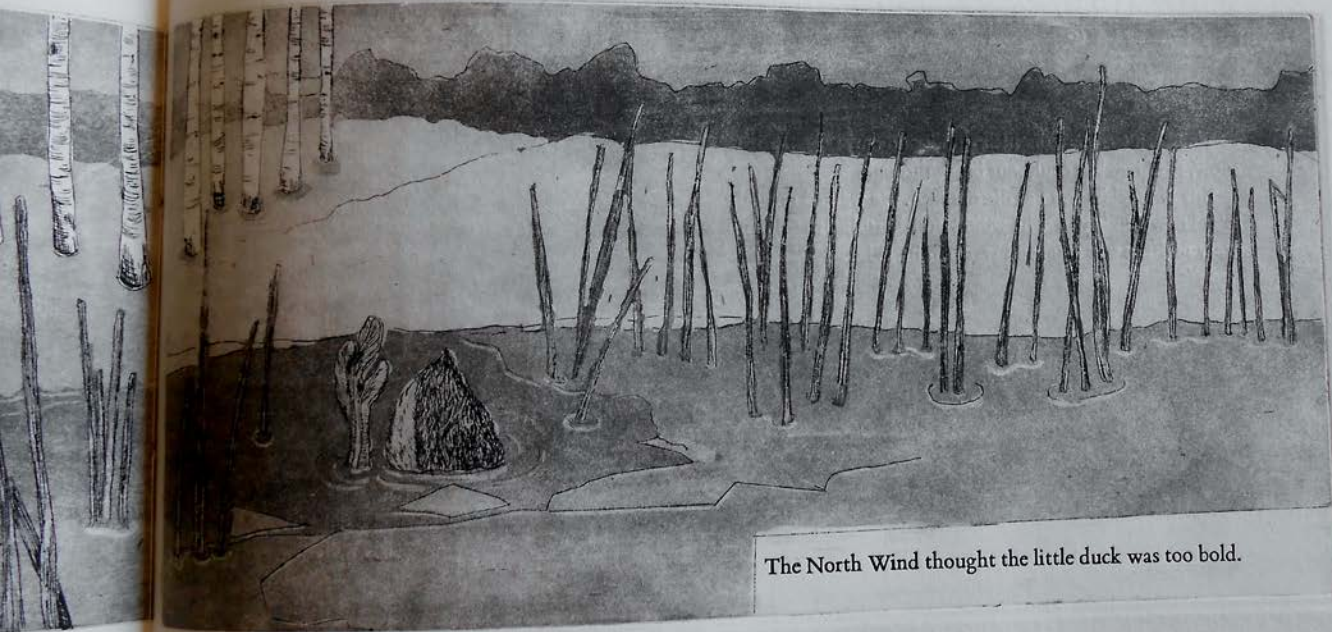
Near the shores of a Great Lake, lived  
a little brown duck, Shingebiss.



He had his own small lodge in the forest  
at the edge of the lake.



Every day Shingebiss would walk to his favorite ponds, pull the frozen rushes out of the way, and dive down to catch fish for his supper.



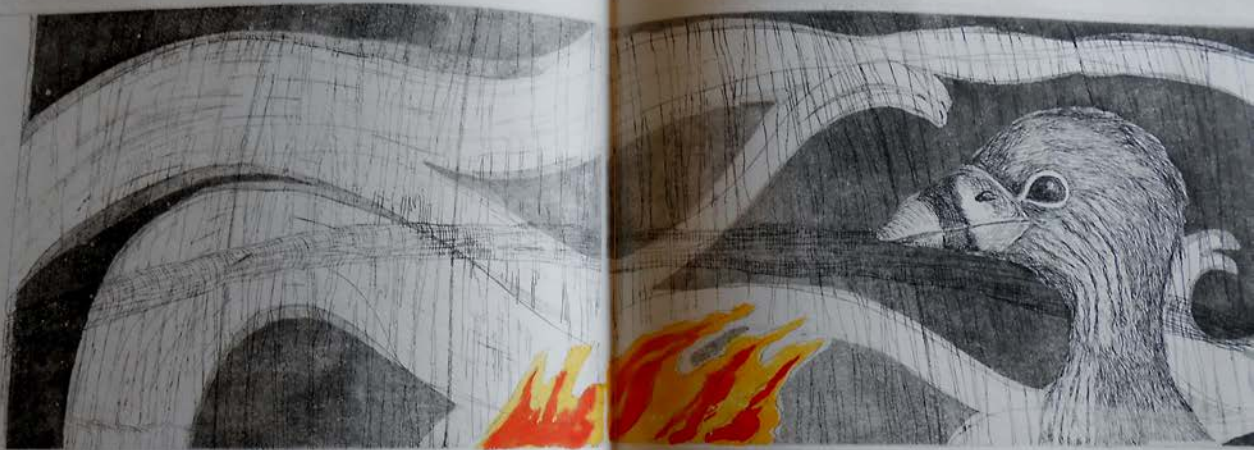
The North Wind thought the little duck was too bold.



Shingebiss felt the ice-cold  
breath of the North Wind blow  
through his door and swirl around  
his lodge.

"I know who that is," he  
thought.

He began to sing.



*"Kancej, Kancej,  
Bee-in, Bee-in,  
Bon-in, Bon-in,  
Ok-ee, Ok-ee,  
Kaveya, Kaveya!"*



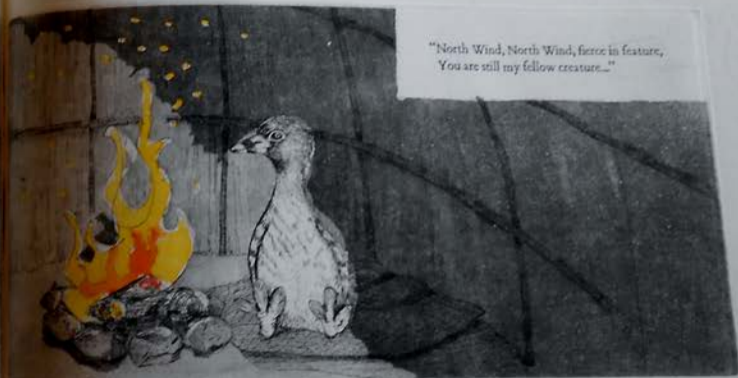
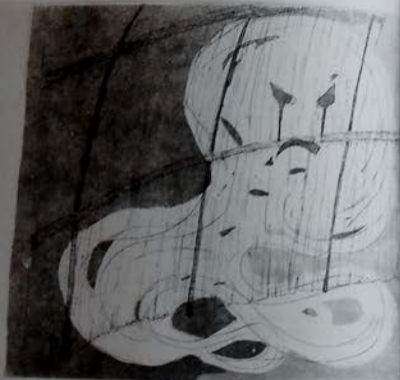
*"North Wind, North Wind,  
Fierce in feature,  
You are still my  
fellow creature.  
Blow your worst,  
You can't freeze me.  
I fear you not;  
That makes me free!"*

The North Wind sat by Shingebiss' fire. He thought he could freeze Shingebiss. Instead, the North Wind began to melt, and his icy breath grew weaker and weaker.

Shingebiss continued singing:

*"Kaneej, Kaneej!  
Bee-in, Bee-in!"*

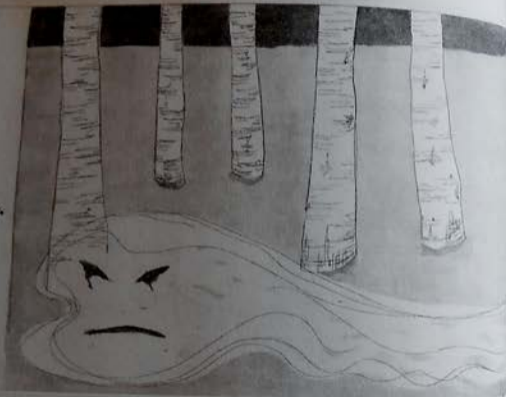
He stirred his fire, and a shower of sparks flew up.



"North Wind, North Wind, fierce in feature,  
You are still my fellow creature..."

The North Wind could stand it no longer. With a shriek he blew out of Shingebiss' lodge and flung himself on a snowbank.

"What a strange little duck, Shingebiss," he said. "I can't starve him, or freeze him, or make him afraid."

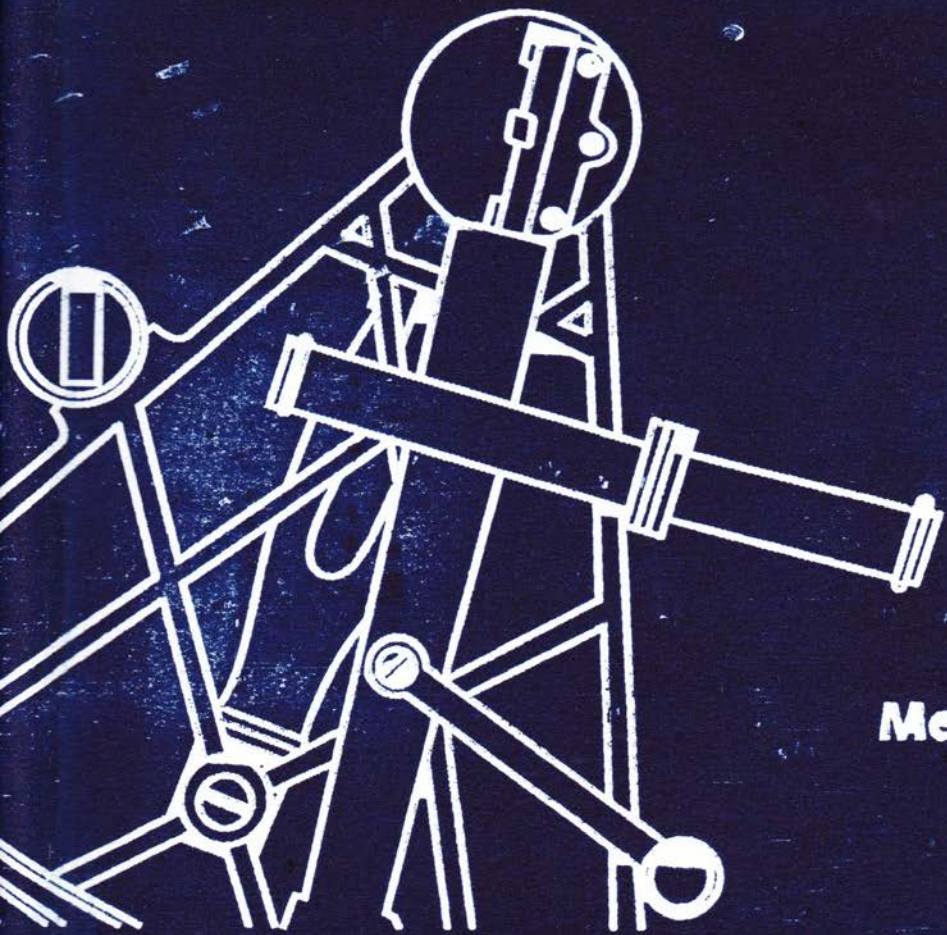


"I will leave him alone."





"The Great Spirit is with him."



**Measure me, sky!**

