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Use of handheld devices: Dabber

2020–22

- Dabber
- "*Ferramenta a ferramenta*"

Research projects: Pure Print/i2ADS, GroundLab/i2ADS

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We became interested in the construction of the dabber while working in the field, where such an instrument, then simulated with cloth, made it possible to print on uneven stones found in situ and adapted for lithography (Anadia, Bairrada, flash residency, 2020). Later, Marta Bełkot, in collaboration with Tiago Cruz (wood, metal and stone workshop technician, STOMMP FBAUP), constructed a dabber based on the illustration and description in the 19th-century book: Traité théorique et pratique de lithographie (1839) by Engelmann (plate 44, appendix). Tiago Cruz carved the handle with great precision from Robinia Pseudoacacia, a hard, resistant and invasive tree that had fallen in the university's garden. He carefully selected the part of the wood that was suitable for carving in one piece, but also dry enough to be turned on a lathe. Later, Marta filled it with rags, felt and soft leather and closed it with needles. Tests were made by inking a lithographic stone, a gillotage metal plate and a relief matrix with excellent results.

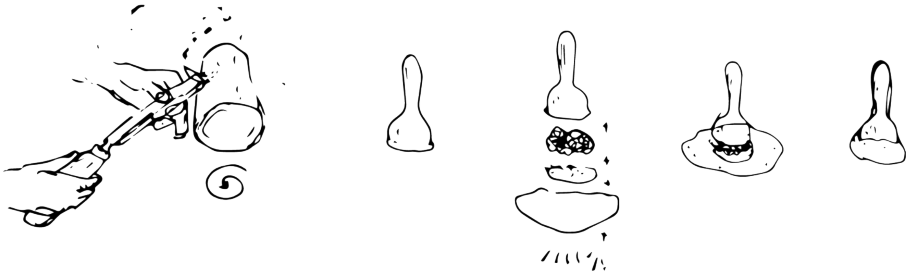
Our first dabber prototype, made from a continuous wooden structure, proved easy to handle, spread and coat ink with. The dabber is widely used in printmaking due its versatility, being used for inking, printing, varnishing, painting or drawing. Similar instruments in different cultures and languages, such as frotton, tampon, baren, or mobang, have the same purposes but different shapes and materials used for its construction. Over the centuries, the dabber was often mistaken with inking balls.[1] Its appearance changed, depending on the purpose, becoming more flat, rounder, sometimes made from umbrella cloth, felt, leather, with a rod or wooden handle.

1 Inking balls are definitively older than dabbers. We can find some information about the tradition of using inking balls, dating back from 1040 to the invention of movable type, based on portable components, at a time ceramic, in typography printing technology, developed in China by Bi Sheng (NEEDHAM & RONAN 1994). Inking balls are slightly bigger, rounder and always used in pairs.

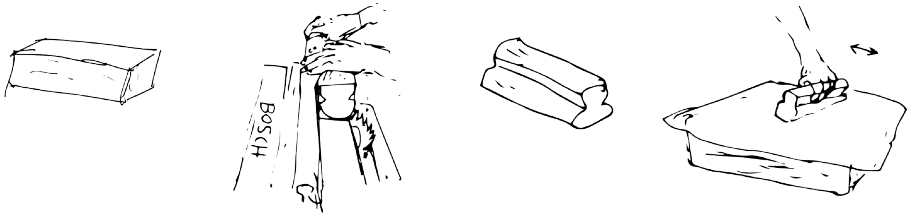
Abraham Bosse (1645)[2] describes it the following way:

> *"A good dabber must be made with good grade white cloth which must be soft and already somewhat used. When you have a sufficient amount of such cloth roll it up the way you would roll up a bandage, but make sure that you roll it much more tightly since the tighter it is, the better it will be. The result should be something that looks like a painter's muller. At this point take some good grade string made with several strands and, using a kind of awl, make some holes along the length of the rolled up cloth. Make sure that the holes are made in different places then pass the string through them and sew everything up tightly so as to reduce the rolled up cloth to a diameter of three inches and a length of about five or six inches. The end that will be used should then be prepared by making a clean cut with a very sharp knife. The cut should be made in such a way that the detached piece looks like a slice of sausage. The other end should then be sewn so as to form a ball. This is the end that will fit into the palm of the artist's hand and will permit him to ink the plate firmly without too much difficulty."*

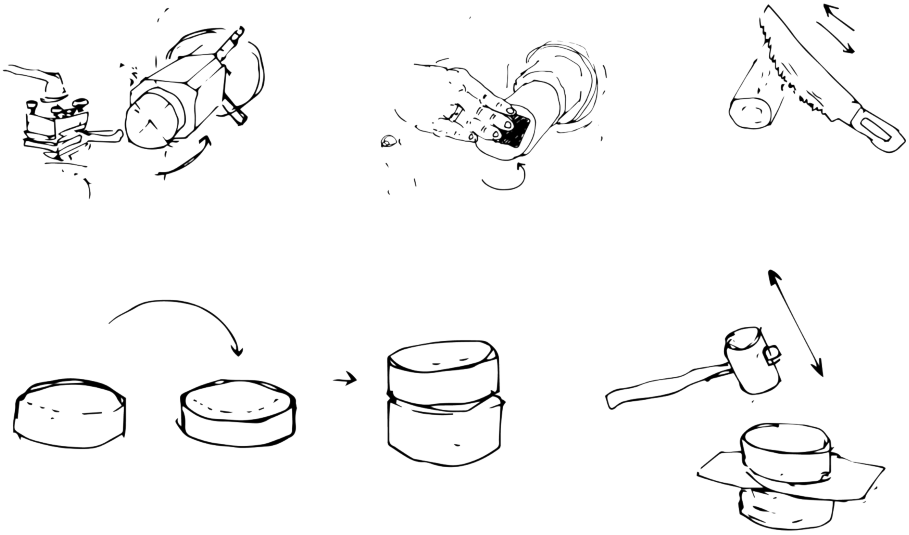
2 Taken from: A technical dictionary of printmaking Béguin, André (1977-1) access oneline: https://www.polymetaal.nl/beguin/mapd/dabber.htm, The Traicté des manieres de graver en taille dovce svr l'airin. Par le moyen des eaux fortes, & des vernix durs & mols. Ensemble de la façon d'en imprimer les planches & d'en construire la presse, & autres choses concernans lesdits arts written by Bosse, Abraham Bosse in 1645 in tranlation to Portuguese by Menezes, Jose Joaquim Viegas in 1801 entitled: The Tratado da gravura a agua forte, e a buril, e em maneira negra com o modo de construir as prensas modernas, e de imprimir em talho docevby Bosse, Abraham, 1602-1676; in chapter descrybing application of soft ground (vernish mole) portuguese name for dabber is ponceta: pillow made with cotton to beat the plate while varnish is still in liquid form, (page54) access: https://archive.org/details/tratadodagravura00boss_0/page/54/mode/2up



In our second attempt (2022) we (Professor Norberto Jorge Ogórek, Tiago Cruz and Marta Bełkot) constructed another dabber prototype as described in Every man his own printer; or, Lithography made easy: being an essay upon lithography in all its branches by Waterlow and Sons (1859), as well as a replica of a metal stamping mold used in the photo enamel process – a tool borrowed from a family-owned photo-enameling workshop in Porto. From this pursuit to make our own tools, we enjoyed a close collaboration between the printmaking and wood, metal and stone workshops, and ended up producing a small tutorial: Ferramenta a ferramenta. In the tutorial, Norberto Jorge Ogórek and Tiago Cruz developed an exercise in which they adapted existing tools from the lithography and metal workshops to create two distinctive tools used for embossing metal and printing from stone.



The dabber in the elongated rectangular version, also made of Robinia Pseudoacacia like the first vertical round dabber, has a different function. Its ergonomic handle helps to spread pressure evenly while printing by hand. While holding it on top of the printing surface, one can decide the pressure, the movement, and the speed.



The replica for the metal stamping mold or, as named by enamellers, the “form”, also made from Robinia Pseudoacacia, is hard and resistant. The form is identical in efficiency and elegance to the original 19 th century artefact.

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