Knight, Bird & Burin

A burin engraving by
Evan Lindquist

Image size (plate size):
202 mm x 124 mm
7 15/16 inches x 4 7/8 inches

Edition: 100 impressions plus 2 Artist's Proofs

Printed by the artist in his private studio.

Part 1

This happy-go-lucky fellow is the same guy Albrecht Dürer engraved in his print *Knight, Death, and Devil.*

That was in 1513. Dürer had the Knight too scared to look at Death and the Devil, but after 500 years, a person ought to be allowed to relax for awhile. So I got him to loosen up a bit and strike a different pose.

My version of the Knight is a satire.

I began this satire for fun and followed Dürer's style. The working title was "Burin Conquers All". The Knight holds up the mighty conquering burin. Death and Devil are nowhere to be seen -- perhaps frightened away. The Knight is able to smile at us for the first time in five centuries.

And the mockingbird perches on the mighty burin to remind us that this is all for fun.

Knight, Bird + Burin (AP) Evan Lindquist ©2006

Albrecht Dürer's engraving is one of the most famous works of art done in Europe. In 1675, Sandrart called it "the Great Christian Knight", and its meaning has been debated ever since by art historians, theologians, and philosophers who have described it in terms of symbolic and historic commentary.

Dürer was the most important artist in Northern Europe in the Late Gothic period. Considered a universal Renaissance gentleman by many, he was most revered in Italy, where his prints were copied and sold for profit by other artists.

He pushed the art of engraving to its highest level in history.

Dürer's skill with the burin was unsurpassed and done tastefully. But many who followed and emulated his skill plunged the art of the burin into a disreputable skill taken up by unartistic engravers whose prints were merely copies and reproductions of work by artists and illustrators.

Preliminary Design

With a book open to the reproduction of Knight, Death, and Devil, an idea began to emerge. While developing a new composition, I used a graphite pencil to sketch on a pad of tracing paper.

I wanted the Knight's armor to be detailed enough to be convincing. My print needs to be recognizable as a new version of Dürer's print. But I did not want any viewer to assume that parts of my composition were copied from the Dürer.

Convincing, the essence of Dürer, but totally new.

I studied the reproduction frequently, making many changes on small slips of tracing paper which I tucked into place.

Study in graphite

When the composite of details seemed to be convincing, I traced over the elements to fix them into a form that would be a basis for the composition.

While the essence of the Knight's armor seemed convincing enough, the reproduction could serve only as a research tool for further invention. Nothing could be copied line for line or traced.

Much more invention would be required later.

The engraving desk

The room is dark, except for one lamp that aims its light directly over my head toward a white reflector [a sheet of foam board] which cants outward, over the desk, at 45 degrees.

The photograph shows me working at the desk. I sit sideways to the desk

As I look downward into the mirror surface of the plate, I see the bright image of the white reflector above me. The plate shines bright, straight up into my eye.

Dark lines begin to grow on the plate as I engrave into the copper. They are dark against the plate's bright surface. They are cut down into the plate with sharply-slanted edges. Light rays that enter engraved lines carom sideways, not upward toward my eye.

Pinned to the reflector are two rough sketch-notes. My idea evolves from these little scraps of paper. I never know where the ideas will lead me.

The chair

It may be difficult at first to get comfortable. I tried out a variety of different chairs before finding this one which is ideal for me.

This is a Vienna bent-wood ice cream chair that belonged to my great grandfather well over a century ago. I built this worktable at 83 cm (32.75 inches), the most comfortable height to match the chair. The chair bottom is 47.5 cm (18.75 inches) from the floor.

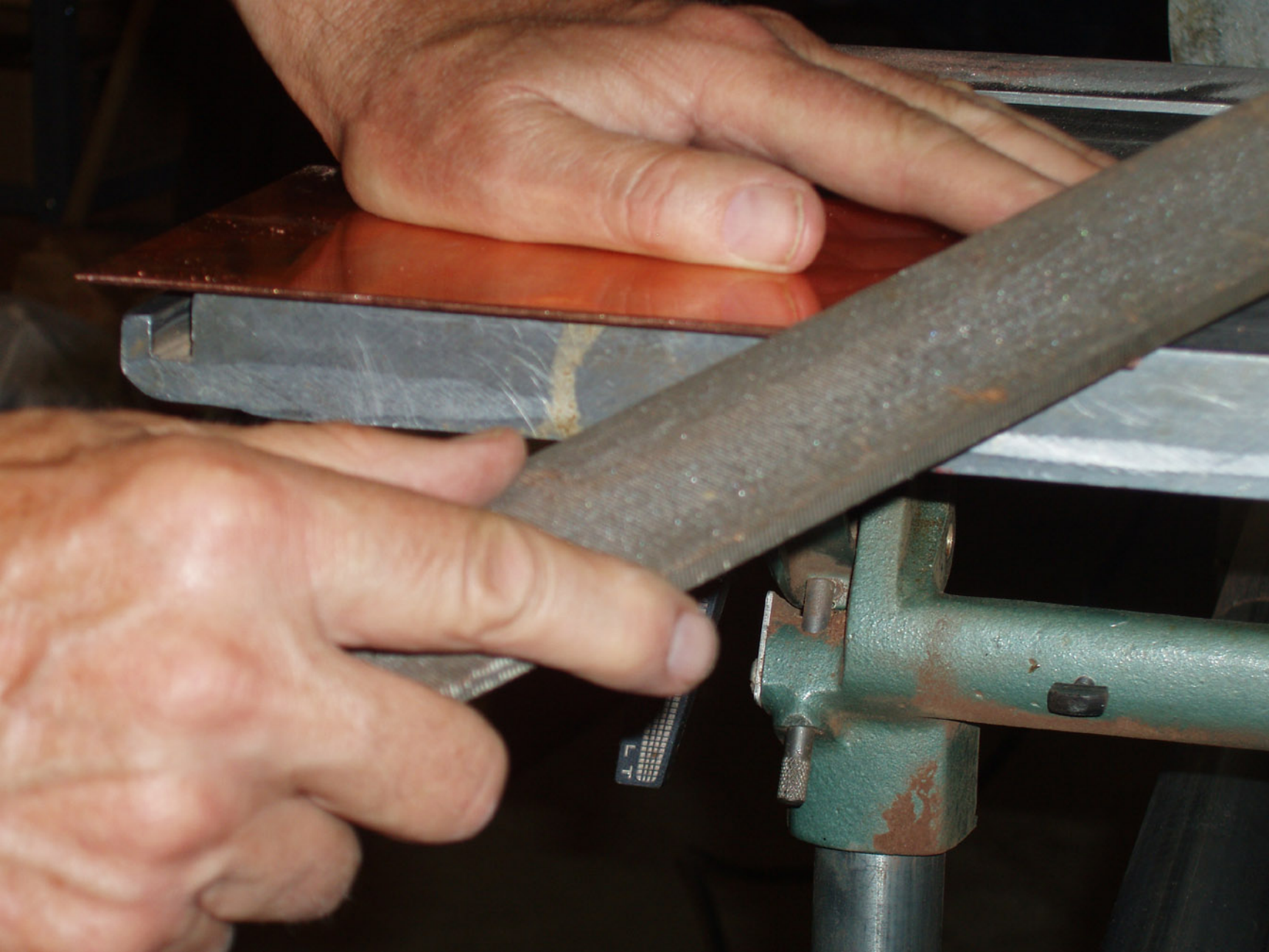
Because I bend forward while cutting with the burin, I lean on my left arm which rests on a thick pillow made from rolled-up printing felts. The pillow is propped on my left knee, elevated by a "foot stool" (actually a document box that raises my left foot a few centimeters). The box is shown at the left edge of the photograph. The posture is similar to that of a classical guitarrist.

A leather engraver's pad is shown here. I seldom use it, but when it's needed, I place it on this rack which is pulled out like a drawer.

The woodcut design on the chair bottom is by Albrecht Dürer, a great source of inspiration. Perhaps that's why I feel comfortable in this chair.

Bevel the edges of the plate

All four edges of the plate were filed to create a bevel, which keeps the plate from cutting through the paper and printing felts later. The corners were rounded slightly to keep them from slicing into fingers.

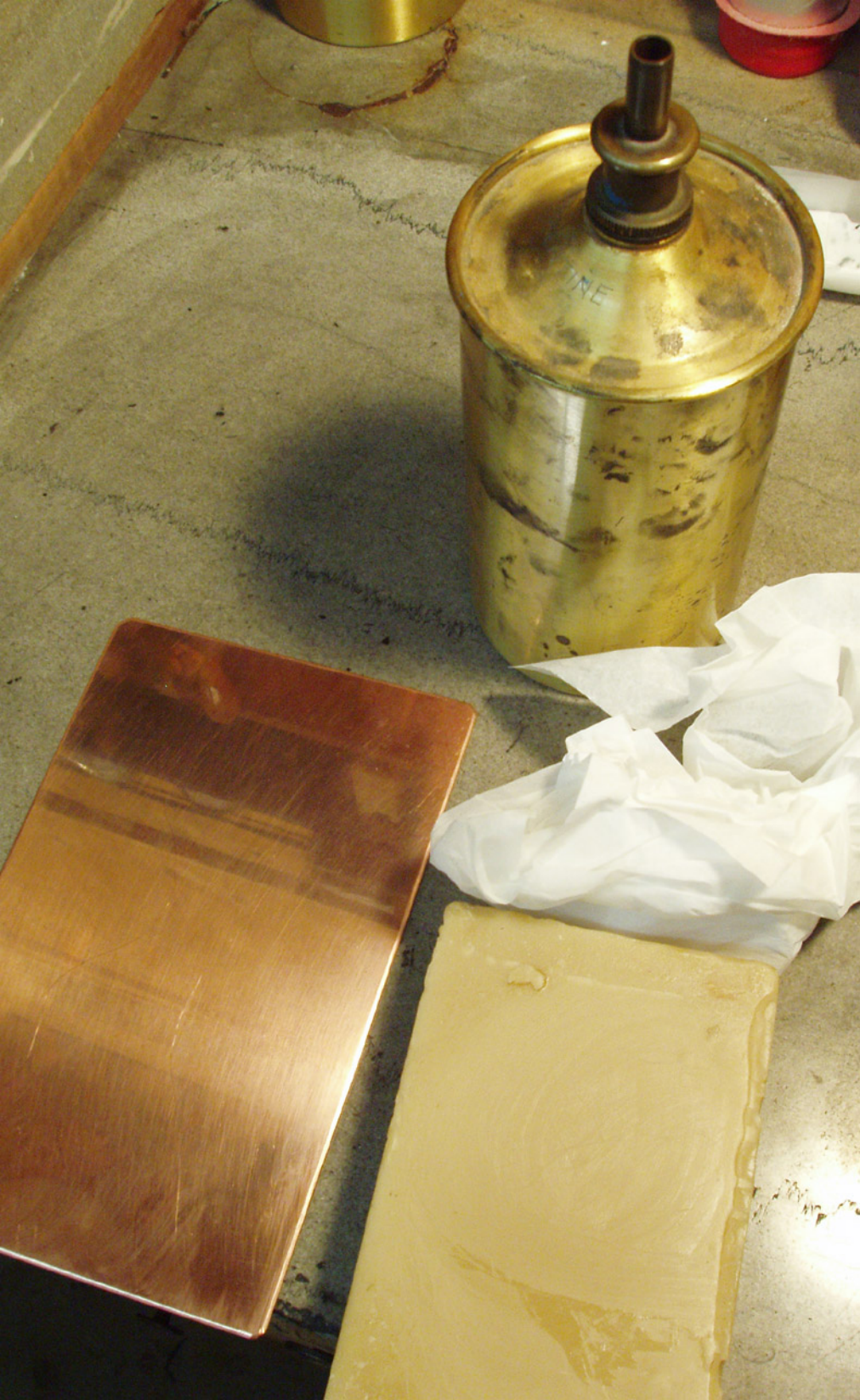


First step in transferring the design to the plate

A composition as complex as this one would be very difficult to engrave without having some preliminary marks to guide the work on the plate.

The marks that I used were transferred to the plate from the preliminary graphite drawing. The plate has its beveled edges.

A few drops of paint thinner will be applied to the paper tissue and rubbed on the block of beeswax.



The objective is to give the surface of the plate a tacky coating.

After applying a few drops of paint thinner to the wadded portion of the tissue, it was rubbed over the block of beeswax, dissolving some wax and causing it to stick to the tissue.

The tissue was rubbed against the plate, transferring wax, which is colorless, barely visible on the plate.

Transferring the design to the plate on the etching press

The plate with its waxed surface was placed on the press. The graphite-on-tracing paper drawing was placed in register on the plate and held in place with tape.

The pressure applied by the press caused particles of graphite to adhere to the waxy coating on the plate.

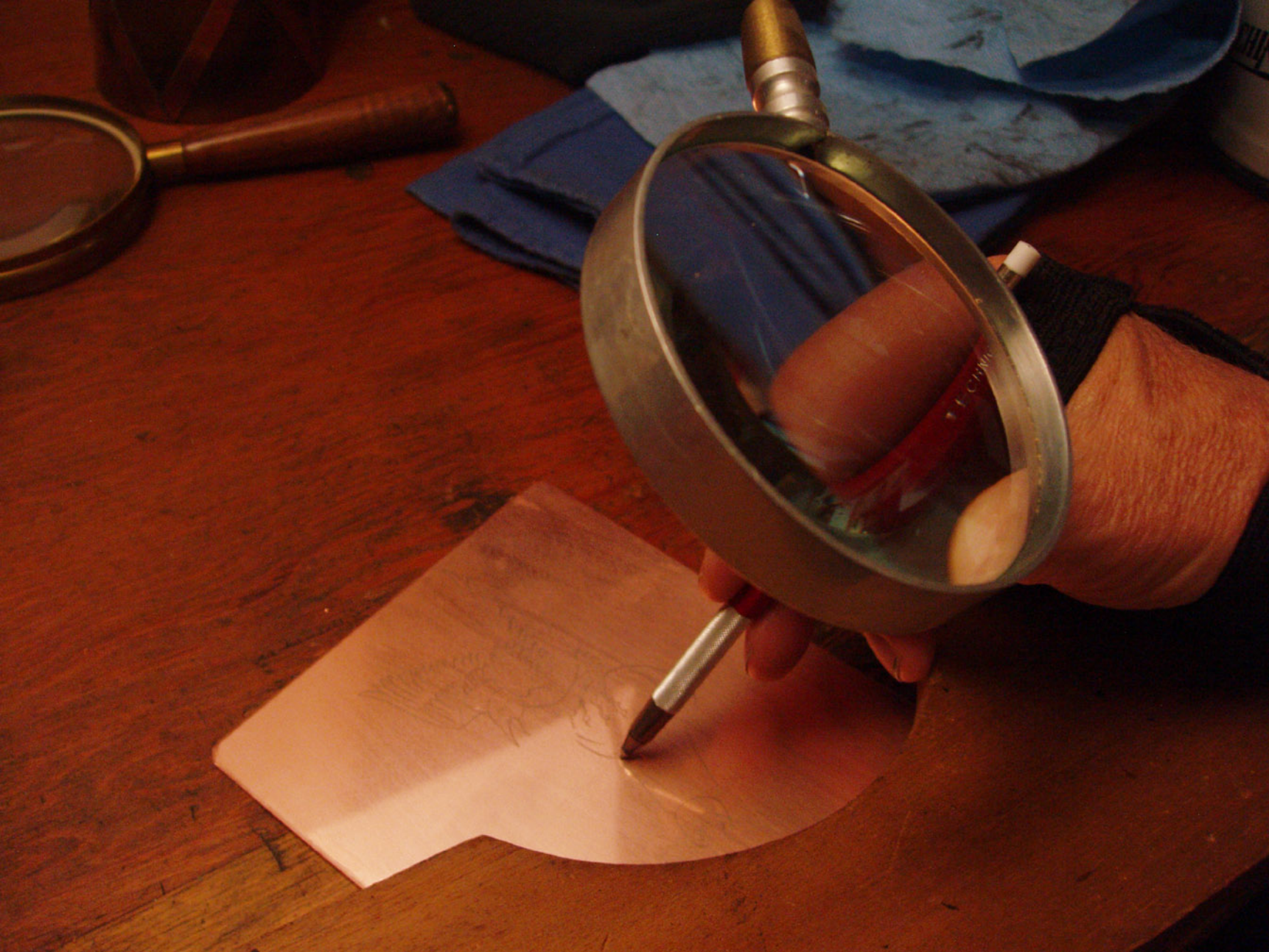
Transferred image

When the tracing paper was peeled back from the plate, the particles of graphite remaining in the wax were easily visible.

The drypoint guideline image

The graphite image on the plate was traced over lightly with an etching needle to scribe a "drypoint" line on the surface. These lines will provide temporary guidelines while engraving the image and should be so shallow that they will not print.

The beeswax coating and its graphite remains were removed from the plate with a few drops of paint thinner on a paper tissue.

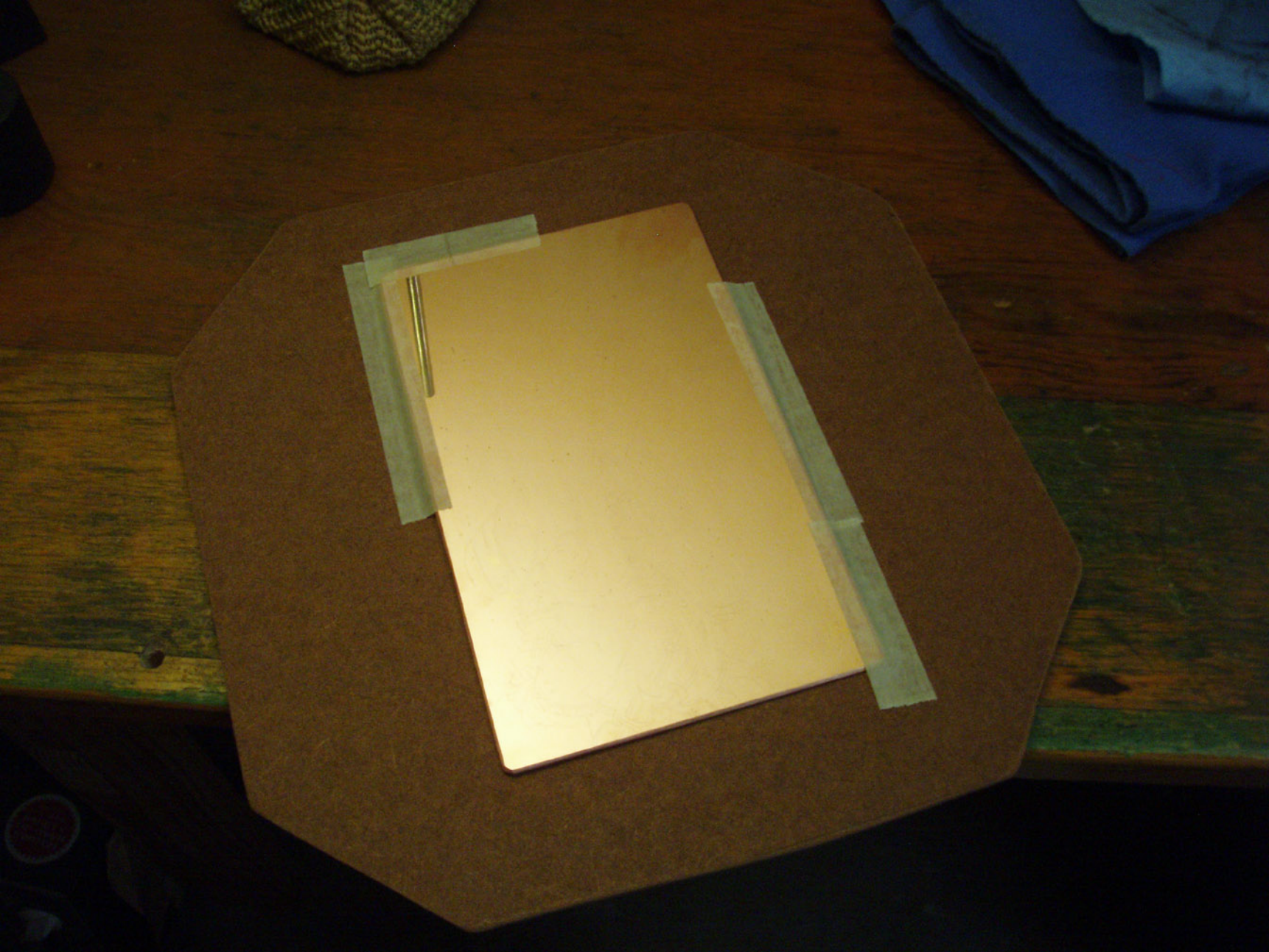


The plate on a mounting base

The engraver must twist and turn the plate whenever curved lines are being cut.

Small plates, such as this one, are awkward to handle if not adhered to a mounting base. The edges and corners of an unmounted plate can easily slice into fingers.

This mounting base was made from a piece of Masonite, 10 x 10 inches. Removing the corners makes it easier to handle when twisting and turning the plate.



The tools

These tools were used on the plate.

A. Dixon Tru/Color Film Marker Black 2225
This pencil makes a black mark on the surface of the plate. I also used a Schwan All-Stabilo 8008 for the same purpose.

B. Roulette, single row 45 dots per inch, E.C. Lyons.
A similar roulette with 65 dots per inch was also used.

C and D. Scraper/Burnisher combination, WC Kimber
This vintage tool was made in the 1920s.

E. Scraper, triangular solid blade, E.C. Lyons.
The blade is wrapped with tape to protect fingers.

F. Linen tester, 10X magnifier. Focal length one inch (25 mm)
This magnifier is used for inspecting the point of the burin.

G. Agate burnisher.
Polished agate mounted in a wooden handle (home made tool).

H and I. Burnisher/point combination, E.C. Lyons.
The burnisher has a curved shape. The point is an excellent needle for either etching or drypoint. The tool shown has been covered with flexible plastic tubing which serves as a comfortable hand grip.

J. Burin, square with bent shaft. Made by Artools.


A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J

Sharpening the burin

Most people who attempt engraving have never learned to sharpen the burin. The burin must be perfectly sharp -- like a needle at its tip.

This photograph shows the burin held in the correct sharpening position on a Norton IB-64 combination bench stone -- the side with the fine grit. The stone is covered with Honing Oil.

The position of the hand feels awkward at first, but by using this position, I always get a perfect point. The hand must hold the burin like a vise without wobbling or twisting.

I examine the point often through a 10X magnifier (a linen tester). If there is any irregularity, or the point shows any roundness at the tip, it must be resharpened.

Commercial sharpening jigs (for example, the Crocker sharpening jig) don't work for me.

Holding the burin

First of all, the burin must be sharp. A dull burin requires too much pressure on the point, causing the index finger to bear down hard -- even causing a blister. The index finger should apply little or no pressure. It gently guides the point.

Forcing a dull point through the copper usually breaks the point, causing the burin to be skated across the plate, ruining the design.

The burin is held almost parallel to the plate -- but slightly raised, perhaps 2 degrees.

The burin cuts in one direction only, and that is straight ahead. Curved lines must be cut by turning the plate.

Whenever I've attempted to cut a curve by turning the burin, the result has always been a broken point and a scratched plate.

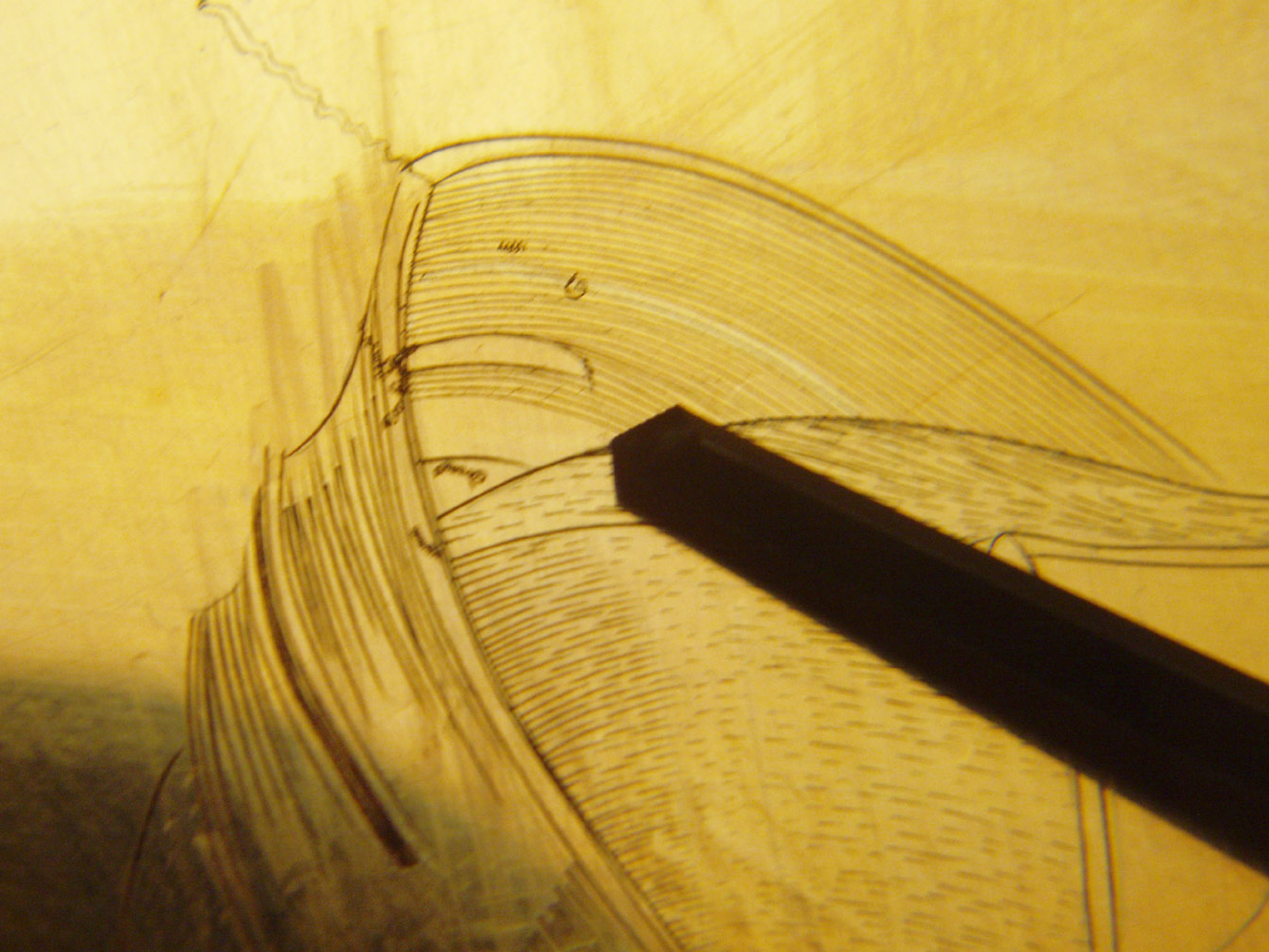
Holding the burin (an underside view)

I rarely hold the burin in a tight grip. The only time that is necessary is for cutting deep lines. But I learned from studying the prints of Dürer that deep lines are usually unnecessary.

Cutting with the burin

Looking through a magnifier, this is what I saw while cutting the lines that form the Knight's helmet. The point of the burin displaces the copper, causing it to curl up into little spiral shapes -- or "watch springs".

The actual distance between left and right edges is 32 mm, about 1.25 inches.



The copper plate

This is the plate as it appears with light cast downward by the foam board reflector. The mirror surface of the plate reflects the light upward -- toward my eyes.

The lines cut into the surface cast the light sideways, causing them to be dark.

In this state, the plate shows the mockingbird and the Knight fairly well established. Next, the burin will be cut.

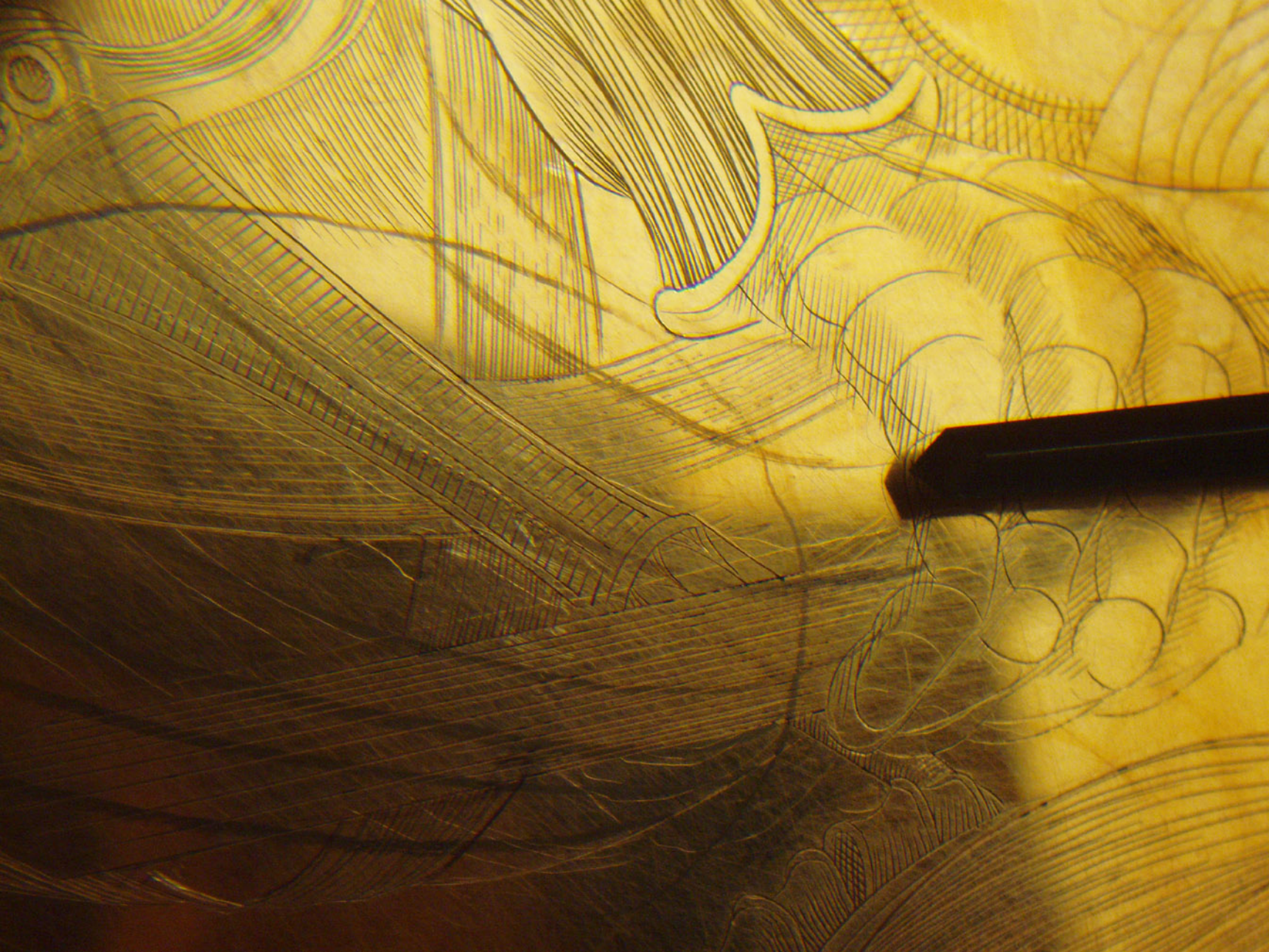
Pencil guidelines on the copper plate

The burin will be cut next. Pencil guidelines have been drawn onto the surface of the plate.

Pencil guidelines on the copper plate

In this magnified view of the armor, guidelines indicate an area and line directions where the next lines will be cut.

Most pencils will not leave a dark mark on the shiny surface of a copper plate. The pencil I use for marking guidelines is a film marker, made for writing on mylar sheets and film. It is easily erased with a kneaded rubber eraser.



Pencil guidelines for letters and other details

Dürer usually signed his prints with his initials and year. Emulating Dürer's style, I engraved my initials on this plate.

For this very small detail, I applied beeswax to the place where the initials would be cut, then I transferred the graphite from tracing paper. I could have run it through the press as before, but it was much faster and easier to use a smooth, hard object such as this folding bone.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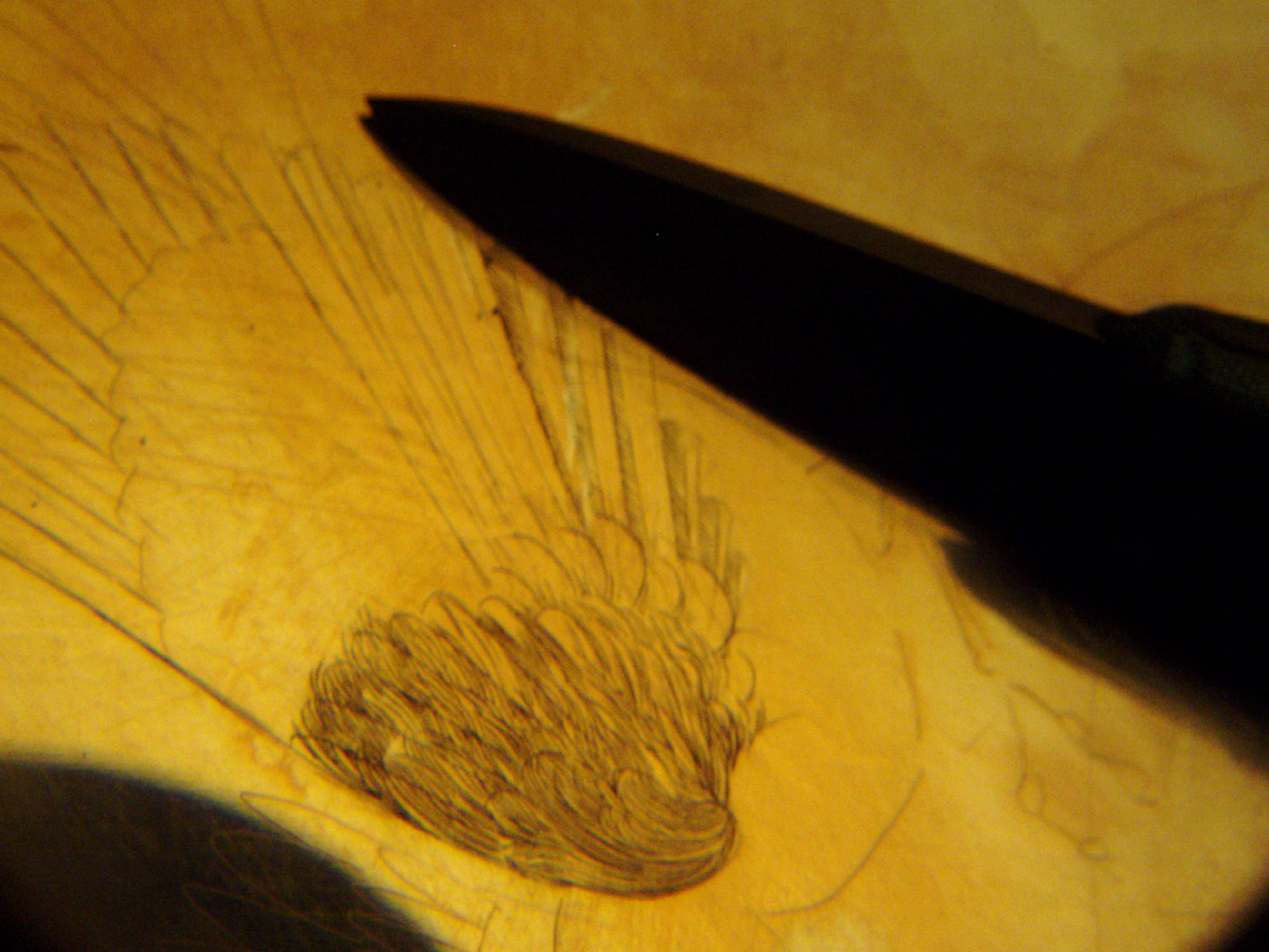
The scraper

The scraper, here seen through the magnifier, slices off burrs that stand above the surface of the plate. Whenever a line is cut, a slight burr is often cast up alongside the line in various places. Burrs are usually too slight to be seen, but they can be felt with sensitive fingertips.

Burrs tend to hold additional ink when a plate is printed; however, burrs wear down quickly in subsequent prints, resulting in thinner lines.

I don't like seeing lines get weaker with each print, so I always remove all burrs that might have formed.

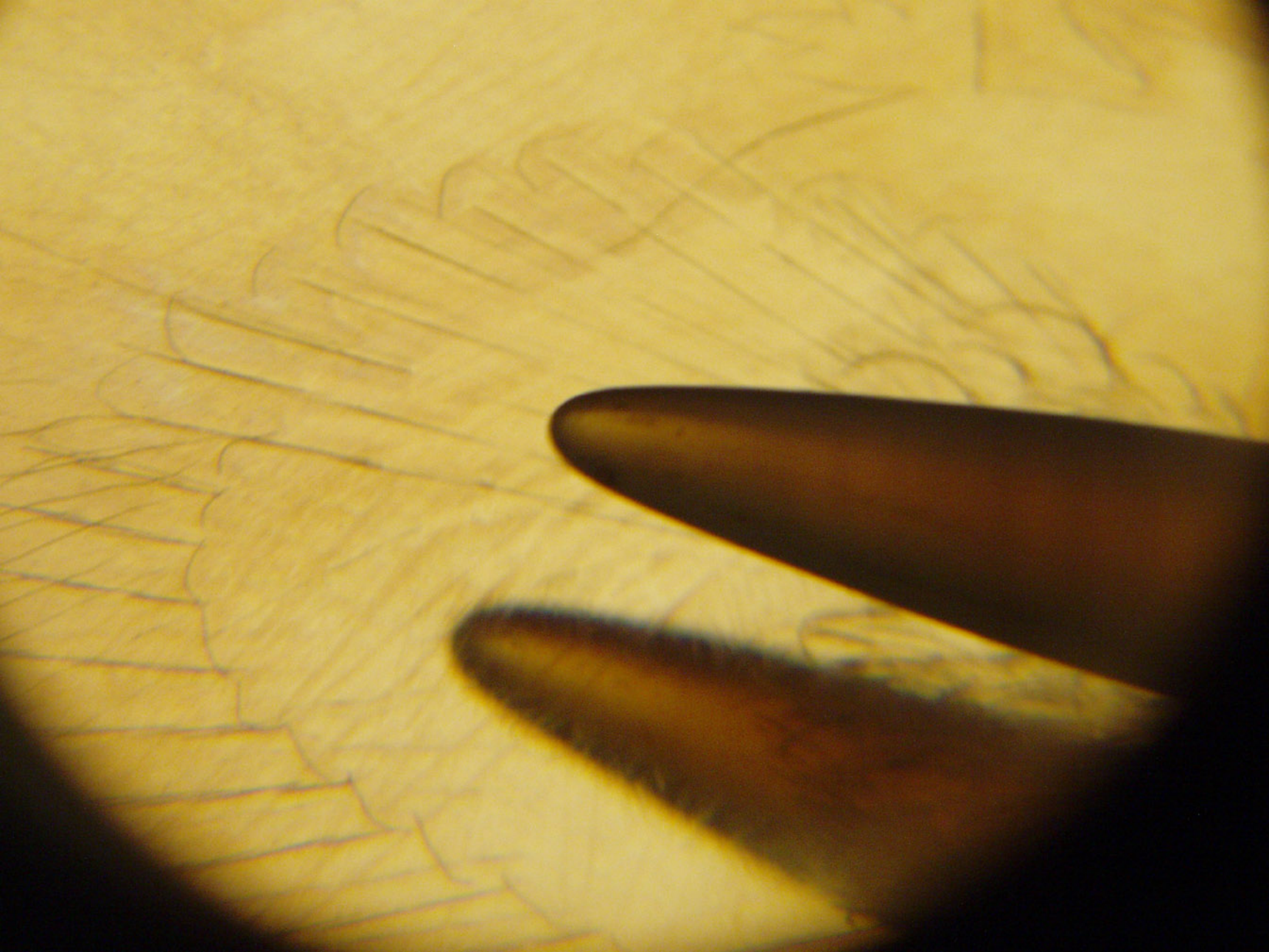
In Dürer's time, engravers did not remove the burrs. Collectors of old master prints prefer the earliest impressions with plenty of burr and richer lines. Later impressions are usually weak in comparison.



The burnisher

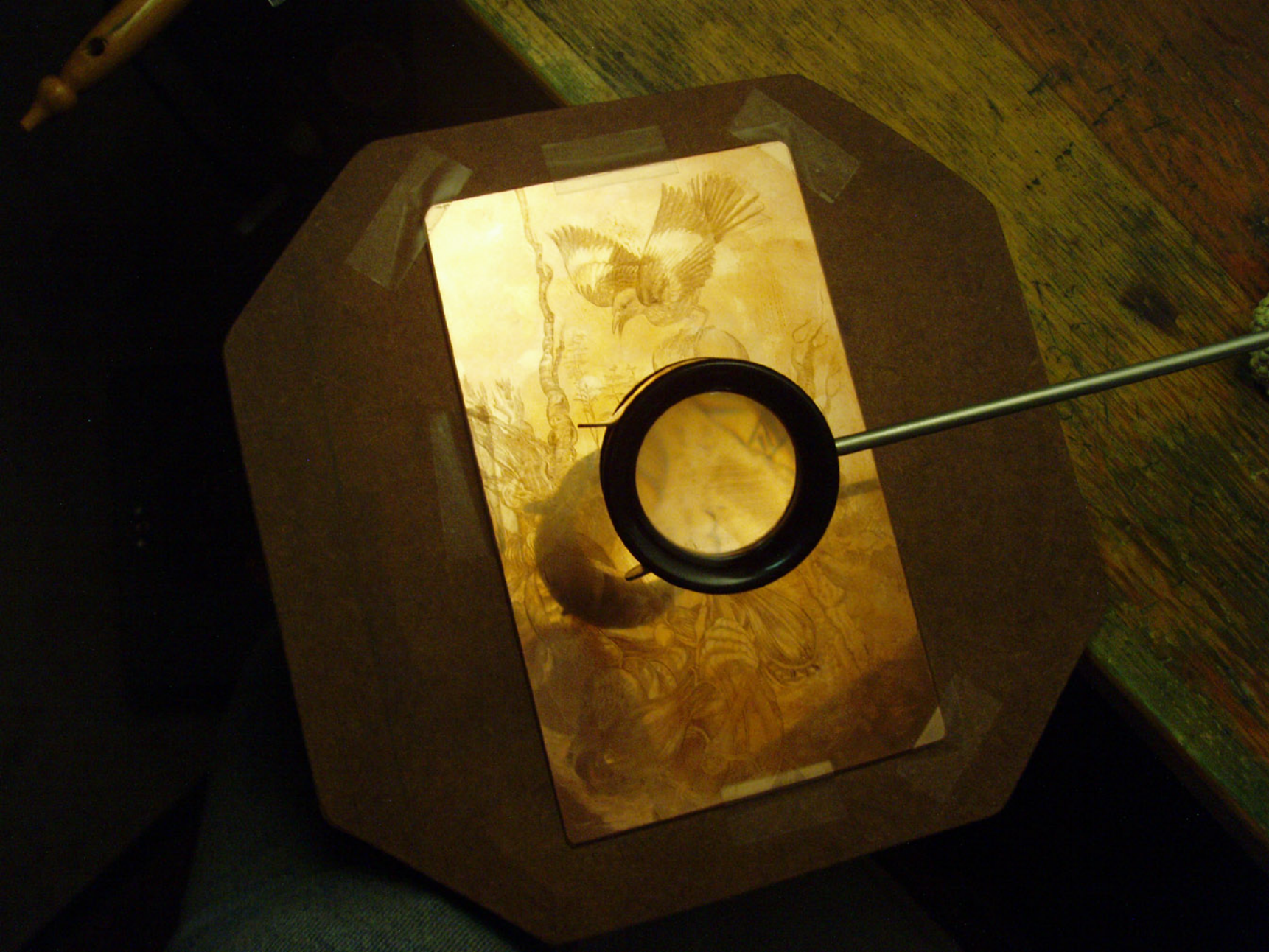
Scratches and burrs on the plate are removed with a burnisher. The smooth surface of the burnisher is harder than the copper. It merely pushes the copper down to flatten it

The tip of the burnisher shown here is an agate. Other burnishers are made of steel and kept highly polished.



The magnifier and mounting base

If the plate is small, most of the work is performed while it is mounted on a mounting base as seen earlier. The magnifier shown here is supported by a long arm. The mounting base is resting on the engraver's pad shown earlier. Curved lines are cut into the plate as the mounting base is rotated.



Cutting without the magnifier

This photograph shows the burin and the plate. In this instance, a line will not be cut on the plate, because the magnifier is not being used -- its reflection may be seen at the top. Very fine lines such as those shown here cannot be controlled without some sort of magnification.

However, an engraver does not necessarily have to use a magnifier. Engravings may be done without using magnification (other than the usual eyeglasses). The lines in such a case would be large, bold lines, probably done on a large plate.

End of photographs and description
Part 1
Knight, Bird & Burin