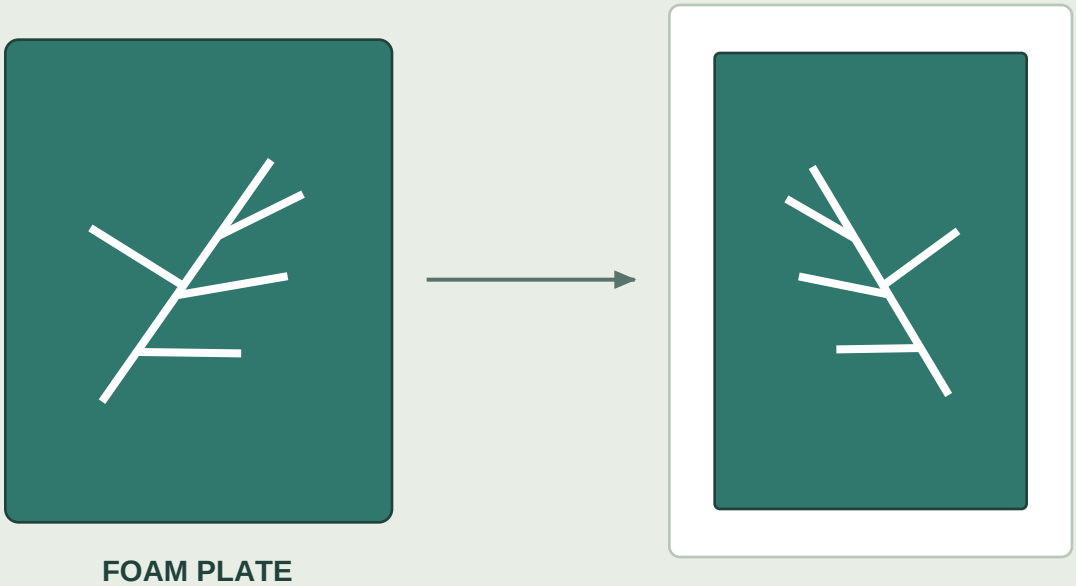
STEADLEAF PRESS

MAKE / PRINTING, STENCILS & COLOR

Carve a Simple Foam Print Block Without Sharp Tools



FOAM PLATE

MIRRORED PRINT

14 practical steps · Draw · indent · print

Original diagrams and two printable maker records

Illustrative plans — not physical test results

FREE GUIDE + PRINTABLES | STP-MAKE-F126

Before you start

Relief printing does not have to involve a blade. A purpose-made soft foam printing plate can be indented with a blunt rounded stylus, leaving the unpressed surface available to carry ink. This project makes a small asymmetric branch motif and three paper impressions. The goal is to compare ink coverage, contact and reversal, not to cut into rigid foam or produce a durable commercial printing block.

Materials: a pre-cut 80 by 100 mm soft foam plate explicitly intended for indentation printing, a blunt rounded pencil or maker-recommended stylus, plain practice paper, a small offcut of similar foam, compatible water-based relief-printing ink or paint explicitly suitable for the plate, non-food ink tray, soft brayer or applicator recommended by the ink maker, clean scrap paper and a ruler. Follow the labels for use, ventilation, cleanup and drying. No knife, needle, heated tool, solvent, drilling or sanding. Keep foam scraps and ink away from children, pets and food.

Plan the project

The plate is portrait, 80 mm wide and 100 mm high. Keep a 10 mm border, leaving a 60 by 80 mm design field. Draw a simple stem rising diagonally from (20,75) to (55,25) mm on a paper sketch measured from the upper left. Add three short side branches to the right at different heights and one short branch to the left; avoid crowded fine details. Each line is indented, not removed. The printed white or paper-coloured grooves reverse left to right: for a coordinate x on the 80 mm plate, the mirrored x is 80 minus x. Thus (20,75) prints at (60,75), relative to the same plate footprint.

For each trial use a 120 by 150 mm sheet. A centred 80 by 100 mm footprint leaves 20 mm left/right and 25 mm top/bottom. Mark two adjacent corner references on a separate registration sheet beneath the print area. Test three impressions: a thin even ink layer, an adjusted layer if required, and a repeat of the preferred method. Keep the paper contact still; choose a single adjustable variable so the comparison is meaningful. Use actual observations, never a presumed result.

Steps 01–02

1. Choose the correct soft printing plate

Buy or use pre-cut printing foam that the maker describes as suitable for blunt indentation. Do not use rigid insulation, unknown packaging, brittle crumbly foam or a material requiring a knife. Select a flat undamaged plate about 80 by 100 mm. If the desired size is unavailable, adapt the drawing to an available pre-cut plate rather than cutting with a blade.

2. Read the foam and ink instructions

Confirm that the water-based relief-printing product is compatible with the foam and paper. Read the handling, ventilation, drying and cleaning directions. Choose the maker-recommended applicator and avoid incompatible solvents, heat and aerosols. Set aside a dedicated non-food tray. Do not assume that water-based means harmless to ingest or suitable for every surface.

Steps 03–04

3. Draw the design and calculate the border

On plain paper sketch an 80 by 100 mm rectangle and a 10 mm border. Draw the 60 by 80 mm field and the diagonal branch motif within it, using the two coordinates in the plan. Three short right-side branches and one left-side branch make the reversal easy to see. Keep the sketch simple; avoid tiny isolated details or letters in this first exercise.

4. Preview the mirrored impression

On a second sketch reverse the motif left to right. Plot the endpoints using x-prime = 80 minus x while leaving y unchanged. For example the top endpoint at x = 55 becomes x = 25. Compare both sketches and label PLATE and PRINT. A groove in the plate generally leaves an uninked line when the raised surface receives ink; it is not a raised ink line.

Steps 05–06

5. Practise indentation on spare foam

Place an offcut of the same foam on a firm level support. With the approved blunt rounded stylus, press a short gentle line to make a shallow depression. Inspect the surface; it should not tear, puncture, crumble or split. Try a second line with a modestly different pressure only if the product instructions support it. If no clean groove forms, change the plate or tool.

6. Transfer the simple motif

Place the full plate on the support and lightly mark its design on the surface using the maker-supported marking method. Keep a 10 mm edge region and do not draw across the plate boundary. If using a paper sketch as a reference, copy the lines carefully rather than forcing a sharp point through it. Compare the asymmetric branch arrangement with the original sketch.

Steps 07–08

7. Indent the motif without cutting

Trace the marked lines with the blunt tool at the gentle pressure established on scrap. Work in short sections and keep the plate flat. If a groove is too shallow, review on scrap and repeat gently only as permitted. Stop if the foam tears or produces fragments. Do not deepen by carving material away, using a pointed blade, heating or sanding.

8. Set up the registration guide

Draw a 120 by 150 mm paper outline on a larger backing sheet, and mark the centred 80 by 100 mm plate footprint. The nominal margins are 20 mm left/right and 25 mm top/bottom. Mark two adjacent corners where the trial paper will align. Keep guide marks on the backing, not in the inked area; arrange the plate so its orientation is repeatable.

Steps 09–10

9. Prepare a thin even ink film

Apply a small amount of compatible ink to the dedicated tray and distribute it with the recommended applicator. Coat the flat unindented plate surface evenly, without flooding the grooves. Follow the manufacturer’s guidance rather than adding water or thickener. Examine the surface in ordinary light. Remove obvious excess using the supported method; never scrape the foam with a blade.

10. Pull the first impression

Place the plate inked-side up on the guide with its recorded orientation. Lower the first paper onto it, using the two reference corners. Place a clean protective scrap on the back and spread gentle even pressure over the footprint without lateral movement or crushing the foam. Lift the paper steadily from one edge and set it aside flat to dry. The motif should appear mirrored if the transfer succeeds.

Steps 11–12

11. Adjust one factor for the second print

Inspect the first print after suitable drying. A filled groove may indicate excessive ink or a shallow indentation; pale patches may indicate uneven film or contact. Choose one adjustable factor, such as film thickness or evenness of contact, and record it. Clean or re-ink only as the maker allows. Make the second impression with the same paper size, registration and motif.

12. Repeat the preferred setup

Compare the actual first and second impressions. If neither is suitable, change the method on scrap or remake the plate instead of forcing pressure. If one looks clear, repeat its settings for impression three, keeping the paper still and the groove free of excess ink. Label all prints on the back after drying; no perfect identical result is guaranteed.

Steps 13–14

13. Dry, display and store

Follow the ink label for drying or cure before stacking or framing. Keep wet prints separate, flat and away from strong heat, food, children and pets. Clean the reusable plate and tools as directed; do not abrade or soak foam if the maker forbids it. Retire a torn or crumbling plate and contain scraps according to local waste guidance. Store dry prints flat and out of strong sunlight.

14. Record the print comparison

Complete Record 2 with the plate size, motif orientation, ink product, paper type, each adjustment and observed result. Mark REPEATABLE FOR CRAFT, CHANGE/REMAKE or HOLD. Select a preferred impression or leave the choice unresolved if not observed. This is an original small paper-print exercise, not a claim of physical testing, permanent ink, product safety or commercial print quality.

Fix, care and preserve

Grooves print filled. Try a thinner film of compatible ink on scrap or revise the shallow indentation.

Print is patchy. Check film and contact separately; avoid crushing foam.

Motif is reversed unexpectedly. Compare the plate and mirror sketch before another print.

Foam tears or crumbles. Stop, contain scraps and use a suitable replacement plate.

Paper smears. Keep it still during transfer and separate until label-specified drying.

Source & evidence boundary

Original Steadleaf English prose, calculations, vector artwork, diagrams and maker records. The following sources provide factual context, not certification of this design. Follow actual component instructions and local collection, disposal and plant-movement rules.

University of Alabama, Art & Art History Faculty Teach Students at Community Day
https://art.ua.edu/news/art-art-history-faculty-teach-students-at-community-day/

Canadian Conservation Institute, Caring for paper objects
https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/paper-objects.html

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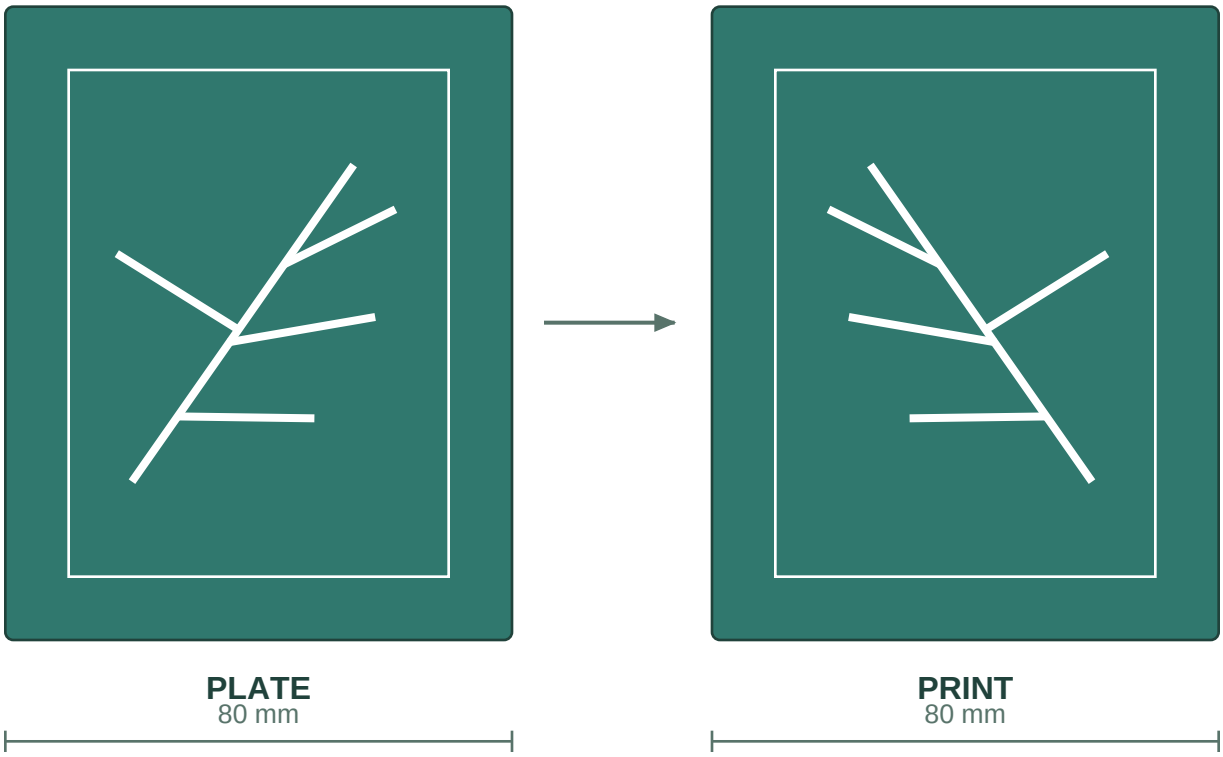
Plate and mirrored print

Illustrative 80 x 100 mm plate, 10 mm border, 60 x 80 mm field. The branch stem runs from (20,75) to (55,25) mm from the upper left; printed x coordinates equal 80 minus plate x.

A / PLATE AND MIRRORED IMPRESSION



10 mm border · 60 x 80 mm field · 100 mm plate height

Stem: (20,75) to (55,25) mm on plate.

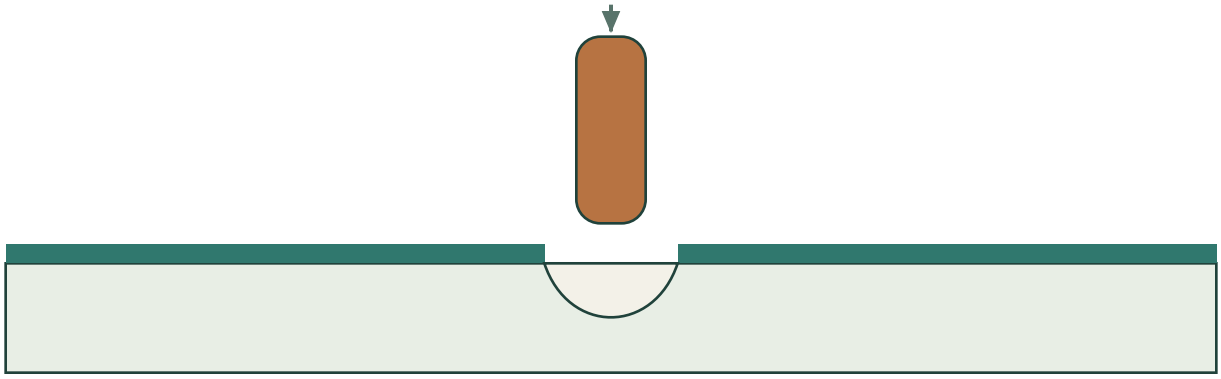
Printed x = 80 – plate x; y is unchanged.

White lines represent grooves, not raised ink.

Shallow relief and three-print trial

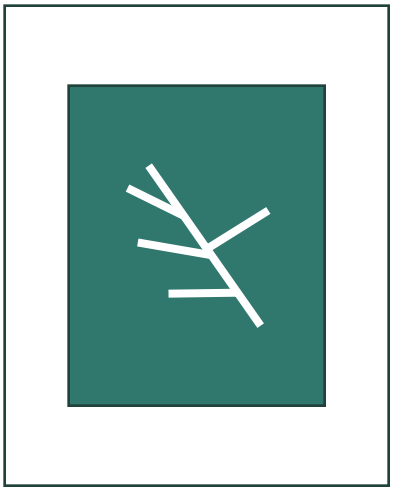
Blunt stylus compresses a shallow groove; ink rests on the surrounding surface. A 120 x 150 mm trial sheet leaves 20 mm side and 25 mm top/bottom margins around the plate footprint. Compare three actual impressions.

A / BLUNT INDENTATION AND INK



Ink on surface; shallow groove stays below it.

B / REGISTRATION AND COMPARISON



120 x 150 mm paper

1. THIN FILM

Record actual impression

2. ADJUST ONE

Record actual impression

3. REPEAT

Record actual impression

Margins: 20 mm sides; 25 mm top/bottom.

Plate and registration plan

Enter actual observations only. Mark missing information UNKNOWN or NOT CHECKED. This is a craft record, not a safety or preservation certificate.

Foam product / indentation tool / compatibility

Plate width and height / border

Motif coordinates / mirror sketch

Scrap indentation observation

Ink product / applicator / instructions

Paper size / footprint / registration marks

Selected first-film method

Decision: PROCEED / CHANGE / HOLD

Three-impression comparison

Enter actual observations only. Mark missing information UNKNOWN or NOT CHECKED. This is a craft record, not a safety or preservation certificate.

Print 1 / film / contact / observation

Print 2 / single adjustment / observation

Print 3 / repeated settings / observation

Mirror direction / groove clarity / coverage

Actual drying or cure / date

Selected print / unresolved issue

Disposition: REPEATABLE FOR CRAFT / CHANGE-REMAKE / HOLD

Cleanup / storage / review trigger