A **stencil** is a thin sheet of material, such as paper, plastic, or metal, with letters or a design cut from it, used to produce the letters or design on an underlying surface by applying pigment through the cut-out holes in the material. The key advantage of a stencil is that it can be reused to repeatedly and rapidly produce the same letters or design. Although stencils can be made for one-time use, typically they are made to be reusable. To be reusable, they must remain intact after a design is produced and the stencil is removed from the work surface. This is done by connecting stencil **islands** (sections of material that are inside cut-out "holes" in the stencil) to other parts of the stencil with **bridges** (narrow sections of material that are not cut out).

Screen printing also uses a stencil process. Stencils can be made with one or many color layers using different techniques, with most stencils designed to be applied as solid colors. During screen printing the images for stenciling are broken down into color layers. Multiple layers of stencils are used on the same surface to produce multi-colored images.

**Stencils: An Ancient Tradition**

Stenciling has a long and rich history. The art of stenciling has existed since the Upper Paleolithic era, approximately 40,000-10,000 years ago, with the earliest known example of "stencil" use dated to 32,000 years ago. Painted wall art reached high artistry during this period and some of the best known uses of stencils are found in cave paintings in Lascaux, France and Altamira, Spain. A common motif in cave paintings was hand tracings. Hands were placed on rock walls and the artist would spray pigment from his mouth around the outline of his hand. Primitive blowpipes made from hollowed-out reeds and bones may also have been used to dispense pigments.

Early South Sea islanders also used stencils. In Fiji, banana and bamboo leaves were used as stencil material. Perforated patterns were cut into the leaves and a vegetable dye was pressed through the holes onto 'tapa', or bark cloth. Stenciled geometric borders were a favored design for clothing and textiles.

In Ancient Egypt stencils were used for the decoration of tombs. Artists stenciled hieroglyphs, figures and animals onto tomb walls. The resulting images were then incised around the outer edges of the design by sculptors to make a low relief, which would then be plastered and painted. Strong vibrant colors such as red oxide and yellow ochre were characteristically used in tomb decoration.
ANDY WARHOL: Prince of Pop Art

Andy Warhol (1928-1987) was a key figure in Pop Art, an art movement that emerged in America and elsewhere in the 1950s to become prominent over the next two decades.

In the 1960s, Andy Warhol created several “mass-produced” images from photographs of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and Jackie Onassis.

Andy Warhol grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with his two older brothers and his parents, both of whom had emigrated from Czechoslovakia. Even as a young boy, Warhol liked to draw, color, and cut and paste pictures. His mother, who was also artistic, would encourage him by giving him a chocolate bar every time he finished a page in his coloring book.

It was during his college years that Warhol discovered the blotted-line technique, a process of taping two pieces of blank paper together and drawing with india ink on one page. Before the ink dried, he would press the paper together, transferring the image to both. The result was two nearly identical images with irregular lines that he would color in with watercolor.

Around 1960, Warhol begun working in the pop art style. Pop art was a new style of art that began in England in the mid-1950s, and consisted of realistic renditions of popular, everyday items.

Warhol's first exhibition came in 1962 at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. He displayed his canvases of Campbell's soup, one canvas for each of the 32 types of Campbell's soup made at that time. He sold the paintings as a set for a $1000.

Unfortunately, Warhol found that he couldn't make his paintings fast enough on canvas. Luckily in July 1962, he discovered the process of photo stencils (screen printing). With a photo stencil the image is produced by a photographic process rather than hand cutting. This technique uses a specially prepared section of silk as a stencil, allowing one silk-screen to create similar patterns multiple times. He immediately began making paintings of celebrities, most notably a large collection of paintings of Marilyn Monroe. Warhol would use this style for the rest of his life.