

The Wine Label as Art: Sine Qua Non, by Manfred Krankl

Winemaker-artist Manfred Krankl designs his own labels, when the TTB doesn't get in the way.

By Robert Taylor

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Many winemakers [adorn their bottles with art](#). Very few make the label art themselves, and none is more famous for doing so than [California Rhône cult icon Manfred Krankl](#), whose coveted Sine Qua Non wines feature a new piece of his original artwork on every cuvée.

A self-taught craftsman, Krankl was never formally trained as a winemaker or as an artist. But collectors patiently wait years for a chance to join the Sine Qua Non mailing list (the secondary-market price for his new wines is [double to quadruple what Krankl charges](#)), and his early one-off labels like The Marauder, The Hussy and The 17th Nail in My Cranium have become iconic works of winemaking art in their own right.

"I grew up in Austria in a very lower-middle-class family, impoverished actually, and in those types of environments, things like art are not looked upon in a very serious manner—that's something that you do like go on a rope swing," Krankl said. "I never thought of it in a meaningful manner other than as a hobby until we started our wine project, and it suddenly presented itself as a potential outlet for that, combining two passions that I had—wine and doing this artwork."

Pencil and charcoal drawing are among Krankl's talents, along with photography, but he's best known for his linoleum and woodcut prints, a hobby he picked up almost 30 years ago following an encounter with a friend's woodcutting architect father and a Christmas gift of Japanese carving tools from his wife, Elaine. "When I was younger, I was influenced by people like Käthe Kollwitz and Erich Heckel and all the German Expressionists," Krankl said. "That dark, weird woodcutting thing was very appealing to me, but it never occurred to me that I could do it myself."

"My first cuts were actually done on lids of wine boxes, which is frankly the worst medium because it splinters a lot, but I quite enjoyed the whole notion of working in a negative fashion—you are working on a mirror image, and working by taking away, the opposite of drawing or painting. ... That sort of mind game was really appealing to me," Krankl said. "I like that when you make the print, there is an element of surprise. It is always a little different than what you had in mind."



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Not all artwork translates onto the size of a wine label. "But woodcutting is very expressionistic and, by definition, is hard-edged. It lends itself rather well," said Krankl.

While woodcuts might be perfectly suited to wine labels, Krankl's particular brand of creativity hasn't always been. His friends advised against his approach before he even got started, and the label-approval board at the Alcohol and Tobacco, Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) has served as an annual nemesis ever since.

When Krankl hatched his plan to come up with a new name and label for every bottle of wine he made, "Almost everybody told me that it was the stupidest idea they'd ever heard," he said. "I have a good friend who is still a distributor for me, who said, 'Are you insane? You're going to change the label every year on every single wine? Don't you know that the whole thing is about brand recognition?' Others would say, 'You'll never keep that up! You'll do it for two vintages and give up because you can't do it,' and I'm happy to say it's all proven wrong."

The TTB hasn't been so easily swayed. "There's not an awful lot of written protocol as to what they can or cannot approve ... they can just send it back and say, 'Nope, we just don't like it,' and you can pound sand after that."

One of Krankl's most risqué labels, The Hussy, was approved without comment, while its companion label, The Good Girl, featuring a nude man resting his head in the lap of a nun, was rejected emphatically: "The explanation was that it was in very bad taste! It actually cracked me up," Krankl laughed. A protruding nipple on the Body & Soul label had to be censored. Krankl was offered a chance to explain the fishnet stocking close-up for a bottling called Net; his intellectual dissertation on its status as an abstract work was summarily rejected. A woodcut of a man driving titled One Armed & Blind was denied as a potential endorsement of driving under the influence. (Krankl shared three of those rejected labels, viewable in the slideshows, along with more details on each piece.)

All the attention to Krankl's artwork hasn't piqued his interest in a second career, however. "My business is the wine business, and the art is sort of the wrapping to it all," Krankl said. "I'm not that great of an artist. I'm realistic. I do that because it's enjoyable to me, and I do it because it works with this whole wine project and lends an artisanal tone that I like, but you know, I'm not really an artist, I'm a winemaker."