

Color Woodcut International

Japan, Britain, and America in the Early Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the color woodcut saw a rebirth. Inspired by the popularity of the nineteenth century Japanese color woodcut, artists in Japan, Britain, and America, took up the medium. They looked back to the Japanese prints of the previous century and adapted the old methods of making the prints, and they drew inspiration from the subjects of old prints as well. The resulting similarity of prints in the three countries results in a truly international style. The artists shared much, but they moved in their own direction as the twentieth century wore on, so although they start out looking quite similar, by the middle of the century their woodcuts are stylistically much more diverse.

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Japanese Westernism

Although Japan had formally isolated itself from the West in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Japanese were still in contact with western goods allowed in through the port of Nagasaki. When Commodore Perry with some of the United States fleet arrived in Edo (now Tokyo) harbor in 1853 and forced Japan into more open trading, a fascination with things western gripped Japan. Images of westerners became common, although, as with Hiroshige's *Picture of Prosperity in America* derived from a view of an Austrian castle, they were sometimes slightly askew. Western styles became popular enough that western clothing and details began appearing in popular prints. Japanese artists came to embrace Western artistic styles as well as imagery and adopted many of the conventions of western illustration in their popular prints.

French and German Color Woodcuts

The enthusiasm for things Japanese reached such a height that the French coined the word “*Japonisme*” in the nineteenth-century to describe it. In France, such famous artists as van Gogh and Monet enthusiastically collected Japanese color woodcut prints. However, before the end of the nineteenth century very few artists had actually used the process they so much admired. Emil Orlik, a Czech printmaker active in Austria, traveled to Japan and on his return to Europe taught woodblock printmaking. In France, Henri Rivière produced sophisticated prints in the Japanese style. However, it was in Great Britain and America that the Japanese style of printmaking had its greatest number of followers.

Development of the Color Woodcut

Once an international community of artists had embraced the color woodcut, they inevitably started to change it. Artists in all three countries experimented with the medium, some returning to a more traditional style, others trying out a personal style of abstraction. New inks made more vibrant color combinations possible.

Many artists experimented with the key block (the black-line block in traditional prints that placed a firm outline around every object in the print). Some removed it altogether to achieve varied effects. Others emphasized it by printing the line block in unusual colors or making it a strong relief element.

The Japanese-style Woodcut in Britain and America

England has a long history of woodcut work, but it was primarily printed in black and white. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, Frank Morley Fletcher and John Dickson Batten were inspired by the color woodcut prints that were being imported to Europe and America from Japan. They struggled to work out the techniques that Japanese craftsmen used to create the prints they so much admired. They began experimenting on their own but finally learned the techniques firsthand from Urushibara Mokachu, a printmaker who immigrated to England.

All British color woodcut artists are heirs to Urushibara's generosity, because Fletcher taught the techniques to his students, first at the Edinburgh College of Art, then in his book *Wood-Block Printing*. Fletcher eventually came to America and taught woodblock technique at the Santa Barbara School of Fine Arts in California.

Americans had been introduced to woodblock printmaking techniques before Fletcher went to California. Helen Hyde, Arthur Wesley Dow, and Bertha Lum all traveled to Japan at the turn of the century to learn the techniques firsthand. Bror Julius Olsson Nordfeldt and Norma Bassett Hall learned the techniques from Fletcher and his students in Europe, and all eagerly shared their knowledge with their peers. A small group dedicated to the color woodcut developed in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Eventually they would develop a new American style of color printmaking, exemplified by the work of Blanche Lazzell, but at first their woodcuts emulated traditional Japanese practices and subjects.

Peripatetic Printmakers

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, many printmakers traveled, sharing techniques and teaching the complex process of traditional Japanese printmaking. This intercontinental instruction, more than anything else, led to the rebirth of the color woodcut.

From America, Helen Hyde and Arthur Wesley Dow went to Japan to learn how Japanese artisans created their prints. They learned just how complex the task was, being split among three groups in Japan: the designer who created the image, the block cutter who divided the image up onto a set of carefully registered blocks, and the printer who inked up the blocks and printed them one after another on a sheet of paper to recreate the original image. While Hyde remained in Japan, taking advantage of Japanese craftsmen to do much of her block-cutting and printing, Dow returned to the United States to teach the technique in annual summer courses.

Yoshida Hiroshi is perhaps the most widely traveled of the Japanese printmakers, touring America and Europe to learn about their art and collecting in his sketchbook images that he would use in his prints on his return to Japan. He was influenced by such impressionists as Monet, whose explorations of scenes at various times of day no doubt inspired Yoshida's sailboats series.

Urushibara was most influential in spreading Japanese woodblock technique, going to England and sharing the secrets of the craft with Frank Morley Fletcher.

Fletcher, in turn, taught Japanese-style woodblock printmaking first to his students at the Edinburgh College of Art, then to American students when he moved to Santa Barbara to become head of the university's art school. Fletcher also wrote the most complete text on the subject, *Wood-Block Printing: A Description of the Craft of Woodcutting and Colour Printing Based on the Japanese Practice*, which went through several editions starting in 1916.

Panel 1

The block to the left carried the ink for the background blue of the print *Sails*. The areas that the artist, John Platt, wanted to be a color other than blue (all the vessels and the lighthouse) were cut away from the block, so that when the ink was transferred from block to paper, only the background area would be printed.

As you compare the blocks with the print, remember that the patterns on the block are reversed from those printed onto the paper.

To make sure that the paper was placed in exactly the right position, Platt made sets of registration marks on the block. Each set consists of a small inverted “L” shape that received the corner of the sheet of paper to be printed and an “I” shape six or so inches below the first mark that guided the placement of the edge of the sheet.

This block has two sets of registration marks: one higher, requiring a small wooden extension, and another set lower on the block. This allowed Platt to use the block for two different colors. He does this on two other blocks in the set as well, and prints from the backs of each block, too, probably to make the best use of these hard-to-acquire, high-quality blocks.

The foreground boat is printed from the lower left portion of this block. The lightest area at the top of the sail was printed with less ink. Although it looks quite dark on the block, the result on the print is much lighter.

The block was rotated to print some dark blue areas. For example, part of the dark blue wake behind the small boat at the bottom of *Sails* was printed from the triangular area at the top of this block.

The central area of this block was used to print the rigging on the boats. Another area, originally intended to be used for the dark blue area below the top left sailboat, was eventually rejected by Platt, who glued a piece of paper over the area and wrote "NO" on it to prevent accidental inking.

The only part of this block used in the print is the point of the large form to the right. This area, originally intended to have been printed by the block to the left of this one, provides the dark area below small sailboat at the top left of *Sails*.

Panel 6

Like nearly all of the works in this exhibition this is a color woodblock print. Artist John Platt cut the blocks in the case below, then printed them in a variety of different colors to create the final print. Each side of each block (the blocks are carved on their backs as well) must be inked and printed separately, some more than once, to build up the final image for each impression of the print.