



INSTITUTE OF ART AND DESIGN
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Woodcut

THE OLDEST FORM OF PRINTMAKING

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Woodcut is a relief printmaking technique

- ▶ Woodcut is a relief printmaking technique
- ▶ To make a woodcut the artist needs to carve an image into the surface of a block, leaving the printing parts level with the surface, while removing the non-printing parts.
- ▶ Areas that are cut away carry no ink, while characters or images at surface level carry the ink to produce the print.
- ▶ The block is cut along the wood grain (unlike other wood technique that will be treated in other posts) then is covered with ink by rolling over the surface with an ink-covered roller, leaving ink only upon the flat surface.
- ▶ Multiple colors can be printed using a different block for each color (as different layers) or by using the reduction technique.

Woodcut is a relief printmaking technique

- ▶ The art of carving the woodcut can be called “xylography”, but this is rarely used in English for images alone, although that (and “xylographic”) are used in connection with block books, which are small books containing text and images in the same block.
- ▶ They became popular in Europe during the latter half of the 15th century.



Division of roles in woodcut

- ▶ In both Europe and the Far East, traditionally the artist only designed the woodcut, and the block-carving was left to specialist craftsmen, called block-cutters, some of whom became well-known in their own right.
- ▶ This is why woodcuts are sometimes described by museums or books as “designed by” rather than “by” an artist. The division of labor had the advantage that a trained artist could adapt to the medium relatively easily, without needing to learn the use of woodworking tools.
- ▶ There were various methods of transferring the artist’s drawn design onto the block for the cutter to follow. Either the drawing would be made directly onto the block (often whitened first), or a drawing on paper was glued to the block. Either way, the artist’s drawing was destroyed during the cutting process.

One technique, several ways to print

- ▶ Compared to intaglio techniques like etching and engraving, in this technique, only low pressure is required to print. As a relief method, it is only necessary to ink the block and bring it into a firm and even contact with the paper or cloth to achieve an acceptable print.
- ▶ There are three methods of printing to consider:
 - ▶ Stamping
 - ▶ Rubbing
 - ▶ Printing in a press



And now ... a little bit of history!

- ▶ Woodcut originated in China as a method of printing on textiles. The earliest woodblock printed fragments to survive are from the Han dynasty (before 220).
- ▶ In the 13th century, the Chinese technique of block printing was transmitted to Europe and paper arrived with it, being manufactured in Italy by the end of the thirteenth century, and in Burgundy and Germany by the end of the fourteenth.
- ▶ In Europe, woodcut is the oldest technique used for print. One of the more ancient woodcuts on paper that can be seen today is The Fire Madonna in the Cathedral of Forlì, in Italy.
- ▶ The explosion of sales of cheap woodcuts in the middle of the century led to a fall in standards (popular prints) and Michael Wolgemut was very important making German woodcuts more sophisticated from about 1475.

And now ... a little bit of history!

- ▶ Erhard Reuwich was the first to use cross-hatching (far harder to do than engraving or etching). Both of them produced mainly book-illustrations, as did various Italian artists who were also raising standards during the same period. At the end of the century, [Albrecht Dürer](#) brought the Western woodcut to a level that has never been surpassed.
- ▶ As woodcut can be easily printed together with a movable type (both are relief-printed), it was the main medium for book illustrations until the late sixteenth century.
- ▶ The first woodcut book illustration dates to about 1461, only a few years after the beginning of printing with movable type, printed by Albrecht Pfister in Bamberg.
- ▶ The woodcut was used less often for individual fine-art prints from about 1550 until the late nineteenth century when interest revived. It remained important for popular prints until the nineteenth century in most of Europe, and later in some places.
- ▶ Woodblock printing in Japan is called moku-hanga and was introduced in the seventeenth century for both books and art. The popular “floating world” genre of ukiyo-e originated in the second half of the seventeenth century, with prints in monochrome or two colors (sometimes these were hand-colored after printing).
- ▶ Later on, prints with many colors were developed and Japanese woodcut became a major art form and it continued to develop through to the twentieth century.

And now ... a little bit of history!

- ▶ In the 1860s, just as the Japanese themselves were becoming aware of Western art in general, Japanese prints began to reach Europe in considerable numbers, and became very fashionable, especially in France.
- ▶ They had a great influence on many artists and in 1872 as Jules Claretie dubbed the trend “Le Japonisme”.
- ▶ Though the Japanese influence was reflected in many artistic media and it leads to a revival of the woodcut in Europe, which had been in danger of extinction as a serious art medium.
- ▶ In Modernism, woodcut came to appeal because it was relatively easy to complete the whole process in a studio with little special equipment

Woodcut today

- ▶ The list of artists who have made woodcuts, from Durer to our own day, is a very long one. A preoccupation in the eighteenth century with the metal plate was followed by a revival in the following century and a subsequent decadence into magazine illustration.
- ▶ With the invention of photography and photo-engraving for reproduction on a mass scale, the woodcut almost ceased to exist. During this low ebb, small groups of artists kept the craft alive until, at the turn of the present century, a new interest burst forth.
- ▶ A technical innovation in the 20th century was when Ernst Ludwig Kirchner developed a process of producing colored woodcut prints using a single block applying different colors to the block with a brush “a la poupee”. We’ll talk about this and other technical innovations in another post.
- ▶ Today, a great tradition in the art of the woodcut is being established around the world and in almost all art schools, museums and galleries, you can find information on the subject.

Thank You