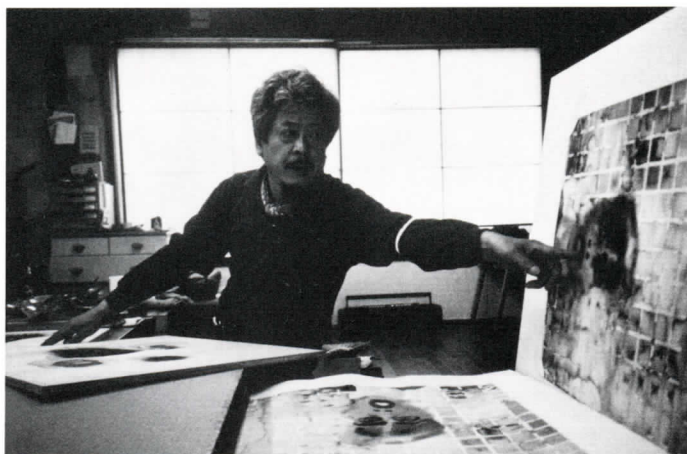


Crown Point Press Woodblock Program

Kyoto,

J A P A N



Japanese style woodblock printing is an ancient art. Introduced into Japan from China in the seventh century, it was originally used for book printing. The Japanese woodblock print flowered during the Edo period (1614-1868) in a style called **ukiyo-e**, meaning "pictures of the floating world." The prominent artists of the day, from Moronobu to Hiroshige, created works expressly for the medium based on everyday scenes. Many of the prints depict the world of courtesans and Kabuki theater, subjects too mundane and daring for traditional academic artists. By the eighteenth century, the style had evolved into a colorful and decorative manifestation of the daily life of the growing merchant class. Ukiyo-e prints were immediately popular in Japan (they were issued in unlimited editions and sold door to door) and, following the opening up of trade between Japan and the West in 1860, were appreciated and collected by Western connoisseurs and artists. Several of the leading French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists—Degas, Van Gogh and Toulouse Lautrec, to cite some of the best-known—were fascinated and influenced by the bold compositions and flattened space typically found in ukiyo-e prints. Hokusai and Hiroshige in turn assimilated many Occidental concepts in their works.

Woodblock is a relief process, that is all areas that are not to be

printed are cut away. In general, a separate block is used for each color. We follow the same method today that was employed in traditional ukiyo-e woodblock printing. First the artist provides the design in the form of a watercolor drawing. The watercolor is traced and the tracing is pasted on a smooth, hardwood slab. Then the professional woodcarver cuts away the portions of the woodblock not to be printed. The printer then applies a thin coat of transparent water-based pigment on the block and lays on it a sheet of handmade paper. He rubs the back of the paper vigorously by hand with a round pad called a baren to transfer the pigment to the paper. No printing press is used. When the printer has arrived at an initial proof of the image, the artist travels to Kyoto to adjust the image. This is the opportunity for the artist to request that blocks be added or subtracted or that colors be altered. The printing of the edition occurs after the artist leaves.

Japanese woodblock printing is highly refined and requires precision and technical expertise. It has always been executed by skilled professional artisans who learn their craft through apprenticeship to a master printer. This distinguishes ukiyo-e woodblock printing from modern woodcut printing such as the type that flourished in Germany during the early part of the twentieth

century. In woodcut prints, artists themselves carve the block in an intentionally crude and direct manner, lending the western-style woodcut its expressive power. For a Japanese woodblock print, on the other hand, it is not unusual for the carver to prepare up to 50 blocks, each one of which might be printed several times before the print is finished. A ukiyo-e-style woodblock print usually has the quality of watercolor painting.

Kathan Brown conceived the idea of inviting contemporary artists to create works using the traditional Japanese woodblock medium. Through our program, artists have been able to nourish their ideas through the challenge of working in a new (to them) process and in so doing have also expanded the range of the ukiyo-e print.

We inaugurated our Japanese woodblock program in 1982 with a print by Pat Steir. Artists who have since participated in the program

include William Brice, Francesco Clemente, Chuck Close, Richard Diebenkorn, Eric Fischl, Helen Frankenthaler, April Gornik, Al Held, Bryan Hunt, Shoichi Ida, Anish Kapoor, Alex Katz, Robert Kushner, Sol LeWitt, Robert Mangold, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Robert Moskowitz, Judy Pfaff, David Salle, José Maria Sicilia, Wayne Thiebaud, David True, and William Wiley.

Our printer, Tadashi Toda, has worked with us from the inception of the project. He is a third-generation ukiyo-e style printer. The woodcarver is Shunzo Matsuda and the coordinator of the project is Hidekatsu Takada, originally from Kyoto and a former etching printer at Crown Point Press.

Constance Lewallen

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Photographs of Tadashi Toda, Kyoto

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