Evolving Traditions

Japanese Prints and their Influence on Western Art

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The Japanese method of printing is much the same as it was when the process was introduced from China in the 8th century as a means to reproduce Buddhist manuscripts. In Japan’s closed society, the printing process evolved over a three centuries into a highly refined form of printing color images. From a simple one color print (sumizuri-e), artisans began to add a single color accent (benizuri-e or aizuri-e). The real revolution was the development of a registration method in which two tabs were carved into the block to align the paper to the carved image. In the 17th century, prints with two or three colors began to appear. At the end of the 18th century, Suzuki Harunobu popularized images using two to three colors, laying the groundwork for following printmakers to develop the craft with new innovations. Schools emerged, teaching the technicalities and artistry of the craft, with each noted artisan adding his own innovations to the wealth of knowledge being taught.

Along with this growth of knowledge came specialization. Craftsmen perfected one aspect of the print process; paper makers became noted for their unique paper, engravers for their accuracy and detail, and printers for their color and subtle handling of the ink. This division of labor became accepted as the norm. As an artist, it was accepted that you did not carve your own blocks or print them. And as government regulations grew, a publisher became the broker between the various specialists and government censors concerned with the reactions of Royalty to the prints.

It is interesting, that just as Japanese art was being so influenced by Western Art, the Ukiyo-e prints became the rage in Paris, the heart of traditional European Art at the time. The attraction was partially the technique but mostly the Eastern design concept. Just as the traditional schools of art in Japan were changing, so too were the classic ateliers of Paris. Arthur Wesley Dow went to Paris to study art in 1892 at the famed ateliers. He was deeply influenced by the Japanese prints to a point he stated he had learned more of design and composition from the prints than he could in a year of study at the atelier. He returned to Boston with a show of his own prints (The Ipswich Series) at the Boston Museum of Fine Art which was received was great acclaim. He later developed his famous school in Massachusetts which influenced a whole new set of American artisans. European artisans influenced by the Japanese prints were Van Gogh, Mary Cassatt, Gaugain, Whistler, and many others.
This break out in both cultures led to new and invigorating work on both sides of the globe. Because printmaking allows an artist multiple avenues of “learned sets of procedures” to use as expressive tools, the more knowledge an artist can gather, the more confidence he has in making a capable and creative statement. Knowledge of cultural, historical and procedural techniques not only allows for confidence with a process, but also gives versatility and adaptability. However, when historical or cultural techniques are applied in part to an artist’s work, an ethical decision is made: is cultural technique to be used only in its pure historic form or does artistic expression allow the selective use of its process elements? Is an artist obligated to answer for the unorthodox combination or use of techniques? Ever since cross-cultural influences have come into play, artists have grappled with the question. While an artist may be very adept at handling multiple mediums, he may be socially inhibited to intermingling them. In my opinion, If we accept the premise that the goal of art is to create a dynamic and motivating image, then it seems that how and when a technique is used should not be an issue.

It was after art school and a US Army stint in Germany that I was introduced to the Japanese print process. I was intrigued as to how they made such wonderful imagery using, what seemed to me, an antiquated, almost primitive process. Western printing is centered around mechanics. The letterpress evolved over the years into an engineering marvel with levers, hydraulics, gauges and more. And here was this process that was all about touch and manual dexterity.

What pushed me into Japanese prints came one summer day when a Denver antique dealer called to say they had some prints I might
like. The last thing I needed was more prints, as I had a drawer full waiting to be framed. The dealer's Japanese collection consisted of furniture, ceramics, carvings, fabrics and, in the corner, a pile of woodblocks in the ugliest mats imaginable. I was reluctant but picked up a few prints and left. But that night, the woodblocks were floating through my dreams so I marched in the next morning with a check for "all the paper" in the collection. The stacks of prints literally filled a table in my studio and became a siren song, pulling me away from deadlines and completing paying tasks. For months, I eagerly anticipated the end of each day, when I let myself pour over these luminous woodblocks, deciphering and learning what all the seals meant and how they were printed. Thank goodness for the Internet and the wealth of knowledge available at a few clicks.

Somebody once introduced me as an expert on Japanese prints, at which I had to laugh. Being thrown into a pit of snakes gives one an appreciation of snakes, but doesn't make one an expert. For me, it's not so much the myriad of facts one can retain, but the understanding of the process. The academics are essential to understanding the process, but the instinctual, intuitive touch is most important on a process that is based on "touch."

The difference between the Shin Hanga and Sosaku Hanga movements illustrates the issue that engages me so to this process. In Sosaku Hanga, the artist is directly engaged with the creation of the artwork throughout the entire process; the design, carving and printing. In Shin Hanga, the artist designs the image and then delegates the remaining work, losing the creative engagement when carving and printing.

Knowing that there will always be one more discovery that will prompt more inquiries, learning is a joy I find in Japanese prints. I know there will always be one more layer of the onion to peal away, revealing some new insight and a skill to perfect.

Leon Loughridge
A Brief History of Japanese Prints

During the Edo period (1603-1868), under the policy of Sakoku, Japan became a closed society, restricting contact and trade with outside countries and societies. A strong middle class, chonin, of merchants and craftsmen developed, as did an economy around that middle class. In that environment, printmaking evolved from Buddhist single-color manuscripts to the highly intricate multi-block prints of the Ukiyo-e period.

**Benizuri-e**

The first illustrative prints were two colors in simplified designs (1720-1750). The first trade prints were calendars given as gifts at year’s end. The printed calendars were more affordable and plentiful than hand-painted calendars.

**Nishiki-e prints**

Printmaking evolved into a wider range of colors throughout the entire sheet. (1760-1790) Suzuki Harunobu straddled both periods with his innovative prints

**Ukiyo-e prints**

From the simple calendar, the process evolved to include numerous color blocks, developing into the Ukiyo-e prints most associated with Japanese printmaking. The introduction of the Kentou registration guide was the innovation that allowed for the detailed registration of the multiple colors in the Ukiyo-e prints.
Periods of Japanese Printmaking

**Edo Period,** 1603 - 1868

Printmaking evolved from manuscripts to the intricate woodblocks of the Ukiyo-e period. Regional woodblocks from Edo (Tokyo) depicted kabuki play scenes of heroism and warriors following the aragoto or energetic style of acting.

Woodblocks from Osaka mimicked the acting style wagoto, or subliminal acting, in their imagery.

**Meiji Period,** 1868 - 1912

Two distinct styles of printing emerged in the late 19th century and flourished in the early 20th century.

*Sosaku Hanga* or “creative prints” promoted the artist’s direct involvement with the printing process with a emphasis on artistic creativity.

The *Shin Hanga* or “new print” movement created imagery to appeal to the Western trade, using the traditional division of labor: the publisher; artist; engraver; and, printer.
A Division of Labor

Japanese printmaking was a collective effort by various master craftsmen.

**The Publisher** (Hanmoto)

The publisher commissioned the artist to create a design. He then contracted with a carver and printer to produce the print. The publisher also applied for the government censor seals required on all trade editions.

**The Artist** (Eshi)

The artist created the design, which was approved by the publisher. A final drawing was provided to the carver and printer with color notes.

**The Carver** (Horishi)

The Carver used the final drawing to create duplicates, which were glued directly to the cherry wood panels as a guide when carved.

**The Printer** (Surishi)

With guidance from the publisher and artist, the printer mixed specific color inks and applied them to the color block, using assorted techniques.

Emil Orlik, Austrian, 1870 - 1932
The Seals

Censor Seals:
During the Edo Period (1603-1868), government controlled the publishing of prints. Prints published for the general public were required to display a censor seal. Those seals, today, can be used to determine the date of printing. The government policy of censor seals ended in 1876.

Publisher Seal:
Each publisher had a distinctive seal. The combination of various seals can determine the authenticity of a print.

A popular print was often reprinted a second and third time by different publishers, with each publisher leaving their distinctive seal and mark on the print.

Other Seals:
Occasionally, the carver or printer would be identified with a kanji character and their seal.

Artist’s Seal:
The artist designed the image and directed, along with the publisher, the coloration. Many artists changed their name and signature after gaining notoriety. Along with receiving fame, the artist also ran the risk of incarceration if the image offended or displeased the royalty.
The Process
Carving the Woodblock

A. The woodblock was traditionally a cherry wood panel. The artist provided a drawing to the engraver, which was transferred onto each block to be carved. Marks at a corner and a side were made on the block for the *kento* guides which were used to register the paper to the block.

B. The engraver would then carve the block, removing areas that would not to be printed. Many master engravers signed the Japanese *Ukiyo-e* prints with their own seal.

C. When completely carved, the raised areas became the printing surface. A great deal of skill was required by the engraver to carve intricate details or script to resemble a fluid brushstroke when printed.
The Process
Printing the Woodblock

D. The printer would work from a color guide provided by the artist to print the image.

The ink for the print was a mixture of organic dyes, modifiers and rice paste. Pigments were introduced by Western traders after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Ink was evenly applied to the raised surfaces of the block with a stiff hair brush.

E. Dampened paper aligned into the kento tabs registered the paper to the carved image.

Paper was made by master craftsmen from the stems of woody bush-like plants. The stems created long fibers, making the paper surprisingly durable.

F. A baren, a circular disk wrapped with a textured bamboo leaf, was used to burnish the back of the paper, transferring the inked relief areas to the paper surface. The texture of the bamboo leaf creates pressure points when the baren is gently rubbed across the back of the paper.
Japanese Prints

Kuniyoshi Utagawa, “Exorcising the Fox Demon”, 1830 (1798 - 1861), Edo Period

Hiroshige Ando, “Village by the Tama River”, 1858 (1797 - 1858), Edo Period

Toyokuni Utagawa, “Kabuki Scene”, 1854 (1786-1864), Edo Period
Hiroshi Yoshida, “Bamboo Woods”, 1912 (1876-1950), Meiji Period


Kawase Hasui, “Cloudy Day, Mizuki Ibaragi”, 1944 (1883 - 1957), Taisho Period
Western Artists Printing in the Japanese Style

Urushibara Mokuchu, “Outside the walls of Avignon”, 1927 (1888–1953)
Design by Frank Brangwyn
English

Hans Frank, “Venice”, ca 1935
Austrian (1884-1948)

Harry Eliott, “Hunting Scene”, 1935
French (1882-1959)
Western Artists Printing in the Japanese Style

A few Western artists printing in the Japanese style.

**Austria:**
- Hans Frank, (1884 - 1948)
- Leo Frank, (1884-1956)
- Emil Orlik, (1870 - 1932)
- Carl Moser (1873 - 1939)
- Bronica Koller-Pinell (1863 - 1934)
- Nora Exner (1879 - 1915)
- Maximillian Kurzweil (1867-1916)
- Carl Anton Reichel (1874 - 1944)

**England**
- Harry Eliott, (1882 - 1959)
- Mabel Royds, (1874–1941)
- Frank Brangwyn, (1867 - 1956)
  / Mokuchu Urushibara, (1888–1953)

**United States:**
- Arthur Wesley Dow, (1857 – 1922)
- Frances Gearhart, (1869 - 1958)
- Norma Bassett Hall, (1889–1957)
- Bertha Lum, (1869 - 1954)
- Helen Hyde, (1868 - 1919)

**Canada:**
- Walter Joseph Phillips, (1884 - 1963)
Thank you to the many folks that have researched and gathered a wealth of knowledge about Japanese prints. The resource they provide is invaluable.

About Japanese prints:

www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/b/benizurie.htm

www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/n/nishikie.htm

study.com/academy/lesson/history-of-woodblock-printing-in-japan.html


www.artelino.com

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www.printsofjapan.com/publishers.htm

Moon Over Gorge
2018, 16” x 7”

References: