



mid america print council

The Mid America Print Council Journal
Volume 23, Numbers 1 & 2, 2015

The Global Print: practice, platform, and international springboard

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Connecting through Printmaking: Mokuhanga and Japan

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When I set out to learn the Japanese water-based woodblock technique, called mokuhanga in Japan, I had no idea how significant the cultural exchange that came with it would be. The simple desire to learn a nontoxic technique that didn't require a press or solvents resulted in a profound change not only in my understanding of Japanese culture but in the way I think about my own work. Learning mokuhanga gave me access to Japan and an idea of its place in Asian history, which changed the way I make woodblocks, and transformed my approach to all the materials I use. It has given me a clearer understanding of the character of pigment, wood, brushes, cutting tools, and a deep respect for handmade paper, which plays a far more significant role in the art of Asia than it does in the West.

I was first attracted to mokuhanga when I learned that it was the printmaking technique used to create the astonishing ukiyo-e prints of Japan's Edo period (1603-1868). When I inquired about the possibility of learning it when I was a graduate student at Hunter College, I was told that it was so specialized that printmakers in the West didn't really understand how it was done. I eventually located a teacher who had studied in Kyoto, New York artist Bill Paden, who provided my first opportunity learn mokuhanga and to see how different it was from any other printmaking technique I was familiar with.

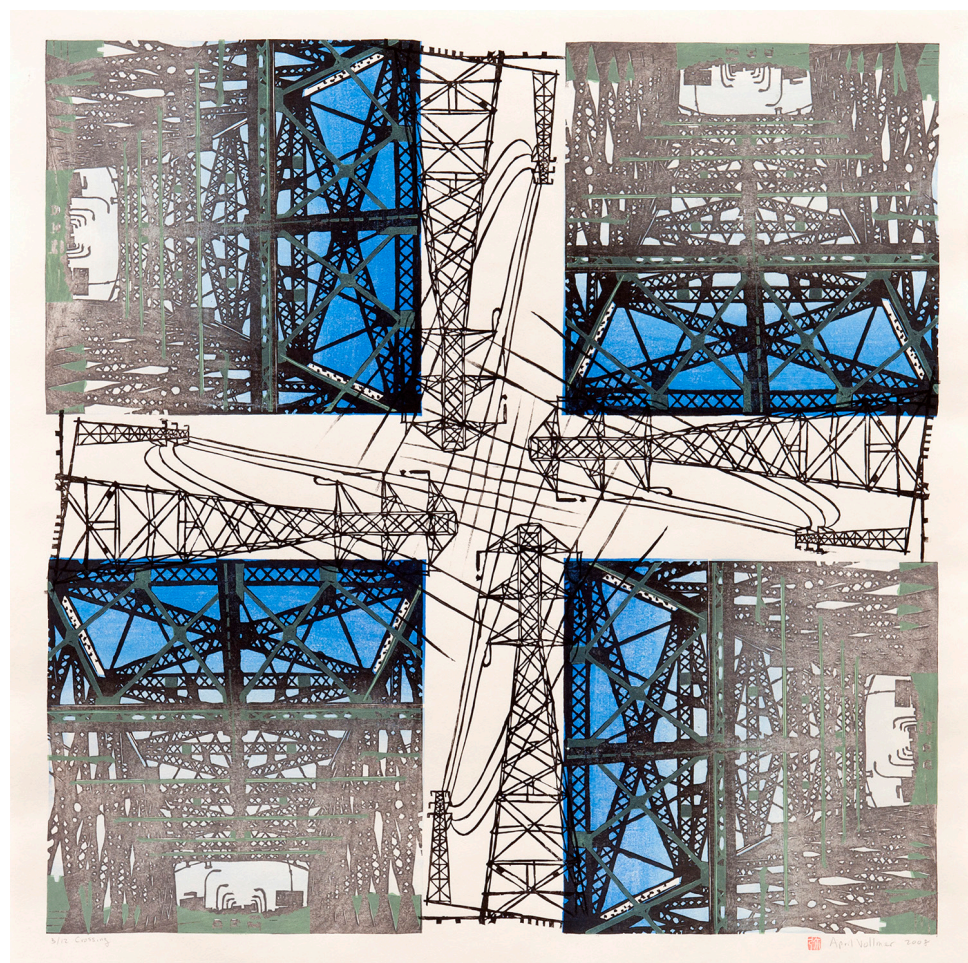
Sometimes I describe the difference between mokuhanga and oil-based woodblock as similar to the difference between a futon and a box-spring bed. It is not just that the technique is different, but the entire approach to the problem comes from another place, conceptually

as well as geographically. I have learned significant lessons about Japan through this printmaking practice, but ultimately such lessons are a way to learn about oneself, to identify cultural presumptions that are taken for granted. More than anything, learning mokuhanga has given me insight into my own underlying assumptions about the importance of making creative prints.

Mokuhanga and Ukiyo-e

Mokuhanga is the traditional printmaking technique of Japan. It evolved from precedents in China and Korea that

traveled across the silk routes to Japan as early as the eighth century, arriving with the technologies of ink and paper, and concepts of government and religion that were gradually incorporated into the culture of Japan. The earliest print project in Japan was the One Million Dharani, completed about 770, small scrolls of Buddhist prayers, printed from a wood or metal matrix, rolled up and placed in miniature wooden stupas. This project was unique, but provided a foundation for the evolution of relief printing, which began in earnest during the Edo period. This was the time when



Crossing, 2008, 26 x 26 inches, mokuhanga on Echizen washi Photo credit: D. James Dee

centralized power moved from the old religious center of Kyoto to the new mercantile capital of Edo under the Tokugawa shoguns. (The city was renamed Tokyo in 1868 during the upheavals of the Meiji Restoration.)

It was the newly created metropolis of Edo, and to a smaller extent the other urban centers of Kyoto, Osaka and Nagasaki, where woodblock developed the technical refinements necessary for producing ukiyo-e prints. Moku means wood and hanga can be translated as printmaking. This is the technique that was used to make all reproductions during the Edo period: books, advertisements, maps as well as the single sheet illustrations that are most familiar in the West. Ukiyo-e, translated as "pictures of the floating world," is a style rather than a technique, and included other decorative arts of the Edo period as well as prints. While the ukiyo-e prints of masters like Hokusai and Hiroshige are inspiring, the system that produced these prints was specific to Edo period Japan. The level of expertise was so high because the prints were made by the collaboration of specialists. Hokusai never cut or printed, he simply drew, all the time, becoming incredibly accomplished because he did nothing else. Print projects were initiated by a publisher, who selected the projects he thought would sell. He paid the artist for the drawings, and then took them to another shop that specialized in cutting blocks; from there he took the blocks to a shop that specialized in printing. Finally the finished prints would go to a sales shop. Each small shop would have a few employees, younger craftsmen learning from the older.

For contemporary artists living in the West, the level of skill of these craftsmen is almost impossible to achieve because such an apprenticeship system does not exist today. Even in Japan, where there are still a few dedicated craft experts, most artists study art along with other subjects in a university setting. The contrast between ukiyo-e prints and contemporary mokuhanga is not only due to the differences between Japan and the West, but between the eighteenth century apprentice system and the twenty-first

century university system. The invention of mechanical reproduction has made commercial hand printing an anachronism. With easier and cheaper ways to mass-produce copies, mokuhanga has been freed from its reproductive role and is seeing a revival as a flexible printmaking technique for creative artists.

Learning from Materials

Mokuhanga has three characteristics that differentiate it from oil-based woodblock. Watercolor rather than oil based inks are used, and applied with stiff horsehair brushes instead of rolled on the surface with a brayer; blocks are printed with a hand-held baren printing tool rather than a press; and the kento registration system of notches cut directly in the block allows easy registration of multiple color blocks.

One of the key lessons of mokuhanga is the importance of sensitivity to materials. Significant in all areas of printmaking, it is essential to successful printing in mokuhanga.

In some ways the technique is simple: without oil-based colors or solvents the cleanup is easy, and there is no heavy mechanical press to maintain. However, countering these areas of ease, the technique demands a nuanced sensitivity to materials.

Japanese cutting tools are carefully crafted of bonded steel and designed specifically for shallow carving. They are used in a particular sequence for accurate carving. It also takes practice to sharpen these tools with the fine-grained waterstones made to maintain the particularly sharp edge of these bonded steel tools.

However, printing is where a developed sense of touch is most essential. Mokuhanga printing is more difficult to master than cutting, and more different from oil-based printing too. The amount of moisture on the block, brushes and paper is critical. Too much moisture will cause the watercolor to bleed into the paper, and too little will prevent it from transferring properly; uneven moisture will cause the paper to buckle. Once the paper and block are damp, color is evenly brushed on the entire surface of the block leaving no dry spots and no puddles. A small amount of

nori (rice paste) is added to help the color print smoothly. The amount varies with each block. In addition to printing nuances like knowing which baren to use and how much pressure to exert for different blocks, there are also special techniques that include animal glue, mica, gold leaf and other materials. Printing is complex, and there is always more to learn.



Cupola, 2011, 26 x 37 inches, digital and mokuhanga on Gozen washi Photo credit: D. James Dee

Handmade Japanese paper, washi, made from kozo, the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, is an important part of the process. It has a smooth front for printing, and a slightly rougher back. An experienced printmaker can tell when it is properly damp for printing. Heavier papers are pre-moistened with more water for a longer time and require a stronger, coarser, baren for printing. Machine-made washi will feel different from handmade washi. Experienced printmakers may be able to discern that paper made from Japanese kozo fiber has greater strength than that made from southeast Asian fiber, where the trees grow more quickly and the fiber is weaker and bulkier.

There is really no way to teach these skills, except to encourage artists more familiar with touching a computer keyboard to turn their attention to the more nuanced sensitivity of their fingertips. It takes time to develop this capacity.

Getting to Japan: Conferences and Residencies

When I studied mokuhanga in the 1990s there was very little awareness of mokuhanga in the United States, though there were a few Japanese craftsmen working here. Because of a lack of experienced teachers, I was able to give classes while I was still learning, and

made connections with several important educators in Japan because of my special interest. I assisted Prof. Tetsuya Noda when he taught at the LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies at Columbia University in 1998, and was invited to participate in a portion of the Nagasawa Art Park mokuhanga training program in Japan in 2004. (Now closed, Mi-Lab Residency is its successor.) This trip to Japan gave me insight into the relation of this printmaking technique with the culture of Japan. I began to see how intimately connected it was with the climate, geography, and history of the country. I visited papermakers and learned that the fine washi used in mokuhanga depends on clear cold water from mountain streams. The cutting tools are made with technology developed for making samurai swords. The shops where ukiyo-e prints were made were part of an urban network of specialists who worked together to make paper, tools, and other supplies that were used in various aspects of making prints for every purpose until mechanical printing displaced mokuhanga in the early twentieth century.

After working at the Nagasawa Art Park Program, I was able to continue my connection with Japan as a board member of the first and second International Mokuhanga Conferences, the first in Kyoto and Awaji and the second in Tokyo. These conferences, held every three years, gave me an opportunity to maintain contact with other artists using mokuhanga, to see master printers at work, and to meet papermakers and tool fabricators.

The huge amount that I absorbed during my visits to Japan convinced me of the significance of this kind of personal experience in truly understanding mokuhanga. It is not just another technique, interchangeable with others, but rooted in a specific time and place. As I learned more about mokuhanga from Japanese artists, educators and craftspeople, I also learned about the culture and history of Japan. I was struck by how different my own experience is even from that of contemporary Japanese artists, much less the artists and craftspeople of the Edo period, who trained as apprentices within

a network of specialists to create the renowned ukiyo-e prints.

In spite of the difficulty of achieving the exquisite control of professional Japanese printers, the flexibility of mokuhanga makes it a worthwhile choice for artist-printmakers seeking a sophisticated water-based technique that offers precise registration, control over color, and the ability to print in a small space without a press. The level of craftsmanship I saw in Japan is beyond what I could ever achieve, but my aims are different, reflecting my own experience as a contemporary artist working in New York. For me, the significance of learning mokuhanga has provided access to a different approach to processes and materials that now permeates all of my creative work. The value of mokuhanga today is that it illuminates established printmaking practices by offering an alternative approach that emphasizes a nuanced sensitivity to materials.



Migrating Gyre #6, 2008, 26 x 26 inches, mokuhanga on Echizen washi Photo credit: D. James Dee



Enlightenment, 2011, 37 x 26 inches, digital and mokuhanga on Gozen washi Photo credit: D. James Dee