

Book Reviews

Japanese Woodblock Print Workshop: A Modern Guide to the Ancient Art of Mokuhanga

April Vollmer

Watson-Guption, 2015

256 pp, 250 colour illustrations.
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Japanese Woodblock Print Workshop by April Vollmer is a well-timed addition to a fine but small legacy of books interpreting and describing to the English-speaking world the traditional Japanese method of water-based woodblock printing, now more commonly termed mokuhanga. From its first descriptions in English in the late 19th century to Vollmer's book in the second decade of the 21st century, we can see how mokuhanga has repositioned itself in western thinking. Vollmer's achievement is to bring the technique closer to a contemporary understanding, based on her long acquaintance with the craft. While her book reminds us of the historic exoticism of Japanese woodblock prints as art, it encourages us to approach its practice less cautiously now that materials and workshops are much closer to hand outside Japan. Furthermore, a vital part of mokuhanga's burgeoning contemporary acceptance, which Vollmer describes, has been both its adaptable, mostly machine-free, non-toxic process as well as the intriguing interplay of materials in its own matrix and its gentle adaptability to others.

April Vollmer had been studying oil-based woodcut in New York since the early 1980s, but became interested in the 'convenience' (she lives in a small flat) of water-based methods in 1990, later studying for many years with Bill Paden, a Japan-trained printmaker. In 2004, she had an opportunity to join the Nagasawa Art Park programme, a water-based woodblock printmaking residency initiated in 1999 by Keiko Kadota, one of the Japanese dynamos involved in bringing mokuhanga to a far wider audience. Over 12 years, this programme – now finished – introduced mokuhanga to nearly 80 artists from 30 countries. In Nagasawa, Vollmer broadened her knowledge of woodblock printing and she and others

who had been on the programme began to more widely use the term 'mokuhanga' and familiarise it outside Japan. The Nagasawa programme finished in 2011 and morphed into a fresh residency powered by the newly formed Mokuhanga Innovation Laboratory (Mi-Lab).

In many ways, Vollmer's book encapsulates this new spirit of mokuhanga and its widening use in North America, for which Vollmer herself has been a pioneer, mainly through her delivery of workshops across the United States since 1998, and now through her book. Although she says in her foreword that the book's purpose is to introduce the 'basics of mokuhanga for creative artists outside Japan', it is much more than basic and much more than a manual. Significantly, it updates the reader on which craftsmen are still making what tools and materials and where in the 21st century and presents a great deal of research made firsthand in their workshops and studios.

Her research she gives in some detail, but engagingly so: for the book is also her path of discovery. She says, 'Initially, I wanted to learn to print without a press or toxic solvents, but the flexibility of the technique convinced me to begin using it for all my work. Using watercolor and pigment dispersions gave me a clearer understanding of color, and using the handmade Japanese paper ... made me think more deeply about the character of paper in general.' Of Japanese paper (*washi*), she writes in typical detail: it 'is made from the inner bark of deciduous trees. The inner white bark is the phloem of vascular plants and transports nutrients.' This closer understanding of the composition and making of paper – as well as knives, pigments, baren (the handheld printing pad) and wood – allows the reader to use such tools and materials more thoughtfully. As Vollmer says, this 'is more than a how-to book, but also a why book. Its significance is in its discussion of why making things by hand remains relevant today, and how a better understanding of the society and technology of the Edo period illuminates our own time.' In short, Vollmer reflects a 21st-century interest in the materiality of traditional craft, poignant at a time when the march of new technology seems pervasive.

Vollmer's handbook includes many Japanese artists and craftsmen, but it also refers to the use of mokuhanga outside Japan, particularly in the United States. This is mokuhanga's new heartland: where many mokuhanga artists practise and teach, where mokuhanga materials and workshops are most widely available outside Japan, and where mokuhanga achieves considerable respect. Mokuhanga's reception and growth here demonstrates both the historical acceptance of Japanese woodblock prints in the region, as well as the healthy local interest in print.



RE-COVERING THE BAREN

Printers sometimes recommend replacing the takenokawa on a baren before it develops holes in order to protect the valuable shin inside. Some re-cover their baren after a day of printing, regardless of whether it appears damaged. In time, the takenokawa will develop holes or splits from use and have to be re-covered. It will last longer in the hands of an experienced printer, and if it is oiled regularly and the shin rotated inside the cover so that the wear is evenly distributed, but eventually the baren will need a new takenokawa. Re-covering a baren is challenging at first but becomes easier with practice. It is a necessary skill for maintaining a covered baren. As with many other Japanese printing skills, each craftsman has developed an individual approach. The bamboo sheath is a variable natural product, especially sensitive to changes in moisture. To avoid splitting, the takenokawa as well as the wrapped baren should be stored away from light and changes in humidity.

Before printing, the re-covered baren should be rubbed with camellia oil. To make the takenokawa last longer without developing holes, a thin sheet of transparent plastic designed for the purpose can be attached to the printing surface before oiling.

Materials for re-covering a baren include a rag for dampening the takenokawa, a stone for softening it, and a thin, tightly twisted cotton or linen string to wrap around the handle. (Synthetic string is generally too slippery to hold well.)
Photo: Doug Schneider

Photos pages 78–81, Matthew Smolinsky

Doubtless Vollmer's book helps to loosen mokuhanga from its roots in Japan. In an email to me she writes, 'I wanted to talk about what happens outside Japan, and to celebrate the freedom of an approach that is not quite so tied to tradition. I believe it is a thin line to walk since I have so much respect for the technical experts, and yet I see a vitality in prints made by artists who have not [all] visited Japan, and are skilled, but focus on the ideas [of mokuhanga] rather than technical perfection.'



The conviviality of *Japanese Woodblock Print Workshop* is further achieved by its sense of community. Vollmer reiterates, 'collaboration is a natural part of the process of making prints...' and printmaking is a chance 'to meet fellow artists, master printers, educators, craftspeople, suppliers, gallerists, and art historians.' As she confirms and we concur, 'Shared technical information is essential to learning traditional methods as well as exploring new ideas.'

The book includes references to the work of the artists in this community: some Japanese, some not, and some never having been to Japan, but many of whom Vollmer has met on the Nagasawa programme, for example, at workshops (hers and others), or at the first two international mokuhanga conferences (IMC) held in Japan in 2011 and 2014. Vollmer has been closely allied with the IMC, which next convenes in the US state of Hawaii in 2017, its first appearance outside Japan. In addition, Vollmer was able to carry out parts of her research and writing of *Japanese Woodblock Print Workshop* in Tokyo and at Mi-Lab's residency HQ near Mt Fuji. Indeed, much of the book describes investigations in mokuhanga made in connection with Mi-Lab, discoveries which add to the book's approachability. These accounts and the illustrated works by many artists and others in the international mokuhanga community included in her manual provide a lively record of the enduring magnetism of Japanese water-based woodblock printing, its technical flexibility and its new vanguard.

Ralph Kiggell ARE

Images

Page spread showing materials for re-covering the *baren* *Blackout* (2013) by April Vollmer, mokuhanga, 813 x 660 mm. This print shows Vollmer's virtuosity with traditional registration techniques, which are explained in the book