

Japanese Woodblock Printing

BY REBECCA SALTER

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 2002

128 PAGES. PAPERBACK

ISBN: 0824825535

Japanese woodblock prints have long been among the most popular and accessible of art forms, attracting a western audience for more than 150 years, even before Commander Matthew Perry brought his fleet to the Edo harbor in 1853 and, pointing US guns at the unprotected city, forced Japan to sign the Treaty of Friendship and open its borders to outside contact and trade. By that time, woodblock printing arts had been perfected for over 150 years, but while popularly collected, even prized, had been of little value. Yet a western audience, unaccustomed to the unique qualities of line, perspective, and the nuanced natural colors that defined a radical Asian aesthetic, recognized a value both artistic and monetary, that has created a flurry of collecting and, especially today, historical writing on the prints. Well known to many are the names of Suzuki Haronobu, Toshusai Sharaku, Utamaro, Ando Hiroshige, and Katsushika Hokusai, among many others, and some of their most famous individual pieces or series. The desire to learn more about their art seems insatiable, to judge by the regular appearance of books devoted to one or all of them, or to some aspect of their creative genius. Adding to the mix, and feeding further this western fascination, is a small new volume by Rebecca Salter, *Japanese Woodblock Printing*.

But don't ignore the gerund in the title of this manual, for this is not a study of the famous works or their intriguing subjects—the geishas, onagata (female impersonator) actors, festivals, or famous urban and rural locales—but a detailed, and very useful, explication of the how-tos of traditional printing for the modern practitioner. And as such, the author reveals a mastery not only of the style and subtlety of the Japanese print, but also of every aspect of its creation, from the making of the paper, the most expensive and important of the elements comprising good prints, to the tools employed, the colors and their organic or mineral origins, the brushes, the printing tools and, of course, the processes of cutting and printing the wood block, each explained using the proper Japanese terminology.

Salter, a seasoned print artist who teaches in London and has exhibited her work widely, shares her expertise in the techniques employed by the famous past masters of Japan, and offers alternative materials options to modern artists when the availability of materials is limited. For instance, when the *yamazakura*, wild

mountain cherry, wood most frequently employed in Japan, which is now rare, is not available, Salter encourages the use of lime, maple, sycamore, pear, chestnut, American white wood, and even plywood. But she identifies a unique requirement for the wood regardless of the species: that it be cut with the grain, allowing for the flowing lines of traditional prints, as opposed to across it as is usual in the West.

One learns of many unique features of the Japanese prints in this book, including the fact that the Japanese use only water-based ink (as opposed to the more common use of oil in the west), that paper is made by repeatedly dipping the deckle (wood framed screen) into the vat of mulberry (*kozo*) pulp, and then rolling it and agitating the surface to fashion a matted, fibrous, and more durable sheet than typically used in the west, or that the popularity of the famous landscape prints of Mount Fuji (1823–31) by Hokusai was due in large measure to his pioneering use of newly imported Prussian Blue from Europe and

China, a more saturated and permanent dye than previous applied blue pigments.

The three most important elements that have contributed to quality in Japanese style woodblock prints are the nature of the *washi*, paper, which was dampened for printing; the development and perfection of the use of *kento*, registration marks; and the employment of the *baren*, or printing pad. Salter provides detailed instructions for making and using a *baren*, including helpful pictures. The bulk of the text is devoted to the methods for transferring the drawing to the block, carving the block and creating the *kento* marks, applying the water-based color, and printing. There is a lot to master here, and Salter offers much encouragement for the individual who wishes to undertake the project from start to finish. (In the time of Utamaro in the late eighteenth century, the process involved four separate masters—a paper maker, an artist to design the image, a carver, a printer—and a publisher to oversee the whole.) She even suggests shortcuts, such as using computers and laser printing to expedite the transfer of image to block for each separate color. The examples she chooses to show the product at its finest, such as *Three Dogs in a Truck* (1999) by American artist Sarah Hauser, display the variety of styles and themes that modern artists have addressed using this old technique. She convinces us that one need not laboriously create slavish copies from either the East or the past, but can use an old method to create contemporary images and designs.

What is the value of learning this method? Salter argues that the traditional techniques and the more primitive and nuanced results are in keeping with the temper of our times: “In an era of environmental consciousness, a printmaking tradition which eschews chemicals in favor of natural materials has a lot to offer.” She perceives value in the struggle with old techniques and materials that provides a new appreciation for the simple, the subtle, and the visually striking.



BOOK REVIEWS

This book is of greatest value for those art instructors engaged in teaching printmaking at the high school or college level, who are eager to learn of and draw from past and foreign styles and emulate their techniques in the classroom. Its clear, step-by-step instructions and illustrations are most helpful for the educator seeking to return to the simple, natural materials and the direct, hand-made quality of the Edo period print arts of Japan. Those teaching the history of art will not find here much that satisfies the desire to comprehend the purpose or iconography underlying famous and beloved woodblock masterpieces; however they will gain a valuable understanding of what the process entailed and learn the correct terminology for the materials and techniques employed. ■

LISA BIXENSTINE SAFFORD, PhD, is a Professor of Art History at Hiram College in Hiram, Ohio. Her area of specialization is nineteenth-century French art, but she has spent the past 11 years learning and teaching about, and traveling, in Asia. She has received seven grants from AACU, ASIANetwork, the Freeman Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Fulbright-Hays Foundation to support her efforts to learn and teach mostly about Japan, and has led students on study tours of Japan twice. Safford spent this summer, however, in India encountering the roots of many of the artistic traditions of Asia.

The Korean War

An Encyclopedia

EDITED BY STANLEY SANDLER

GARLAND PUBLISHING, INC., NEW YORK AND LONDON, 1995

416 PAGES. HARDCOVER

ISBN: 0-8240-4445-2

Ever want to know all about M*A*S*H* units—for real, not just on TV's famed series M*A*S*H*? Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals provided emergency medical surgery: after initial treatment, wounded personnel could be picked up by a Medevac chopper and flown to the interior for additional treatment. M*A*S*H* units were important during the Korean War, treating those whose brain and spinal cord damage



required neurosurgical care. "The M*A*S*H* moved like birds in a windstorm, settling down only to flee again. In the operating room, plasma froze, lights winked out as generator fuel lines clogged with ice, and surgeons worked by flashlight, the bodies of the wounded steaming as surgical knives cut them open." Clearly, *The Korean War* is more than a dry encyclopedia. It contains the best accurate information available in a single volume on the causes, the events, the people, the places, and the hardships of war.

Stanley Sandler, affiliated with the Directorate of History and Museums, US Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, has edited the most valuable resource for teachers and professors on the topic of the Korean War, which lasted from June 25, 1950, to July 27, 1953. Connected to Special Operations, Sandler "knows of what he speaks" in this volume. It begins with a General Introduction explaining the history of the Korean War, and a Chronology of Korean History dating from 2,000 BCE through April 26, 1954, the Opening of the fifth Geneva conference on the reunification of Korea. These are followed by a Map Series using maps from of the Office of the Chief of Military History, Washington, DC, and articles written by well-credentialed authors beginning with the topic of Dean Acheson and ending with the X Corps that led the amphibious assault on Inchon in 1950.

All of the "heroes" (and some protagonists) are included in well-researched biographies. That of General Omar N. Bradley (1893–1981) explains how the US and the UN became involved in the Korean War and how the war started. Bradley served as the first



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