

# The Process of Making a Woodblock Print

In the Edo period (1603–1868) and the Meiji era (1868–1912), the process of most commercial woodblock printing began with a publisher, or *hanmoto* (literally, “origin of the block”). The *hanmoto* was responsible for the financial backing of the project and sold the finished works in a store they owned. A *hanmoto* usually began by identifying a subject they thought would be commercially successful, such as a new play or a popular novel, and then commissioned a suitable artist to produce a design or a series of designs on that subject. To execute the design, the *hanmoto* also commissioned woodblock carvers and printers who usually worked separately from the artist in specialist studios. The *hanmoto* operated as an artistic director throughout the process, coordinating the efforts of all the different specialists.

The artist produces a series of sketches on thin mulberry paper, reworking the composition until they are satisfied with the design. The final composition of neat, black lines is known as a *hanshita-e* (block-ready drawing). The *hanshita-e* is passed to the block carver (*horishi*) and is pasted face down onto a block of cherry wood using *nori* rice paste. A cloth soaked in camelia oil is rubbed on the back of the paper to make it translucent and to expose the ink lines of the drawing. If the paper is especially thick, the paper fibers are dampened with water and the upper layer rolled away in clumps for the same effect. The carver uses these lines as a guide and carves away the surrounding wood so the design remains as raised lines. A sharp, flat chisel is used to carve close to the line, while a mallet and chisels with larger, curved blades are used to remove the surrounding wood (figs. 1 and 2). The design now on the block is a mirror image of both the original drawing and the final print. This woodblock with the carved outlines of the design is known as the keyblock.

A printer takes the keyblock and places it on a slanted desk (fig. 3), with the carved surface of the woodblock facing up and toward them. The printer will usually wet the blocks with a wide brush to prevent the pigments from drying out. A smaller brush called a *hakobi* is used to transfer ink to the raised outlines of the design—usually the carbon black ink *sumi*, which is then spread using a wide brush with short bristles (figs. 4 and 5). A thick piece of mulberry paper is placed on top and set into registration marks known as *kentō* to ensure the design is printed in the same place on each sheet of paper (fig. 6).

The paper is rubbed from the back with a type of printing pad known as a *baren* (figs. 7 and 8). Many printers make their own *baren*, which is formed from a lacquer disc and a coil of bamboo to provide a durable surface. The coil is then covered with a bamboo leaf, which ensures the roughness of the coil does not damage the paper and spreads the pressure evenly across the surface of the pad.



Figs. 1 and 2 Mallet and chisel



Figs. 3 and 4 Slanted desk and brushes



Figs. 5 and 6 Ink is spread and paper is placed



**Figs. 7 and 8** A *baren* is used to rub the paper from the back



The resulting printed sheet showing the outlines of the design is then used by the block carver to determine the additional blocks that need to be carved to produce the colored areas in the design (fig. 9). The number of blocks needed and the areas in which they are carved are guided by economical decisions, and woodblocks are usually carved on both sides to maximize the use of resources. Lighter colors are usually printed before darker colors.

To print the color blocks, pigment is applied with a small brush directly to the block on the area that will be printed with that color. Then the pigment is spread using a wide brush with short, stiff bristles. *Nori* rice paste is often added to the color to alter the consistency and make it easier to control its distribution (fig. 10). Japanese woodblock prints can achieve remarkable color alignment across the different blocks since *kentō*, which are used to guide the paper into the perfect position, are carved in the same place on every block (fig. 11). Brushes are used to spread the color, and then the paper is fitted into the registration marks. This process is repeated until all the colors have been printed (fig. 12).



**Figs. 9 and 10** Outline and paste



**Figs. 11 and 12** Block alignment and process continued

