

Crown Point Press Woodblock Program

The People's Republic of

CHINA



Fong Jiu Da at Tao Hua Wu, Suzhou

Watercolor woodblock printing was practiced in China as early as 600 A.D. Initially used to print Buddhist scriptures—then later paper money, playing cards, books, and art—this printing technique was the precursor to the ukiyo-e style that evolved in Japan. Woodblock printing was invented in China, as was moveable type, which was first made from baked clay and preceded Gutenberg's experiments in Europe by 400 years. The Chinese language, however, employs thousands of ideographic characters so hand-carving wood blocks was more effective in China than using moveable type. The essential materials of printing—paper and ink—originated in China over two thousand years ago. In Marco Polo's day, important art and printing centers were established in the cities of Hangzhou (then the capital of China) and Suzhou. Today, printing workshops throughout China print New Year commemorations, calligraphy and decorative arts, as well as reproduce ancient paintings, screens and scrolls. Called **douban** (assembled blocks) or **muban shuiyin** (woodblock water print), the woodblock printing technique remains virtually unchanged since China's golden age of printing during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), when art and literature flourished.

For Crown Point's woodblock program an artist creates a maquette

by working on silk with watercolor, the same materials that the printer will use to make the final print. The maquette is sent to China where a person called a transformer reconstructs the image for the woodcarver by tracing it, separating the image into different sections and colors. Woodblock printing is a relief process in which areas of the image that are not to be printed are cut away on the blocks. In China, many small blocks, each corresponding to different areas of color, are used to create a single print. This differs from the Japanese method where large, full-sized blocks are used. In the Chinese technique, the blocks are cut in a variety of sizes and the quantity used to make a single image varies from one to over a hundred. The blocks are carved from pearwood or boxwood, fine-grained surfaces that have a smooth and even texture with various degrees of hardness for different printing purposes.

The ink the printer uses—composed of earth pigments that are mixed with water, hide glue and tree resin—is made liquid by grinding the pigment in an inkstone before transferring it to porcelain bowls. The ink, which resembles transparent watercolor, is distinct because of its permanence and luminosity on the silk. The blocks are inked with round brushes made from bear or deer hair; often the pigment is made to run or is wiped away to achieve



Chang Jin Shen at Rongbaozhai, Beijing

different effects, or is built up to create gradations of color. Sheets of silk, pre-mounted on thin *Xuan zhi* (a soft paper made from bamboo and mulberry bark) are held at one end by a clamp for registration, and placed over the inked blocks one by one by the printer who transfers the ink by applying pressure to the back of the silk with a flat palm-fiber brush. Certain colors are printed and then dried, while others are kept wet during printing. After an initial proof is pulled, the artist travels to the studio to view the print and make alterations. At this stage, when artist and printer meet, the artist is able to communicate the essence or spirit of the work through an interpreter. The prints are editioned after the artist leaves and when the finished prints arrive in San Francisco, they are mounted with wheat starch paste in the traditional Chinese fashion onto European backing paper.

Crown Point Press began its program in China in 1987, when Kathan Brown first visited Beijing. Our goal is to enable artists to work in an unfamiliar medium and, through the experience, to gain new perspectives toward their work. The

Chinese ideogram for the word "art" is a combination of two characters, one meaning "beauty," and the other "skill." By combining traditional woodblock methods with the ideas of western artists, we hope to foster new aesthetics and further the practice of an ancient technique.

A print by Francesco Clemente was the first work completed through our program in China. Robert Bechtle, Robert Kushner, Li Lin Lee, Tom Marioni, Janis Provisor, and Pat Steir have since participated in the program. Crown Point Press has worked with printers at the Rongbaozhai studio in Beijing, the Duoyunxuan workshop in Shanghai and the Tao Hua Wu studio in Suzhou. We have also worked with printer Cai Yan in Hangzhou. Professor Yang Yonghua of Hangzhou is our interpreter and coordinator in China. Brian Shure, an etching printer in our San Francisco studio, is project coordinator and moulder.

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