

The Woodcut: Meaning and Mission

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When the German critic Hartlaub wrote, “In the beginning was the woodcut” he was simply expressing the fact of the primacy of the oldest of the graphic forms. Developing as early as the 9th century in the Far East the woodcut did not establish itself in Europe until the beginning of the 15th century, a full 25 years before the advent of engraving on metal plates. Indeed, the woodcut stood at the beginning and inspired future graphic processes.

Why wood? Inexpensive, readily available and inviting as a substance to be cut, it was the common material of every Middle Age and Renaissance carpentry shop. The humble origin of the board gave rise to the perceived humility of the woodcut process. What began as unsophisticated craft quickly blossomed into a major art form and one with sufficient power to challenge church doctrines and make governments nervous. The board was of proper thickness to be locked onto the press bed with typeface, and its message was one which spoke to all levels of society.

Called the democratic medium because of its affordability and the freedom offered the artist to work independently of patronage and church pressures, and growing from middle age guild traditions, it matured through such anonymous practitioners as the Master of the Playing Cards, the Housebook Master and that especially gifted artist who signed his works simply: E.S. A technical and conceptual apex was reached in the remarkably unique works of Albrecht Durer and his contemporaries who built upon the pioneering efforts of the anonymous masters.

Spurred on by two diverse needs: carved blocks to be used in fabric design and the creation of small devotional papers, the woodcut quickly moved beyond a dependency upon other art traditions and developed its own voice as a unique instrument of individual vision and dedication to cause. Hans Holbein produced powerful graphic statements in support of Martin Luther, which necessitated a clerical response cut appropriately from wood.

A remarkable characteristic of the woodcut is its ongoing flexibility and capacity for technical change from Renaissance procedures of drawing and cutting to the innovative experiments of Paul Gauguin and Eduard Munch who spawned generations of adventurous designers and cutters.

Albrecht Durer had quickly assimilated and combined two diverse linear systems prevalent in the works of the anonymous masters and of his teacher, Michael Wolgemut: the decorative contour line acting as a boundary definition for all subjects and serving as a guide for the hand colorer, and the optical line, thinner and more mechanical, meant to reveal such inner detail as anatomical description and the folds in clothing. Durer joined these seemingly diverse systems into an expressive and dynamic drawing style in which

line followed form in a delicate interweaving. Durer's vision of the world was dynamic and decidedly linear.

Durer painted his pearwood blocks white to resemble a pristine surface and then delivered a crisp and precise pen drawing as an exact guide to the formschneider or cutter. The wood was interesting to Durer only as a pliant vehicle capable of delivering the impact of the drawing. Durer interpreted the world as an extremely complex linear system rendering form, space and light as undulating line.

Late in his career Durer was directed by the Emperor Maximilian toward two giant woodcut projects: The Triumphal Arch and The Triumphal Procession. A group project necessitating many blocks, these prints sought to rival or outdo the scale and complexity of paintings. Fundamental to the development of such grandiose projects was a massive aerial view of Venice, 3 meters long, and designed on 6 separate blocks by Jacopo de Barbari. Barbari spawned an entire generation of mural sized woodcuts.

Titian made major contributions to the muralistic print. His Red Sea, the largest of his designs, including architecture, multiple human figures, landscape and vast panoramas of sky and sea was printed from 12 blocks. Titian's drawing, so freely expressive and obviously confusing to his cutters, seems more in keeping with contemporary modes than the more precise processes of Durer's circle. Titian did much to push the woodcut in the direction of modern conceptions and freedom.

These works, both by Durer and Titian, thrilling in their monumental sweep and fidelity to subject, are obviously inspiring to contemporary print designers such as Orit Hofshi. The concept of combining boards to express a broad cinematic scope appears to be a direct response to the Titian practice. Such bravado challenges the standard usage of materials as well as of studio scale. Its purpose is to overwhelm by enveloping the viewer in the unexpected and by suggesting the inclusive sweep of a map.

In France, in the middle of the 19th century, two major influences were made manifest in the neglected field of the graphic arts: a birth of interest in primitive or tribal art and the discovery of Japanese prints. The Exhibition Universale hosted the first major exhibition of Japanese prints in Paris in 1867. Another exhibition was held in 1885.

Called "the Incunabula" of the woodcut, Paul Gauguin found hope for the revitalization of French art in the instinctive work of primitive cultures. He enjoyed and employed the word "savage" to condense his delight in the concept of tribal cultures uncontaminated by the west. As well, Gauguin was an avid collector of Japanese prints whose curious perspectives, flattened space and unexpected diagonals furnished visual excitement for French designers. Interested in the effects of the sculpture tool on wood, Gauguin quickly adopted the practice of printing his cutting effects so that the board, itself, became part of the woodcut's message.

To help the public visualize his Tahitian experience, Gauguin equipped his island narrative, Noa Noa, with woodcuts of a highly experimental nature. Using colored

stencils, shifting the paper to create blurred effects, pressing the paper into the boards' inked cavities or partially wiping surface areas before printing, he achieved a remarkable range of expression. In such technical experiment, as well as in allowing the imagery to become suggestive rather than explicit, he helped given birth to the painterly print. In essence, he had created the modern graphic form.

A master of psychological insight, Eduard Munch, who worked in a variety of graphic media, discovered an especially expressive range in the woodcut. Experimenting with color variations given to the same blocks, eliminating and adding steps, adding multiple colors to the same board and cutting his blocks into segments to be inked separately he fostered a concept of near infinite possibility. Munch made notes on his states which represented phases of clarification, with the implication that no statement is necessarily definitive. The woodcut was thus open to mood changes and the gradations of subtle nuance.

One major aspect of the woodcut is the fascination with the board, itself. Munch was the first major artist to exhibit his blocks with the prints, allowing the matrix, the sculptural source, to exist with its offspring, the ink on paper. The Brucke artists, much enamored of Durer and fascinated by process, felt that they had more to learn from observation of his blocks than from the printed matter itself. This tendency has influenced contemporary artists who carve and often paint planal works without a subsequent printing intention, the carved wood viewed as an end in itself.

Orit Hofshi's massive work (9'x 36') exhibited at the Herzliya Museum is a prime example of how the matrix contains a vitality and power of its own, expressing the vigor of gouged wood rather than that of printed paper. Possessing a three dimensional advantage, the boards suggest an independent vigor and fascination. The majestic scale of this work follows the sweeping geography of Titian's so inclusive vision. Size impresses, but cutting with great expertise and such sensitivity given to material, as Orit Hofshi possesses, impresses even more. To work successfully on such scale is demanding of the artist's control, but size alone is vapid without the enrichment of the designers' and cutter's practiced skill.

The Herzliya Museum work instantly revives memories of Orit Hofshi's years at the Pennsylvania Academy. Dedicated to scale, she covered the 4'x8' table tops with her boards, circumnavigating her surface as she drew, cut and printed. At work was an exuberant physicality buoying a voluminous vision. Seeing the woodcut as physical as well as emotional challenge, she enjoyed testing the board's resistance to the sharp gouge plowing its path through the wooden earth. For the woodcutter there is always a consciousness of wood, steel, ink and paper, the hard and the soft, not antithetical but working together.

Orit's drawing and cutting were free, expressive and explorative from the first. Linking her to such great Brucke artists as Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff. As well, she displayed a kinship with contemporary artists of expression and scale as H.A.P.

Grieshaber, A.R. Penck, Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer who's Rhine Series contributes to the woodcut mural with delicately collaged surfaces mounted on canvas.

Leonard Baskin was one of the first American artists who, as early as the 1950's, began creating highly detailed figures of impressive proportion. He helped to rescue the print from its ongoing diminutive scale, one of the reasons why the public failed to take the graphic arts seriously.

The woodcut artist prides him or herself on simplicity of process. A board, a knife, a brayer and ink makes the art form possible. Many artists view hand printing as a religion, as does Orit. The self-reliance of the pressure of the hand releases the artist from dependency upon the mechanics of the press. Cutting on pine boards and printing on Okawara paper Orit is most conscious of the properties of her materials and their relationship. Recalled, is the oriental concept of the five energies:

Wood as fuel gives rise to fire
which creates ash and gives rise to
earth whose mines contain
metal which on the surface of a mirror
attracts dew and so gives rise to
water which in turn nourishes wood.

The gouge's sharp edge, the softer board and the still softer ink and paper need one another to be properly fulfilled.

Important as processes and materials might be, it is concept given to substance which provokes thought and lends power and meaning to works of art. There is a healthy optimism in Orit Hofshi's work, in her love of the grand project, in her all-inclusive, Whitman-esque message. An obvious romantic appeal is expressed by her carved nature dwarfing the human element. Indeed, nature is seen as both its own stage and drama with speaking parts given to the marvelously textured segments of the earth, itself.

Orit's visionary sweep is as broad as that of the great Sung landscapists who spoke of nature's bones giving support to surface atmosphere. Orit's scroll-like range seems capable of limitless expansion, but unlike the Chinese, her eye reveals all with a crystalline clarity. She presents a highly textured and various world to wander in.

If there is a musical element emanating from Orit's work one must think of Mahler's symphony to the earth or of Beethoven's 6th, The Pastorale.

Orit Hofshi confronts the viewer with both challenge and wonder. Her carved world seems somehow bigger and seemingly more infinite than self. Recorded on the earth's ample face are time's indelible traces, a past-recorded rock-by-rock and resistant of time's insistent wash. A diminished figurative presence reminds us of earth's enveloping scale and of our own most evident frailty.

The unfolding century's long experience of prints has so enriched our awareness. Graphic works have probed our spiritual depths, cried out for justice and have lent truth of

observation to all areas of subject matter. Prints have made science possible by standardizing understanding and have helped us define ourselves. By their use as illustration, graphic works have given eyes to the world and lessons to the imagination.

Why do we keep returning to prints? For answers, for enlightenment, for visual appeal, for drawing delights, for both cosmic truths and humble satisfactions.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner wrote of what he called “the mysterious attraction of prints”, a phrase which attempts to explain the graphic work’s ongoing power and appeal. Fritz Eichenberg, whose own graphic range spanned both religion and social philosophy, demanded the highest possible calling of the woodcut. He wrote that he wanted the woodcut...

“...to become again a messenger of spiritual forces, to help again to enlighten the masses and heal the wounds the world inflicts on them. The artist of today must go out and live among his people. He must, in order to diagnose its ailments and find a cure for them. He must be a prophet, a preacher, and a physician... he must find a philosophy that will support him, a faith that will be the driving power of his art”.

In this statement Eichenberg delivers a tall order to both print and printmaker. But one which graphic works have been meeting. It is a mission which adventurous printmakers like Orit Hofshi will to continue to fulfill.