

# Woodblock Shimbun

Brought to you by the Mokuhankan print shop in Asakusa, Tokyo

All the print news that fits!

Featured print in this issue:

## The Great Wave

Katsushika Hokusai (1760~1849)

Designed: c.1830

Size: 28.5cm x 39.5cm

Carved: David Bull

Edition printers: Shinkichi Numabe,  
Kenichi Kubota

... notes by Dave Bull, owner Mokuhankan

This Mokuhankan edition of the iconic 'Great Wave' image had its origins in the autumn of 2014, being offered to the backers of my Kickstarter campaign "David Bull is building a new shop in Tokyo" ...



The old museum print that served as our 'master copy'



I had set up the campaign when it became apparent during the runup to the opening of our new Asakusa shop that the financial situation was going to be quite tight. I asked for support for our venture, and in return, offered the backers a copy of this print. The initial timetable for delivery was a point some four months after the close of the campaign, but the project turned out to be quite a bit more complicated than I had originally foreseen, and I missed that deadline by a large margin.

This little pamphlet will give you a capsule overview of how the print was made. (For those who would like more than a 'capsule', please have a look at the long series of videos on my YouTube channel that we produced along the way.)

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The initial step when making a reproduction of an old design like this is of course selecting a master copy to guide the work. In the case of this particular image, that turned out to be a much more difficult task than we had anticipated. This was because I was unable to decisively identify an 'original' copy. A number of major museums have high-resolution images of famous old prints in their collection



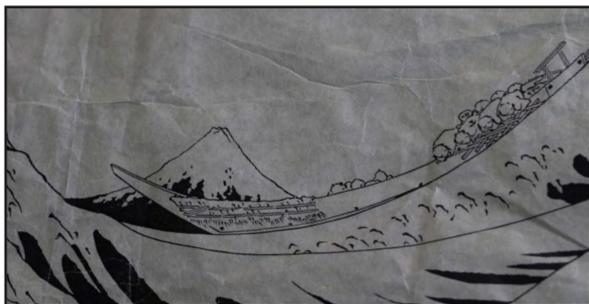
Linework on a very old copy ...



Linework on a typical modern reproduction ...

available for download, but when I closely inspected those available I came across a curious thing - all of the images were of print impressions taken from different block sets.

For people well versed in the antique print trade, this is actually not such a curious thing; they know that over the more than 180 years since this image was first created, many many reproductions have been made.



My tracing of the original ...

These days, it is easy to tell the difference between a reproduction and an early copy - the paper is of course different, as are the pigments - but when the reproduction (forgery?) dates back to Hokusai's time, it becomes next to impossible to tell things apart. This print was clearly a popular item right back in its own day, and once the foreigners began to clamour for copies of it, many publishers (those honest, and those less so) stepped in to fill the demand.

After much investigation and comparison, I settled on a particular copy that was clean and clear enough to allow good reproduction, and I began the long job of preparing the key block tracing - the necessary step before carving can begin. I did this by importing the image into Photoshop, and - working at a very high magnification - tracing over each and every line of the image, trying to catch the 'taste' of the lines left by the old carver so many years ago. Once this was done, I printed it out on extremely thin

*gampi* paper, and began to prepare for carving.

As viewers of the video series know, I ran into trouble at this stage. The first piece of wood I selected - which I thought was strong and hard enough - turned out to be not so suitable, and after a couple of days work, I abandoned it. I had no new wood that seemed suitable at all, so I dug into my warehouse of finished block sets, and selected a block that I had carved over 25 years ago. At that time, there were still specialist block suppliers in business (they have all since died or closed shop), and this was a very nice piece indeed. It was very dense and hard, and - perfect for our purposes - I had used only one side of it. The reverse side was planed perfectly smooth and flat, just waiting for the touch of my knife!

Carving that key block was a very enjoyable process. Working on such a dense piece of wood reminded me just how far our 'standards' have fallen in recent years. It's not that there are no trees left because of over-harvesting; the situation is the other way around. It's because there are so few publishers/carvers left that the supply chain has become broken. With little to no demand for good wood, the suppliers have all disappeared, and all that is left in the market is wood destined for furniture making, etc., and which is not selected for print-making.





I should mention that there was one other step I took before beginning to carve. I cut a hole at one place in the wood - where the cartouche will appear in the design - and inlaid a small section of boxwood there. Even though this cherry block is very hard, I think that the very small lettering inside the cartouche would be the first place to begin to break down after extended printing. By using boxwood at this point, I should greatly extend the lifespan of this block once printing begins.

Once the carving was done I pulled a rough proof and saw that I had been able to reproduce the lines of the key drawing quite accurately. Using that proof as a guide, I went back over the block bit by bit, adjusting lines as necessary, opening up some of the foam areas, and getting ready for the next step, preparing colour block transfers. I did find that my proof sheets were a bit difficult to print smoothly - the fine lines printed easily, but the wider areas of solid blue resisted the colour. This is normal when working with very hard blocks, and is the reason why we typically select a softer wood for colour blocks. "We'll deal with this at printing time," I thought, and moved forward making the colour transfers.

This was a straight-forward process, as this design

only uses a very small number of colour blocks. The main difficulty is in making sure that things are perfectly aligned. The blobs of white foam scattered all over this design are not created with white pigment; it is the white paper showing through that makes the effect, and if the alignment is even slightly off, the effect is spoiled. I prepared the transfers with this in mind, pasted them down, and spent the next couple of weeks cutting the full set of blocks.

This point might be the best place to mention something about the time it took for me to produce this print. For a traditional carver, doing a block set for the Great Wave would be a couple of weeks work (longer, if he had to prepare a detailed drawing for the key block himself.) It actually took me months, just how many



Preparing the colour separation for the sky block ...

富嶽三十六景 神奈川沖  
浪裏

大田南畝画





山崎屋 錦屋 謹啓  
シブルアトメント  
五九七五三



I am embarrassed to admit. My embarrassment is tempered by the fact that these days, I have a rather lot of things on my plate. Foremost among these is of course running the new shop in Asakusa, and given the fact that the Kickstarter campaign was set up for the specific purpose of helping get the shop up and running, this is a kind of poetic justice ...

Once the block set seemed ready, I scheduled a couple of proofing sessions with one of the professional printers who has been working for Mokuhankan for the

past few years. I knew that we would need more than one session, because almost certainly there would be adjustments needed in the block set once we had some proofs in front of us.

And so it turned out; not only were there a number of places where I needed to adjust registration, or open up some of the foam carving, we found one place where I had totally forgotten to cut a necessary area, and one of the boats in the design had a large white gap where there should have been planking! Well, fixing such mistakes is a normal part of the carver's job, so that was easily rectified.



What was not so easily 'fixed' was the problem we had with the key block impressions. As I mentioned above, the fine lines printed very well, but the areas of broader colour simply would not. For most *ukiyo-e* work, this is not a problem, because a typical key block has *only* fine lines; deep colours are reserved for colour blocks. But the wood I selected for this block was so hard, the

printer and I found it very difficult to find a balance between the two competing requirements: working delicately to preserve the fine lines, and pressing vigorously to bring out the deep colour.

By the end of the second proofing day we thought we had worked out a satisfactory compromise. He would first ink the block lightly in some places but more heavily in others, and would then apply his baren similarly, bearing down lightly in some areas, and heavily in the necessary places. I gave him the go-ahead, passed over 100 sheets of our best paper, and he got to work.

It took him the best part of two weeks, but the day arrived when his call finally came to let me know that he had finished the job and was sending the prints over. His voice wasn't all that confident, but I didn't press the issue, and waited for the package. Well, you can perhaps guess what I found - a stack of prints that had more variation than is acceptable. A couple of dozen of them were done very nicely, but the rest were ... perhaps I can say ... 'so-so'.

It was a very complicated situation. By his standards - and he is one of the top printers working here in the field today - all the prints were 'fine' to send out. But when you looked closely at many of them, you could clearly see the struggle that he had gone through to get them done. There were many copies where fine lines had been crushed from too much pressure or too much pigment, and just as many on the other side of the equation where there hadn't been enough pressure to make a good impression on the deepest blue.

And there I sat (this was now early August of 2015), with Kickstarter backers having already waited well over half a year beyond my original promised date of delivery, and I had only a couple of dozen acceptable prints. Was



this Kickstarter project about to fall into that category of 'Failed to Deliver'?

At that point it was clearly time to move on to 'Plan B', although in truth - as those who have followed the entire video series know - we were by this time probably up to 'Plan Z'! The answer was simple in concept - split the key block, leaving the fine lines alone but making another block to print the solid areas. So I dug up another piece of wood, one softer and suitable for solid colour printing, made a new clear transfer from the key block, and began carving. It didn't take all that long, and once I finished I gave it a quick test. It needed many very careful adjustments, because the foam bubbles all had to line up perfectly, but I got it done satisfactorily.

Time for another proofing session, and this time I contacted another of the men who has been doing much of the printing of our Ukiyoe Heroes series. This man (somewhat older than myself) is more of an ukiyo-e specialist than the initial printer I had chosen. With over forty years experience, and having made more copies of the Great Wave during his career than



I've had hot dinners, he seemed like the best choice at this point.

He wasn't so happy about the idea of having a 'doubled' key block, as he thought that it shouldn't be necessary, but once he and I had been through a trial printing session trying to work with just the original key block, he agreed with me that the wood was just too hard to produce good impressions. He would be able to get 'some' good copies, but many would show the same problems as those I had received from the other printer. So we went ahead and tested working with both blocks. This turned out very well indeed, and we got what we needed: nice 'character' in the carved lines depicting the shape of the waves, yet with a good deep blue also present in the other areas. I gave him the go-ahead, along with a stack of paper, and he got to work.

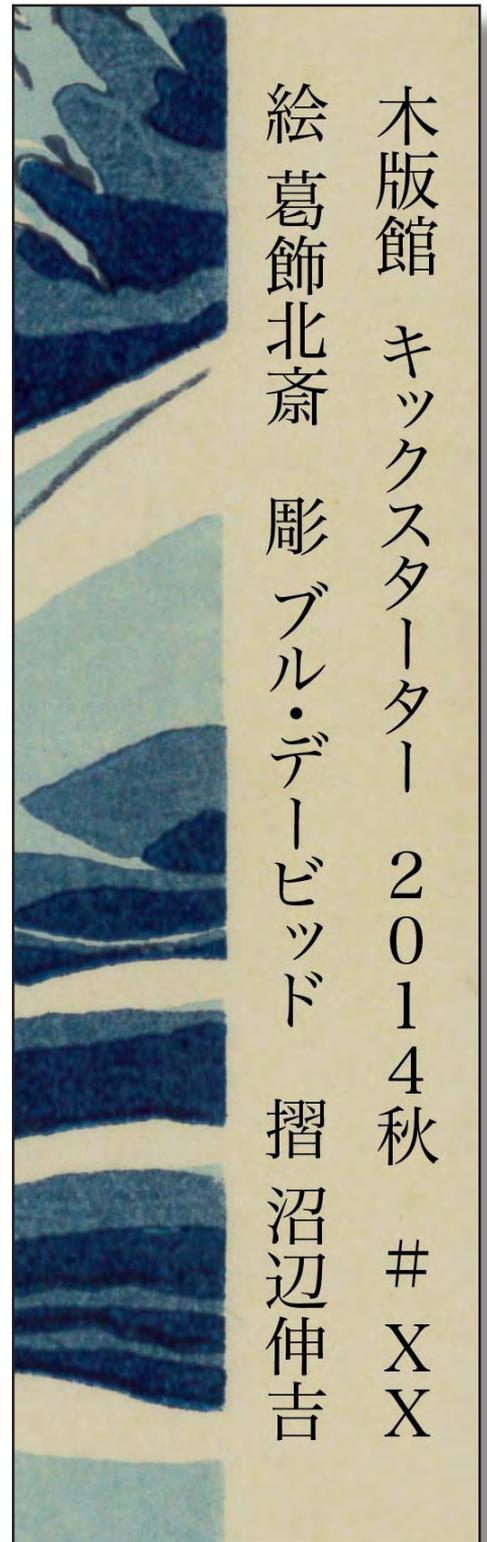
The prints he delivered were very well done, so I then began to prepare everything for the Kickstarter backers. At the time I was planning the campaign it had not been my intention to use any kind of numbers on the prints, but a great many of the backers asked me to do something that would allow them to have a clear record of their participation in the campaign, so I created a plate for embossing some data in the margin of the prints, as shown in this photo. The right column reads: "Mokuhankan Kickstarter Autumn 2014" and this is followed by a number representing the order that people joined the campaign (starting with #2, as we are keeping #1 here for our own archives). The left column will vary from batch to batch, as it reads: "Design - Katsushika Hokusai, Carved - David Bull, Printed - (printer's name).

The sample illustrated here shows **Shinkichi Numabe** as the printer (he did that first batch). The next group were stamped **Kenichi Kubota**, and we went on from there, batch by batch. (At the time I am creating this note, our intention is to have these two men alternate with making batches of this print; other printers may be joining them as we move along ...)

Once the Kickstarter backers all have their prints, we will trim the embossing plate to remove the right column, and all subsequent prints will simply carry the craftsmen's names.

It was quite a journey producing this print, with many ups and downs along the way, but we are pretty happy with the way it turned out. It was very common in the old days for woodblock prints to be carved very well (as the general standard was very high) but printed quite poorly, as they were just slapped out in a quite careless way (not being considered 'high art'). In the 20th century things switched around - the printing began to be done more carefully, because by then people were looking at this as a more important genre of art, but by then the carving techniques had slumped considerably.

We hope we have - to the best extent possible - caught both sides pretty well. Thank you for your interest in our work!



## Mokuhankan

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