

From the 'Classics of Woodblock Printmaking' series of texts

JAPANESE WOOD-BLOCK PRINTING

BY

HIROSHI YOSHIDA



Test Sample

37 pages from various sections of the book

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The book is identical to the original version published by Mr. Yoshida in 1939; nothing has been omitted. As an improvement to that print version, the images of his prints in the Appendix, which were at that time reproduced in greyscale, have here been included in full colour.

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FRONTISPIECE - "CHERRY AND CASTLE"

EDITOR'S PREFACE

(for this edition)

by David Bull

This book is, without any doubt at all, the most useful book ever published on the art of Japanese woodblock printmaking—in any language. That is quite a sweeping statement, but one that I am convinced is true. Here in Japan there are quite literally hundreds of books on woodblock printmaking in print at any given moment, but few of them attempt to cover the topic in as much depth as Mr. Yoshida did, and none of them do so with anything like his experience and authority. As for languages other than Japanese, books fall into two general categories: basic introductions which demonstrate the craft at a crude level of technique, or volumes written by printmakers with more experience, but who had only a superficial knowledge of the techniques as actually practiced in Japan.

Mr. Yoshida was familiar with this situation, and he spared no pains to put together a book that would communicate to the interested reader as much of his accumulated experience as he was able to commit to the printed page. And he was just the man to do it, living and working as he did in *both* worlds—that of the artist, and that of the craftsman.

There is an absolute treasure-house of information in this book, and it will repay a lifetime of study and learning. I myself have been working in this field for more than twenty years, and have accumulated a substantial body of experience, but still find plenty to learn from Mr. Yoshida. In the course of preparing this edition, I had occasion to re-read the entire text closely a number of times, and again was struck by something that I first discovered many years ago—each time one dips into this book, one finds that increased experience leads to better understanding of what he wrote. Things that you *thought* you understood before, come to be

seen in a new way. The phrase “*Now* I see what he is getting at!” is one that will come to mind frequently.

This implies that the relative beginner will *not* understand Mr. Yoshida’s explanations and descriptions, and indeed, this is not a ‘simple’ book, nor is it organized with a simple step-by-step exposition. His woodblock prints (including a few illustrated in the Appendix to this edition) are masterpieces of complexity, and simply cannot be ‘explained’ in words. But he *did* go to great pains to put down the fundamentals of the process as he and his craftsmen practiced it. Whether or not you the reader will develop the ability to create similar masterpieces is something only you will know, but Mr. Yoshida held nothing back from you; he kept no secrets.

He wrote this book in the late 1930’s, a singularly inappropriate time for East-West communication. He himself was a very ‘internationalized’ Japanese, rather unusual for his time, and the conflicts of the mid-twentieth century must have caused him no end of anguish and frustration. The book was unable to receive wide distribution, and to this day, remains a very scarce item. On those infrequent occasions that a copy becomes available, it is inevitably priced as a ‘collector’s item’, well out of reach of the person who simply wishes to learn from Mr. Yoshida’s teachings.

It is thus with great pleasure that I am now re-issuing his book, in the hopes that his original dream—to communicate his love and passion for the Japanese woodblock print to the rest of the world—will finally, fifty years after his death, come to be realized.

Whether this re-publication will lead to the production of new and interesting woodblock prints somewhere in the world, or whether the ‘only’ result will be an increased respect for the author and a wider appreciation and understanding of his prints, remains to be seen. In either case, we come out ahead.

I hope you enjoy this book and find it worthwhile. I am happy to be able to play a part in bringing it back to life again ...

TOKYO, Summer 2006

DAVID BULL

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The art of wood-block colour printing may be said to have enjoyed its finest period during the Edo Period, for it is then that one finds the flowering of this peculiar art of Japan. Again, it may not be in error to state that since the Edo Period there has been a retrogression rather than an advance in this art. We cannot help observing that those artists who have followed the style of wood-block printing developed during the Edo Period have more and more gradually, even from before and through the Meiji and Taisho Eras, fallen short of the achievements of that period. No one can deny that there has been continued copying but with the imitations rather poor comparatively. A renaissance is needed by which the creative art of the present period may bring new vitality and power to the wood-block colour print. Imitation must yield to the new creative power grafted on to the foundations so well laid during the Edo Period.

A study of the wood-block printing of the Edo Period shows great independence, indeed in many cases complete separation, with regard to the artist, the cutter, and the printer. The artist was engaged by the publisher to make the sketch and having been compensated, to a large extent had no further interest in the process. Likewise, in turn, the cutter and then the printer. It is evident that such a process could not but entail a great loss in that, for the production of the finest wood-block colour print, the creative art and vision of the artist is needed not only in the sketch but in the cutting and printing as well. Only in this way can continuity be assured and the vitality and power of the artist shown in full in the final result.

The outstanding need of the art of wood-block printing today is that, upon the foundation so brilliantly laid by the masters of the Edo Period, there be built something distinctive of the present age. At least there should be an ingrafting of modern creative genius upon that foundation and not the rather half-hearted efforts to imi-

tate that which is foreign, as is seemingly being essayed by some modern artists. It is true, of course, that Japan, in her civilization and art, is greatly indebted to other nations, both ancient and modern. Indeed, this is not less true of all other nations, for not one country has within herself the possibilities of the full expression of art, since true art is cosmopolitan and the result therefore of external influences as well as of the inherent vitality and life of the different nations. Yet it is equally true that through such a development a medium is offered for the expression of something which is purely national in the highest and best sense. For instance, while one finds in China the initial beginnings of wood-printing which engaged the interest of Japanese artists, yet these artists, through their added study and development, have evolved a technique and created an art which may be truly said to be Japanese. So while Japan, in her art life as well as in other realms, has been influenced from without, she has gladly accepted this influence, has added to it by her own study and development, has infused into it all the true Japanese spirit and, as a result, Japanese art has assumed a national consciousness of expression and content. This is quite evident in the art of wood-block colour printing.

The foundation of all good wood-block printing rests upon the perfection of drawing and painting, of colour and line. These are truly essential, yet it is also true that the artist must see the end from the beginning. The entire course of the development of the print must be charted by him so that his creative genius may be seen not only in the foundation sketch but in the cutting and printing as well. To do otherwise involves a break in that continued development of the print which demands not only a diligent study and analysis of the colour print of the Edo Period, but also the infusion into it of the new creative features significant of the present time. Only in this way can a print be produced which will do full justice to the present creative vision and power of true Japanese artists.

The author of this book freely acknowledges his indebtedness to others—to which he has added his own study, analysis, investigation, and development. So in return, since he feels that art is

universal and has its message for all peoples, he would, through the medium of this book, make his experience and knowledge available to all who may care to profit by it. There is no narrowing or limitation of art in any sense here, for the author firmly believes that there is much in Japan's contribution to the art culture of the world of which she may well be proud and that—in this contribution—the wood-block colour print holds an enviable place. It is this phase of Japanese art—namely the wood-block colour print—which the author would make possible to all artists, to all art-lovers, to all students and to all critics.

I must on no account omit to acknowledge my deep indebtedness to Dr. Jiro Harada, of the Imperial Household Museum in Tokyo, for writing for me in English in the form presented in this book what I detailed to him in my mother tongue, thus helping me to realize my long-cherished desire to let this peculiarly Japanese art become better known in the West. Thanks are due also to the Sanseido Company Ltd. for undertaking the publication of this book and for taking no end of trouble to give the best possible form to this volume.

TOKYO, January 1939

HIROSHI YOSHIDA

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

At the outset let us consider for a moment the position which Japanese wood-block colour prints occupy among the prints of the world. The etching and wood-block prints of the West are produced primarily by one impression. The former is essentially in one colour, though occasionally a brush is used on the print to create a different tone. The latter also is of one impression, though of late years some artists have come to use several processes in the printing, or to apply colour with the brush to the necessary parts of the print. This last-mentioned method was also practised in Japan in the primitive stage of the art of colour printing, when the printer was unable to manage colour blocks.

We know that the wood-block prints which Branguin came to produce a quarter of a century ago were turned out with the assistance of a Japanese cutter and printer who was in London in 1910 with the Japan-British Exhibition held at Shepherd's Bush, and has remained there ever since. These colour prints, therefore, may be said to be a variation of Japanese prints, based on the Japanese traditional method. Such being the case, it is but natural that this great master artist should be able to express his great power in the drawing in his wood-block colour prints, though his vigour and strength are not so evident in the colour and printing.

On the whole, the etching and wood-block prints of a single impression may be said to prevail in Europe and America. The Japanese artist, on the contrary, in producing wood-block colour prints thinks nothing of repeating the printing scores of times, prints produced by more than one hundred impressions not being very rare. Naturally, great difficulty attends such a process, which

requires a great number of printings to complete a single picture. As one may well suppose, the Japanese process involves endless care, skill and patience. Yet the work is done without much ado, usually leaving but little trace of the great difficulties which had to be surmounted in the making of the print. The prints so produced look as if they had been done with the utmost ease and the simplest technique. The secret of it is based on the technique, the foundation of which had been firmly laid by the artists of the Edo Period (1602-1867). Of course, the subjects dealt with in the prints of the Edo Period were peculiar to that period and highly popular then. The fashion in the style of prints, and the subjects favoured by the artists, change with the times. Yet the technique so highly developed then still serves us as a foundation upon which to build the structures of the present age.

Of course, I am not denying that credit is due to the one colour or one impression print. Far from it. Such has its merits; it shows the artist's power directly expressed. But it also has its shortcomings. Some of the prints of the West with more than one colour possess meritorious qualities, while others do not. There are cases where the colour is excellent, but the drawing leaves much to be desired, and *vice versa*. This unevenness is mainly due to the difficulty of the technique involved. In the Japanese prints, however, both drawing and colour can be nearly perfect on account of the great development attained in the method. It goes without saying that it is not the aim of this book to deal with the one colour process. We shall confine ourselves to the making of the prints which require a great number of blocks and a great number of impressions.

It is well for us to realize at the very beginning that the art of block printing is not easy to master. The wood-blocks themselves, the cutting of them and printing from them, which are indispensable in the making of Japanese colour prints, are a very inconvenient and highly complicated medium with which to deal. Why, then, does this kind of print occupy such an important position in the world of block-printing? It must be on account of the excellence of the prints so produced.

The art of the printing of ideographs existed in Japan more than eleven hundred years ago, as shown by the printed *darani* (Sanskrit, Dharani) charms in Chinese characters contained in the one million stupas made in 770 A. D. at the command of the Empress Shotoku, many of which, both stupa and *darani*, are still preserved. The modern block-printing of drawings in sheet form came into existence some two hundred and fifty years ago, and the use of colour blocks came into vogue about fifty years later.

We all admire the world-renowned works of such masters as Utamaro, Harunobu, Kiyochika, Sharaku and Hiroshige, of the Edo Period. We admire their prints as we do the etchings of Rembrandt and Whistler. They were all great masters and we admire their works, though there was a difference in the mediums they used. In the West prints were made mainly by the use of metal or stone, but in the Far East the artists relied on wood-blocks. It is impossible for us to decide their relative greatness. But this much we may say: what were produced by Rembrandt and Whistler and other great artists of the West may be considered as flowers that bloomed in the art-field of the Occident, while the works of Utamaro, Harunobu, Kiyochika, Sharaku and Hiroshige may be looked upon as flowers that bloomed in the art-field of the Orient. They are both beautiful, and each has its own charm.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE WOOD-BLOCK PRINTING

Before proceeding further let us consider some of the outstanding characteristics of the Japanese wood-block colour prints.

(1) Artistic value that comes from the use of the hands. In producing Japanese prints wood-blocks are used, and these blocks are cut and printed by hand. Of course, not all prints made from blocks cut by hand and printed by hand can be either artistic or good. At the same time it may be conceded that prints made from blocks cut and printed by hand can be more artistic than those that are produced mechanically, or by cutting blocks by hand but printing them by machine.

In producing a lithograph the artist first draws, and his drawing as such may have artistic value. But after the drawing is transferred to the surface of the stone, the printing is mechanically done. Take the case of an engraving; the art of it is in the engraving, the rest being done mechanically. The etching is slightly different. Here the artist does the printing as well as the drawing, but the aid of the chemical action of the acid is evoked. Now, in making Japanese prints, the artist does the work by hand from beginning to end.

(2) The wood-block print shows the artist's true value: his skill as well as his shortcomings, his successes as well as his failures in the work. A line may be bad, but it cannot be concealed in the print as it may be possible to do in the etching. Whatever is cut on the block shows; nothing can be disguised. In this sense it may be said to express the artist most faithfully.

(3) The Japanese print uses many blocks and requires a great many impressions. There is no method in the West which requires nearly as many printings as are called for in the Japanese process, as we shall see later.

(4) Clarity is the life of wood-block printing. To be sure, there are methods known as *ita-bokashi* (where the block is cut down gradually in order to produce a soft edge in printing), in which clearness is sacrificed. This method is called into aid only when absolutely necessary, yet it still remains true that block printing is by its nature essentially based on clear-cut blocks and clean printing.

(5) The print is capable of a deep tone, accompanied by an indescribably exquisite quality in the colour. Beautiful colour full of feeling may be shown in Japanese prints. When a colour is applied on top of the same colour for the second time, as is commonly done, it deepens the tone and when the second impression overlaps on another colour, it produces a different effect.

(6) The superiority of the paper enhances the artistic value of the print. Japanese paper, while retaining enough pigment on the surface, allows much to sink into the paper, penetrating almost to the back, which gives intensity of feeling to the colour and of

power to the print itself. The merit of the Japanese paper used will be evident when Japanese prints are compared with other prints done on paper which does not absorb but holds pigment on the surface. In this connection we may observe that oil painting has a depth of colour because of the thickness of the paint on the surface, while water colour painting is lacking in that depth. The colour in the Japanese woodblock print gives the feeling of depth. This is mainly because the print is as if it had been dyed with good colour, due to the pigment's being absorbed by the paper.

(7) The paper used for Japanese prints has an excellent surface, extremely pleasing to the eye, as well as to the touch. The paper has an inexpressibly pleasing quality. This same quality, so much to be desired, is not possessed by other kinds of paper. Of course, all the pre-eminence given to Japanese prints is not due to the paper alone, but it cannot be denied that the paper does possess unique qualities and that the artist has made wonderful use of this medium by skilfully taking advantage of all its excellent peculiarities.

(8) Wood-blocks add charm to the print. It may be noted that in Japan the face of the plank is used for the printing surface, and not the end of the grain as in blocks for Western engraving. Because of its natural grain, wood may be considered a difficult medium for prints. However, by careful forethought and skill, the grain can be utilized to good effect. By a proper use the wood grain may be made to produce a better tone than a flat, grainless surface, imbuing the print with a deeper feeling than would be otherwise given. Of course, the flat, uniform effect may be obtained by printing from linoleum, but the result is cheap and inartistic. The print so made may be likened to the ordinary coloured pane of glass for a window, which differs radically from the beautiful stained-glass window, the latter being richer by far and artistic beyond comparison.

(9) The colour of Japanese prints improves with time. The print gets better and better as the days pass by. This is unlike other pictorial art which is at its best at the moment when the picture is finished. When the print is finished, while the paper is still wet,

the print looks good. But when the paper dries, the general effect of the print is often disappointing to the artist. However, the colour improves in a few days or in the course of a few months; this is extremely reassuring to the artist. The improvement is not due to any change which may occur in the colour of the paper, or to the fading of certain colours in the print. The improvement is greater with *hōsho* paper than with *torinoko* paper. The improvement is more marked in some colours than in others; especially do *yōkō* (carmine) and indigo show a tendency to clarify, thereby improving the tone.

I have often heard it said that the pigments which produced such beautiful colours in the prints of the Edo Period are no longer obtainable. But I believe this is not true. I have investigated the matter, and am convinced that we have today a greater variety of pigments than the artist of earlier times had at his command. Furthermore, some colours do improve with age, though none of them will require years for such improvement. In trying to find out what was the cause of the improvement, I have tried various experiments: I had some prints hung in the air for greater exposure, others I kept in the basement to keep them moist, and I tried other methods which I do not need to mention here. But they were not especially improved by these experiments. To be sure some improvement was discernible in some prints, but these prints also improved while they were kept in the stack. Finally I came to the conclusion that the cause of improvement was not in the exposure to the air, but in something else. On one occasion I used paper which contained a small amount of pulp. When I had finished printing and the paper was dry, I was greatly disappointed; it was a failure and I ascribed the failure mainly to the existence of pulp in the paper. I thought this stack of prints was not good enough to be shown to the public; so I put it away in a closet, and as a matter of fact, I quite forgot about it. Several months later I happened to see these prints by chance and observed that they were not so bad after all. I was constrained to change my mind finally and decide to send them out to the public. The improvement is more marked when printed on pure Japanese *hōsho*, unmixed with pulp. I dis-

covered that the colour of the prints improved when printed on Japanese paper with water colour pigments, but not with ink.

I have not been able to arrive at any definite conclusion as yet as to the real cause of the improvement, but I hope someone will carry out the Investigation to the end. However, I have made one or two observations in this connection. One is that the paper, which was maltreated or tormented in the repeated printings, in spite of all the care taken, resumes its original condition in time, and the colours seem to improve when the paper returns to its original state. Another is that the gradual disappearance of the sizing, or *dôsa*, either glue or alum or both, from the paper seems to have a favourable effect. I know for a fact that the sizing does disappear in time, for sized paper may be all right for use for a year or so, but after a longer time the paper has to be resized to be in a proper condition for printing, showing that the sizing does disappear. And I know also that when *hôsho* paper comes fresh from the paper-maker, the pleasing feeling which its surface gives is almost irresistible. Equally remarkable is the loss of that pleasing feeling, which one cannot help noticing, when paper comes back after having been sized prior to using it.

In the course of my experiments in printing I tried silk, first mounting it on paper. The colours did not improve as was the case when I used paper. So it was disappointing. In this connection it may be observed that perhaps the usual appreciation of silk as a medium for painting is because of its texture and the pleasant sense it gives to the touch, rather than because of the quality that gives pleasure to the sight. This induces me to believe that the improvement is due mainly to the excellent quality of Japanese paper used.

The water-colour painting is at its best the moment it is finished, and the best one can do is to preserve it in that condition. But it is different with Japanese prints, as we have already observed. The precious element in Japanese wood-block colours, of which the production is so complicated and difficult, seems to be in their improvement with age, while others deteriorate. Secondly, the colours themselves as they appear on the print are pleas-

ing to the eye, even before they are improved. These two aspects have a great deal do with the high appreciation evinced for Japanese wood-block colour prints. The colours from the same pigment bowl look much better when printed than when applied with a brush.

If these prints did not possess any special artistic qualities, painting by hand might be considered better than the prints. However, these prints do have artistic qualities which are peculiar to wood-block work. The number produced should not affect the artistic value of the product; this is determined by the quality, justified by the process involved and the aim attained. Suppose there were one hundred prints made, and these were all destroyed by chance, save one. Of course, then the market value of the single print would be multiplied. But would its artistic value be raised in any way, because all the others had been destroyed? No, the artistic value of that print would not be altered by the external circumstances; it would remain the same whether there were many or few.

We are not concerned so much now with the pictorial value of the print, nor do I care to argue at length the artistic value of the print. What concerns me now is the wood-block colour prints themselves, and how to make them. The kind of pictures to be made will be left to each individual's taste. If an artist likes to follow the style of Hiroshige, he may do so, though his choice does not interest me, for the subjects treated and the manner employed are no longer closely connected with our present life and activity. We no longer have to walk along the Tokaido line, wear sandals, and carry mushroom umbrellas, as pictured in the prints by Hiroshige. But if an artist should be interested in making such a picture, he may do so as far as the subjects are concerned, but he should not attempt to treat them in the spirit of the Edo Period, which has already passed. What we are concerned with in this book is how to make wood-block colour prints of the present day, and good ones at that.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL INFORMATION

PRINT ARTIST

It goes without saying that it is absolutely necessary for a print-artist to be able to draw and paint well. These two qualifications of the ordinary painter—to draw well and be able to use colours—are absolutely necessary. In addition he must be able to analyze, cut the blocks and print.

Not every painter can become a good print-artist. Nor, though good at analysis, cutting, and printing, yet without the ability to draw and paint, can one be an efficient print-artist. Analysis includes as well the ability to compose.

In trying to make a print the artist is often likely to allow his thoughts to wander. Even after all the blocks are made, he may not be sure of himself. Having no definite idea in mind, he is liable to try various colours on the blocks, or paste one colour on the dress of one figure and another colour on that of another, and thus try to get a chance result which will satisfy his artistic yearning. But that is not the right way to work. Such an artist may be likened to the skipper who sails out of a harbour without any fixed destination in mind. The ship proceeds over the sea this way or that, as willed by the wind and tide, and then when he comes in sight of land, the skipper points to it and says that that is his destination. That is absurd.

First of all, the artist when he starts working on a print should have a definite end in view, with explicit ideas in mind as to every detail of the picture he wishes to produce in print. He should have a definite objective, a fixed destination, before starting from the harbour. The method of working, the order of procedure, etc., are

nothing more than the instruments which guide the ship toward the mark in the face of storms and other difficulties.

In the Edo Period, prints were essentially reproductions of paintings. But to-day it is different: they constitute an independent branch of art. Nowadays what we aim at is the production of prints which are independent of imitations or reproductions of painting. In the Edo Period, a picture drawn by an artist was handed over to the cutter, who cut it, and then the blocks so made were handed over to the printer that he might print from them. Under such circumstances, though there was a publisher who managed the affair, it was not possible to get an exact reproduction of the original painting. Therefore the finished work was not exactly a reproduction either. Many failed in the attempt. But therein may be found the true significance of the art. The printing of modern times, however, is an art in itself, the artist using wood-blocks and printing therefrom by hand. It is an independent art just as are water colour and oil painting.

The art of print-making is different from that of ordinary painting. To begin with, the print-artist must be able to cut the wood-blocks. The painter has no such work to do. The print-artist must be able to print from blocks. The painter applies pigments to the surface of the canvas, and the print-artist applies pigments to the surface of the blocks and lets the paper absorb them he transfers the pigment from the blocks to the paper. Here one may find a certain resemblance, though faint, to the work of the painter, but it is fundamentally different.

The outstanding feature of print-making is analysis. The ability to analyze is the most essential part of the print-artist's work. In order to do this well, he must first have a complete picture in his mind, analyze it, and produce the necessary blocks for the colours, etc. Nothing like it is to be found in the painter's work.

In starting to make a print, naturally the subject is to be decided first. The subject to be decided upon depends on the medium to be used. Some subjects are more suitable for oil or water colour, others for etching, and still others for wood-block colour prints.

The etching is usually of one colour; and the subject to be chosen should be decided accordingly. Some of the prints are of one colour only, and this type has been highly developed in Europe. But we are now dealing with the wood-block colour prints of Japan which require many colours. So what we are concerned with is different from the wood-block prints of Europe. It is also different from oil painting, because cutting and printing are also involved in the process.

However, for our present purpose, it is impossible to decide upon any particular subject, for different artists have different requirements. One may think a certain subject highly suitable for a print, while another may differ in his opinion. Thus the art of one person will naturally be different from that of another. Again, one artist may be able to do justice to a certain subject, while this may remain beyond the ability of another.

Regarding colour, its treatment also is different from that of the oil painter's. The artist in oil may be able to get his desired colour effect by repeated applications, working until he obtains the effect which satisfies him. But the print-artist thinks of his finished product the colours of which may not be true to nature, but will be satisfying to his artistic ideals.

ORIGINAL SKETCH (GENGA)

First, a sketch must be made in such a way that it can be worked into a colour print. The artist makes his sketches from nature; one on silk, another on paper; some with oil, others with water colours. But the sketch must be made especially for the print, and not be a mere copy of nature; it must be worked out so as to be suitable for cutting and printing, and for the production of a satisfactory print.

Some artists strive to make the original drawing a finished painting, without taking into consideration that it is to be developed into a print. This method leaves much to be desired; therefore, should not be attempted. Even if tried, the result will be

CHAPTER III

ADVANCED TECHNICAL ELUCIDATION (A)

TOOLS AND MATERIALS

THE STUDIO

We have so far made general observations concerning the necessary steps connected with print-making. These, I hope, have given my readers at least a cursory knowledge of print-making. Now I wish to lead them to my studio and tell them about my work—how I go about it as a print-artist, what materials, pigments and tools I use; how I manage, or try to manage, the complicated intricacies connected with the work. By so doing I hope my readers may be able to get a real insight into the secret of making Japanese woodblock colour prints and secure a working knowledge of this branch of art the development of which has been peculiar to Japan.

WORKING ON THE OUTLINE DRAWING

To prepare the *sen-gaki*, or outline drawing, considerable time and thought are required. I often sit for hours at a stretch in contemplation. This usually occurs at the time when the azalea bloom is toward its end and the cherry trees, having no longer any blossoms, are covered with fresh verdure. The warmth and fragrance in the air tempt one to go out of doors and to ramble about. Naturally I look out of the window, gaze upon the blue sky, the passing clouds, the fresh verdure, etc. But my thoughts are on the prints I am about to start making. Many unfinished drawings will be scattered about in the studio, some on the floor, some on the table,

and some pinned on the walls. This is the time when I dream over them. All sorts of beautiful results seem possible; the wonderful prints which are yet to be made are now visualized. Of course, some subjects seem easy to deal with; others appear hopelessly difficult, though tempting. Some seem very clearly defined; others are obscure in prospect. Some subjects may have taken my fancy for years, yet I may be unable to form a satisfactory drawing, the results so far attained lacking something somewhere. If I push my work in spite of such a feeling of dissatisfaction, failure is certain. That something which is lacking somewhere must be ascertained and supplied before I can go on.

Generally there are one or two drawings which stand out more prominently than others, and which seem to require immediate attention. They seem irresistible. So I begin to work on them.

Sometimes I go out on a trip somewhere into the country and sketch things which interest me greatly. If it happens to rain and this prevents my going out, I occupy myself in the inn in preparing a drawing for the print. Some of these attempts may seem satisfactory, but a further consideration of them is necessary after returning to my studio before I shall be able to complete the basic painting, or original composition from which the *sen-gaki* may be made. Many of the sketches, drawings, and paintings which are scattered about in my studio and to which I have referred above are of this nature.

Often in the evenings, when my mind may be tired, I find delight in returning to the contemplation of these drawings. I ask the opinions of the members of my family; often valuable hints are obtained from them, each from his or her own angle of observation. I have learned to respect these views. I understand that the great master painter Okyo, the founder of the modern realistic school of Japanese painting, often used to ask the opinions of farmers and artisans in order to perfect his art.

Finally I arrive at the stage where I think my original composition is all right. From this I make an outline drawing, having analyzed the picture in terms of colours and thought out all the

necessary colour blocks connected with it. Then, and then only, do I proceed to have the outline drawing cut on the block to make key prints, or *kyôgo*.

There is an inexpressible pleasure in the contemplation of the details in which I often lose myself. There is an endless delight in these dreams, for every dream seems bright and possible of realization. I deal with one subject at a time. Not until the outline drawing of one print is finished and the cutting well on the way, do I start on the next subject.

When I paint, sometimes I am so filled with enthusiasm that I can finish a picture in a day or two. During that time I shall be able to finish it completely so that it will be impossible for me to do any further work on it, not even to add a dot. But that sort of thing is not possible in print-making; it takes a much longer time to complete a print. Even after I have finished the outline drawing, it requires cutting and printing and many blocks have to be made for the colours, and all have to be printed in the proper order to obtain a finished product. It requires a long season of hard labour to get the final print.

Since such complicated and intricate requirements are involved in the process of making a print, it is necessary that there should be something strong and urgent in me to be expressed. There must be something that fills me with ardour; something that impels me to express myself in the prints.

In the Edo Period practically all the *ukiyo-e* print-artists were poor, and had to struggle hard for a livelihood. They received very little for their drawings. Hiroshige seems to have spent in travelling nearly every *sen* he received. By actually being on the spot, associating himself with the subject directly, be it a landscape or otherwise, he was able to prepare himself for the work. When he had gotten himself deeply interested and full of enthusiasm he was able to produce many masterpieces.

WORKSHOP FOR CUTTING

When the *sen-gaki* is to be cut on the block, it is necessary that this enthusiasm should still exist. Cutting is tedious work. It is not done so quickly as the drawing. Every line requires two cuttings: that is, one on either side of it. And each has to be done very carefully, for an error will spoil the whole work. Once an error is committed, it is difficult to correct it. Not only when cutting the lines, but even in the *sarai* (clearing the space between), enthusiasm is highly necessary. The clearing is done with *ai-suki*, and it should be done even like Michelangelo's hammering away the unnecessary parts of the marble when sculpturing. A single wrong hammer stroke might have spoiled the whole work. It is the same with wood cutting. It takes a long time to finish even one block; sometimes many days. And there are many to be cut. And it is natural that the artist should like to see the result of his cutting, by printing it on paper, but he must wait until the end to get the impression. Thus it requires patience, yet his enthusiasm must not slacken until the end of the work.

Moreover, it is not impossible to keep up such enthusiasm that long. When I cut the block for my "Rapids" (1.8 ft. x 2.75 ft.) I was at it for more than a week at a stretch before I finished the cutting. I tried to express the force of the running water, the strength of the gushing river, the rush of the gurgling rapids. In order to obtain that result, I used a *tsuki-bori*, without paying strict attention to the drawing. I cut the block as my enthusiasm moved me, naturally disregarding the lines here and there. But I was so interested in the work that my ardour kept me at it until the end. Though I had to suffer physically for it afterwards, I was pleased with the result shown on the block.

In order to express natural phenomena by the lines in the print, it is necessary to study nature very carefully. To paint a river, one day may be quite sufficient, but in order to make the drawing for the print, two or three days may not be enough. It was only after careful observation that the true insight was revealed to me—the true insight obtained by some old masters who devised the conventional forms of crests of waves, etc., found in the traditional style of Japanese painting. At certain times the crests in the whirls

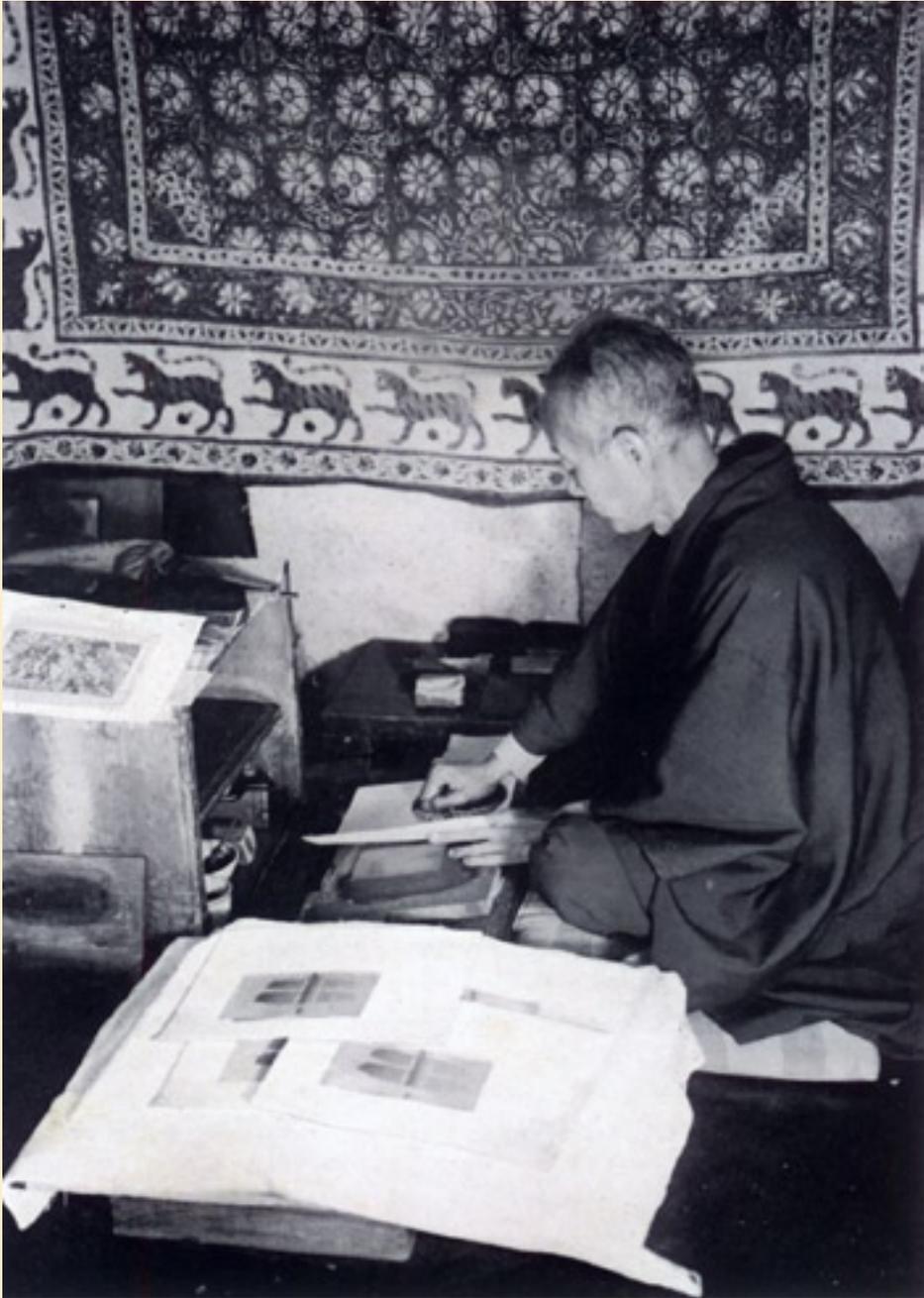


FIGURE 14: THE ARTIST AT WORK

of water look like fern sprouts, which curl and contort in various forms. Such a phenomenon the artist must study carefully before he is able to observe correctly, to draw and to cut.

The workshop where the cutting is done is liable to be far from neat. All sorts of tools will be lying about and the chips that fly from the blocks will be scattered about on the floor. It is impossible for the room to be kept tidy while one is at work.

AT PRINTING STAND

The room in which the printing is done is also likely to be far from neat and tidy. All sorts of things will be scattered about—dozens of pots with pigments, various brushes for the colours, a basin of water, a pot of paste, another of oil, a board with shark skin stretched over it on which to split the hairs of the brushes, a bowl with the pigment which is being used and containing a brush for applying it to the block. There are rags also, these being necessary for moistening and wiping off the pigment from a part of the block for the shading. An assistant may be grinding powder pigment in a mortar, etc.

When the artist sits in front of the low table to begin work, he sits there cross-legged, as shown in the poses assumed by some Buddhistic figures. It is necessary that strength should be put into the lower part of the abdomen. This has long been insisted upon in Japan when one is engaged in some important work, whatever it may be. The attitude of mind must be right: it must be calm and well balanced. Of course, this need is not confined to the print-artist alone. It must be the same when a writer sits at his desk with a pen, or when a painter faces his canvas with a brush, or when a soldier is about to march against the enemy. Yes, the artist's mind then gets tense as if he were on the battlefield. Here indeed a battle must be fought in order to vanquish all difficulties and reach the realization of the ideal! While at work, the artist's mind must be kept intensely alert; every moment requires his closest attention. If this is not given, his work will be a failure. If a blot appears on one print unnoticed, then it is likely to be on every one of the

is lifted by holding its upper edge. The cut of the block determines the manner of lifting the print.

If one is unable to manage the handling of the print with one hand, he may remove the print with both hands. But this is not advisable and the artist should train himself not to use both hands for the right hand has other work to do while the left is engaged in removing the paper from the block.

The print when taken off the block may be placed on the stand sidewise or upside down, or sometimes every other print is placed upside down in order to equalize moisture in the paper. In whatever position it may be found, the artist should be able to judge the result of his work.

The work should proceed with uniform continuity. When the work begins on the second sheet and proceeds to the third and fourth, the intervals allowed between each impression should be the same. When the pile is finished, the prints should be kept in order and placed on the shelf face down as before.

In the course of printing, sometimes it becomes necessary to change the position of the register marks as we have already observed. But this should not take too much time. If it does, the prints should be covered up to prevent them from drying.

USE OF BAREN AND BRUSH

(1) The *Baren*. The origin of the name *baren* is not clear, as I have already stated in the previous chapter where I stressed the importance of this peculiar printing pad. As I have described the *baren* fully elsewhere, suffice it to reiterate here that it is the soul of the printer.

Without going into details, let me remind my readers that the *baren* consists of three parts: the coil or disk of cord technically known as *baren*; the *ategawa* made by pasting many sheets of paper one on top of another, and the *kawa*, or bamboo-sheath with which the *ategawa* containing the *baren* is wrapped. It should be

remembered that since the fibre of the bamboo-sheath with which the cord is made is stiff, the cord is by no means smooth; and has numerous projections. These corners or projections on the cord do useful work in printing. The *baren* gives a stronger pressure on the paper to be printed because of these projections, which serve to push the colour through the paper. The paper must be flexible enough to resume its former flatness even after being pressed. The *baren* becomes coarser—the corners or projections become more pronounced—as the strand used in the cord is increased. The four-strand cord is made by doubling the ordinary cord of two strands. By doubling the four-strand cord, an eight-strand cord is obtained; and by doubling that a sixteen-strand cord is obtained which is very much coarser than the four-strand cord.

The *baren* with a four-strand cord is commonly used for the outline block; and usually a worn-out one at that. Or one made of paper cord, instead of bamboo-sheath cord is used. The most commonly used *baren* for colour blocks are the ones with eight strands.

A part of the bamboo-sheath cover is used to make a handle for the *baren*. This handle is held by four fingers, and in pressing it against the paper naturally the strength is placed on the lower, or fatty part, of the palm. Consequently only a part of the *baren* is used. So it is necessary to turn the *baren* within the cover in order to use the *baren* uniformly. When the corners of the cord are pretty well worn out and the *baren* becomes smooth, then the coil is undone and recoiled to expose more angular corners, and so it can be used again. By careful use, a *baren* may last for several years. It is exceedingly durable. Someone once tried metal wire, but the life of the *baren* so made was very short, owing to the fact that wire does not rebound. The bamboo sheath has proved to be much more durable than metal wire for the purpose.

When marks of the *baren* are required on the print as in my "Parrot," a sixteen-strand *baren* is usually used.

The *baren* made of four-strand cord contains about twenty-one or twenty-two coils, the diameter of the disk measuring about five inches or so.

The *baren* is sold unwrapped. The artist who prints has to get a *baren*, *ategawa* and bamboo-sheath and wrap the *baren* to suit himself. The life of the wrapping sheath is not very long; often it wears out in a single day. So the printer has to rewrap the *baren* many times in the course of his work. It requires art to do this, an art so inseparable from the ability of the printer, that one may be able to judge his ability as a printer by his skill in wrapping the *baren*.

A small quantity of camellia oil is put on the bamboo-sheath on the *baren* and rubbed on a piece of cotton.

When the *tsubushi-ban* (block cut all over) is printed, the bamboo-sheath wrapping comes to grief in one day. When badly wrapped, the life of the *baren* is especially short.

From olden times, there have been some secrets handed down concerning the use of the *baren*. But the details must be divined by the artist who prints. In printing, the *baren* is pressed with the fatty part of the palm. This means that the strength for rubbing the *baren* should come not from the hand but from the shoulder, the strength of the whole body passing through the shoulder. Mere manipulation of the hand is not sufficient.

The pieces of bamboo-sheath left over from wrapping the *baren* may be used for stirring the pigment and applying it to the block. In making this, the piece of sheath is wound around a piece of stick notched toward the end. It is tied firmly over the notch and the bamboo-sheath cut at the required length. The softened sheath may be shredded, by taking off all the soft parts of the bamboo-sheath, and leaving only the fibre to form a suitable brush.

Other kinds of *baren* may be made according to one's need. Once I used one made with cardboard for a pad, not for rubbing but merely for tapping the paper on the back to get a certain effect for the background of my print, "Portrait of a Boy" (No. 98). The

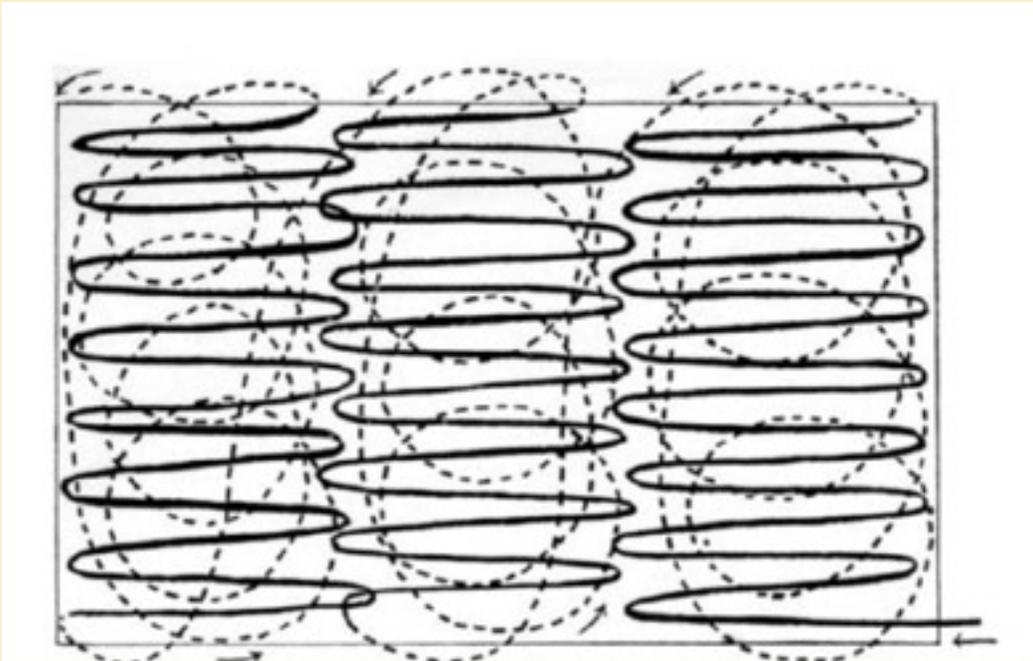


FIGURE 22: THE PATH OF THE BAREN

The rectangle indicates on the paper the block of *mino-gami* size

The heavy line indicates the middle of the *baren* where strong pressure is applied in printing.

The dotted line shows where the *baren* is moved lightly.

The arrow indicates the direction of the movement of the *baren*.

It is difficult to print *tsubushi* of the *mino-gami* size, but this is the best for practice as it constitutes the foundation of all styles of printing. It requires a great deal of strength and the work may be facilitated by holding the left front of the printing stand (not the block) firmly with the left hand while printing.

First the paper is secured on the block by pressing it lightly with the *baren*. Then apply the *baren* near the right-angle register mark and press it in a short zig-zag motion, beginning at the bottom and gradually moving forward as indicated by the heavy line in the drawing. When the *baren* reaches the top, it is brought down to the bottom again and with a light circular motion worked up to the top again and then moved down to the bottom of the middle part of the block to work on a fresh area, as indicated by the heavy and dotted lines. In this manner the whole surface may be covered in three upward moves. During the work the result of the printing may be judged from the back as the paper absorbs the pigment.

In printing *tsubushi* of a medium size block, some artists begin working from the left to right, but this may be considered exceptional.

CHAPTER V

FAILURES AND SUGGESTIONS

FAILURES

Let us consider now some of the failures which may result even after we have done everything possible to avoid them. The register marks have been corrected, the colour blocks and pigments all adjusted, and the print which may serve as the standard having been obtained, everything may be considered to be in perfect working order. Under these conditions the work may be proceeding. In spite of all this, failures do occur.

Unexpected failures must always be watched for, and caution must be taken against any possible mishap. Everything may be arranged not to leave any *ketsu-ochi* (blots), but still the pigment may collect into a pool somewhere and may soil the print. Everything may proceed well until the paper gets warped or sagged and causes *ketsu-ochi*. The paper must be constantly watched—the moisture of the paper, the condition of the weather when the work is continued to the next day, etc.

If the work continues too long before the print is finished, then specks of rot or stain may begin to appear. And when they do appear, it is too late to remedy them. Precautions are necessary, and one must ever be watchful.

Sometimes minor stains which may prove very serious in the end are overlooked, and passed for some time without being noticed. Some may be corrected; others it may be impossible to remedy.

Care must be taken with regard to the peeling of back of the paper by scraping it with a *baren*. If small particles from the trimming of the paper should stick to the surface, they will spoil the

print. The artist must be on the look out for the white lines caused by too much pressure on the *baren*, when the paper is too wet, and also for stray loose hairs from the brush.

When many *tsubushi-ban* are to be printed, they should not be printed all in succession. Otherwise the paper will be badly damaged.

No one can tell what may happen to the prints at any time quite unexpectedly. When we discover bad spots or lines in the prints, say on the last day of the printing, imagine our great disappointment! The artist cannot be too careful.

GOOD JUDGEMENT

It is difficult to make right judgments at the time of the trial printing.

But after printing the first few prints in the *hon-zuri*, if one watches carefully, a correct judgment may be formed.

For instance, the register mark may get wrong. It may be on account of the shrinkage or the expansion of the block after the outline drawing has been printed. Or it may be that the paper has shrunk or expanded. To judge correctly all these phenomena and to devise means to correct them is very important.

Any fault that may be discovered in the blocks should not be laid at once to the cutting. Upon correct judgment depends the life of the print. If a mistake is made in judgment, the end will be disastrous.

The expansion of the paper is liable to be mistaken for the shrinkage of the block. And there is the shrinkage of the key print to be taken into consideration. All this makes a correct judgment difficult as well as highly essential.

The shrinkage and expansion of the block lengthwise are almost nil. If there is any, it is generally the result of carelessness in pasting the drawing on the board for the cutting.

Sometimes the board may be considered to have been shrunk lengthwise, but it may not really be so. It may actually be the wrong use of the register marks; if so, this can be readily corrected by changing the register marks according to the method already described.

Errors may occur singly, and then it is necessary to make a careful investigation to ascertain the cause. When the colour impressions are taken, they may show a perfect registering as far as the colours are concerned, but not as to the outline. In that case the impression of the key block must have been wrongly taken. Thus it is most essential to get at the real cause of the errors.

Often it is difficult to distinguish the grain of the wood from the baren marks. However, the former appears regularly in a given place, while the latter is not fixed in any one place.

White lines may be caused by a foreign material such as bits of paper from the trimming or stray hairs from the brush, or possibly something else.

There are many defects, such as small blots, which can easily be overcome if one only discovers them in time. If unnoticed, the defect will appear on all of the prints.

We are likely to overlook even so clearly visible a cause as dirt in the pigment, or a lump of pigment on the block. Such can easily be removed, but may remain without our knowing it. Sometimes the brush produces bad lines due to the manner in which it is used in charging the block. Bad lines are sometimes caused by the brush, which should be rubbed against shark skin in order to even the hair. But if the bad lines continue to occur notwithstanding, the cause must be sought elsewhere.

The grain of the wood may be ground off with *nagura*. Or it may disappear when the freshness of the block wears off. This must be correctly judged. *Kanna-mura*, unevenness in the planing of the board, may be found on the block. This is difficult to correct; it can be remedied to a certain extent by levelling the surface

with a whetstone. *Nagura* is generally used on the better surface to make it even with the worse surface.

The knowledge of these facts will help the artist to form good judgments when confronted by defects. If misjudged, the failure will be serious as the defects may be too great for repair. If the trouble lies in the baren, however much one may apply *nagura* to the block, the print, far from being improved, will get worse.

Instead of the *tsubushi* the artist may find *goma*. If he arrives at the conclusion that this has been caused by the undue hardness of the paper, he will have to do something to overcome it.

When the defect appears gradually and disappears without attention, it is generally due to the condition of the moisture in the paper or to the *nokori-enogu* on the block.

To detect the cause of the trouble is essential; and this must be quickly done. Otherwise these defects may spoil five, ten or even twenty or thirty sheets of prints before the trouble can be remedied. This may be borne with patience, perhaps, but when the whole pile of prints is spoiled, it is indeed unbearable. Such a tragedy is not impossible, especially when the *dôsa* is poor, or when the quality of the paper is below standard.

A glance at an object is better than hearing a hundred times about it. If these errors were shown in a print, the readers would understand them at a glance. But to include such examples is not within the scope of this book. They will be left for the readers to study, find out and take necessary steps to remedy.

LARGE BLOCKS

Large blocks are exceedingly difficult to work with; I have made failures in such attempts. I had to struggle hard in managing large prints and in so doing I have learned a great deal. The experience was worth while not only as an aid in making large-sized prints, but also in perfecting small-sized ones.

COLOUR PLATES



PLATE VI - "FUJI FROM MIHO"

Number of blocks used: 12

Number of impressions given: 40

Outline block in two colours.

Muda-bori were used for the waves, though they were taken away before the printing.

Obokashi (gradation over a large area) was used.

PLATE VII - "OBATAN PARROT"

Number of blocks used: 8

Number of impressions given: 22

A part of the key block was used for indenting by blind printing.

Baren-suji for the background.

