

CRAFTS: When in Tokyo, try making a Japanese woodblock print

Linda Lombardi, Associated Press Updated 7:31 am, Wednesday, February 10, 2016



Photo: Linda Lombardi, AP



IMAGE 1 OF 4

In this Dec. 10, 2015 photo, a woodblock lies on a table in the Mokuhankan print studio, in Asakusa, Tokyo. Mokuhankan offers tourists a hands-on experience making a simple Japanese woodblock print using [... more](#)

You probably know what an ukiyo-e print looks like, even if you don't recognize the term.

"The Great Wave Off Kanagawa" by Katsushika Hokusai is a familiar image around the world, a premier example of a Japanese art form that turns up on mugs and T-shirts as well as museum walls.

For me, a few museum posters bought in high school and preserved like precious relics gradually evolved into an obsession with Japanese culture. So when I heard there was a place in Tokyo where I could make an ukiyo-e print myself, I had to try it.

David Bull, who moved from Canada to Japan in 1986 to become a printmaker, owns the Mokuhankan studio and offers "print parties" to tourists.

When I arrived there, I knew we weren't going to start with anything as complex as Hokusai's wave. Bull provides a simple design for beginners. But the basics are the same: These multicolored prints are made by using a different woodblock to apply each pigment.

For this to work, you need to line the piece of paper up perfectly each time. I couldn't help thinking of those screen-protector films you put on a phone, when you get just one chance to line it up correctly? I can't usually do that right. How was I going to do this again and again on the same sheet of paper?

There's a method to it of course. Each woodblock has two shallow notches or slots carved along the bottom of the design as guides: a straight line on the left and a corner on the right.

But all of your instincts — or mine, at least — are wrong, as I found when I picked up the first piece of paper from the stack between by thumb and forefinger. You're supposed to hold it between your first two fingers. And if you think that's awkward, wait till you hear what Bull told me next: Don't look! We're not going to do this by sight. Your thumb needs to be free to cover the carved notch on the right, so you can't see it. You slide the paper in, determining by touch that it's snug against the carved angle, and lay the paper down over the whole block.

I practiced that on each block, and Bull said we were ready. Laid out on the work surface were some pretty little bowls with brushes in them, containing pigment and paste. First, you drop a glob of paste onto the block's surface. Then stir up the pigment and brush some on. Mix them together right on the block with a little scrub brush.

We started with red because it's easy to see when the pigment and paste are mixed and ready; with the others, you just have to trust it when the block looks shiny and wet. Then we got the sheet of paper and put it down.

Once the paper was in place, I picked up a round, flat stone with a handle and rubbed the paper hard. Since each color may be used on different parts of the print, there's an example of each block posted on the wall so you know what spots to cover.

We were making an edition of three prints, so with the first block I printed three sheets of red. I put them between pieces of Styrofoam to keep them moist. Bull moistens the paper the night before and it expands a little; if it dries up, the design won't line up right.

You can put the prints on top of each other immediately without worrying that the ink will smear or stick. "That's the real difference between Japanese printmaking and Western," said Bull: With many Western prints, the paper is the carrier of the ink; here, the paper is actually embedded with the pigment.

When we moved on to the second block, with blue, I lined one up wrong. Bull reminded me that even the professionals aren't perfect.

"The first three per day never make it to the shop floor," he said. "They're like a warmup — that's your excuse to the boss."

We did the black outline of the design last. The black ink tends to splatter, so Bull had me put on an apron. The scrubby brush to mix this ink on the block has shorter bristles, so it's easy to get it on your fingers. To prevent smudging, you have to stop and make sure your fingers are clean.

The professional printmakers in the back of Bull's shop print the black ink first, but it needs to dry overnight. So with novices like me, the order is reversed to let us experience the whole process in one session.

We also used only four blocks — the professionals that day were working on a print that required 30 different impressions — and less expensive paper.

Otherwise, we used real materials and an authentic division of labor.

"It's the old ukiyo-e quartet," Bull said: the boss, the designer, the carver and the printer. He is both boss and carver for this shop, but insists, "I'm not an artist."

"The guy directing the movie, he's not a screenwriter," Bull said by way of comparison. "This way, you have consummate professionals at every stage."

Even without being a consummate professional, it was fascinating for me to get a taste of the method.

<http://mokuhankan.com/parties/index.php>

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