

Searching for the Source

I grew up in a small village in the mountains, surrounded by impressive forests. Wood is of incredible importance there. The traditional building style is a mix of stone and wood. Tools were made of wood. Small shelters and storage structures for hay can be found everywhere, and these are made of wood. People there are proud of their woodworking tradition.

In the small town where I moved to later, there were occasional shows of contemporary art. It was from printed reproductions, however, that I knew about the really important works. The few originals by famous artists that I got to see were prints as well. One day I knew I was going to be an artist too, an artist who makes prints.

Historically, printing was a laborious and expensive undertaking, which was only used for texts and images of importance. For something to be deemed fit to print, it had to undergo a process of review and selection until finally it was declared worth the effort.

While I was studying printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, I had a chance to do prints in many techniques, with the exception of woodcut and linocut. When I realized that all my prints had some resemblance to woodcut prints, I suddenly noticed this omission, and I decided this was something worth exploring.

I was on my own and tried my luck with woodcut. Working with wood was great. It was inspiring and familiar. It was the material I had used to realize my dreams as a child. The work was rough and wild, and I delighted in the powerful language I could evoke in this technique.

It turned out that it was not easy to keep this powerful expressivity visible in the work, since a lot of it was created by my inability as a wood carver. Actually it was the mistakes that made the prints so appealing to me. As I practiced and got better, and the mistakes disappeared, my ambition became a possible enemy of success.

Searching for options, I decided that if I wanted to find a way out of the dilemma, I would need to learn seriously about woodcut. When I found a book about the work of Katsushika Hokusai, I knew that I had to study in Japan, and subsequently I found a way to do so.

Even as I learned the proper technique of woodblock printing in Japan, I decided to take a different route. I exchanged the delicate knives for stones, with which I started to chisel the relief out of the plate. I sat on the floor, like our Stone Age ancestors, hitting the block with the stone. The rough tool made it impossible for the work to become too detailed. It was a process that made images appear and disappear in the wood. Layers of image became visible, and the rough and beaten wood did not allow the use of standard printing procedures.

I began to understand that in my work the process of creating woodcut prints had become something very different from what it had been for centuries. I did not use a technique to reproduce an image: I used it to produce an image. I now understand the making of a print as a succession of decisions that are part of the creative process. The printed result is only one manifestation of it. The block and the creation of the block are of equal importance to me. When printing is not done with the intention of creating an image of something else, the print shows a set of qualities that point directly to the wooden object from which it was pulled.

I still work with woodcut because it gives me complete control over the production process. Today artists are not limited to a set of historical techniques when creating prints, but have the option of using all sorts of digital methods. This freedom makes the use of analog techniques a conscious decision, which holds special significance for the work's reception.

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