

The Printer Emulates the Painter

—the Unique Chinese Water-and-ink Woodblock Print

By Diana Yu

中國的水版木印

THE MEANING of the term *mu-pan shui-yin* 木版水印, literally “wood plate, water print”, is now confined to that type of woodblock printing specially devoted to the reproduction of traditional Chinese paintings, i.e., paintings executed in traditional method using the water-and-ink medium.

By nature a handicraft, *mu-pan shui-yin* has nevertheless been called “an art of re-creation” for having reproduced extremely close likenesses of fine works of art. Its wonder and charm lie in its completely hand-made process of production, while its secret is in its altogether non-use of photography and oil, so essential to modern printing. In block-carving and printing, it is in fact an assemblage of indigenous techniques garnered from an age-old heritage.

點葉法
點葉法不復
分別某家用某
點葉法用其樹
者以前後各樹
中須載有古人
點法法雖不
同然法法所
於無意中相似
者亦復不少當
神而明之不可
死守成法

Tracing its ancestry

The history of picture-printing in China can be traced back to the T'ang dynasty, when a lot of Buddhist scriptures printed in block-carving carried illustrations from the life of Buddha. The extant earliest example of this is the cover-picture of a version of the “Diamond” Sutra (金剛經 Vajracchedikā-prājnāpāramitā-sutra), discovered in Tun-huang 敦煌. The picture, depicting the Buddha giving a sermon in a garden, is dated the 9th year of Hsien-t'ung 咸通, corresponding to the year 868 in the late T'ang period. From then on, there has been no lack of carved illustrations in the Chinese book-making tradition, serving not only religious denominations in their widespread outreach for converts, but also architects, engineers, agriculturalists, medical doctors, encyclopaedists and other compilers who commissioned book-carvers to publish the fruits of their studies.

A field in which book-carvers could exercise their skill as well as their imagination was literature, and excellent wood-carved editions of popular fiction and drama had been produced since Yuan and Ming, especially in the years *Wan-li* 萬曆 and



Plate 61 A PAGE FROM THE MUSTARD SEED GARDEN PAINTER'S ALBUM. Woodcut illustration of how different leaf-forms should appear when executed by brush. From an edition dated the 18th year of the Ch'ing Emperor K'ang-hsi.

T'ien-ch'ih 天啟 (1573-1627, late Ming period). In this era, well-loved novels and dramas and the elegant illustrated editions in which they were printed reciprocated each other's influence, pushing both these genres of literature and woodblock prints into wider and wider popularity. Four places were specially noted for the production of woodblock prints—Peking (in Hopei), Chien-an (in Fukien), Chin-ling—today's Nanking (in Kiangsu) and Hsin-an (in Anhui). There emerged families of famous carvers, such as the Huang 黃 family in Hsin-an, and among the many wellknown artists who drew and illustrated for such books were Ch'en Lao-lien 陳老蓮, Ting Yün-peng 丁雲鵬 and Hsiao Yün-ts'ung 蕭雲從.

The popularity of wood-carved books continued into the Ch'ing dynasty, with its centre in Peking. In such representative works as the "Li-sao t'u" 離騷圖 and "Wan-hsiao-t'ang hua-chuan" 晚笑堂畫傳, the strong influence of the realistic style of Ming is apparent. Though some artists adopted western technique in creating their pictures, such as Chiao Ping-chen 焦秉貞, who painted the original pictures for the Kang-hsi 康熙 edition of the "Keng-chih t'u" 耕織圖, the majority of them held firm to the folk tradition. Beside the above-mentioned albums, there were mass-productions, printed in the millions, of copy-books for learners of painting, writing-paper printed with fine decorations, and festival pictures, the most widely sought after of which was the New Year picture. Before it lost its popularity to lithographic print-

ing, introduced into China from the West after the years *Chia-ch'ing* 嘉慶 and *Tao-kuang* 道光 (1796-1850, mid Ch'ing dynasty), woodblock printing was the chief medium by which writing and art was known to the populace.

Line-cuts and Ink-tones

In developing the modern water-and-ink woodblock print, much inspiration was drawn from the experience of the past. We have seen the great variety of woodblock-printed material in China in the Ming and Ch'ing. Roughly speaking, they fall into two categories when analyzed from the point of view of visual effect. The first is the line-cut, which is produced by using a single block to print an area of ink, of uniform density, whose edges distinguish sharply from the paper. This method can be elaborated upon to form the second category, the multiple-block print which, by superimposing areas of different water-and-ink density on one another, produces a picture with gradations in ink-tone. While contour drawings are usually reproduced by the first method, there are many occasions which require the use of the second, to reproduce the subtle-ink-tones issued from the brushes of artists painting in the water-and-ink tradition. In Ming and Ch'ing times, there was a steady demand for the latter kind of prints to decorate books and stationery, which reflects how popular taste was following the lead of water-and-ink brush painting, the predominant tradition of the era.

A PLANT PAINTING TAKES SHAPE. A relatively simple painting, this is printed in just four blocks, in

Plate 63

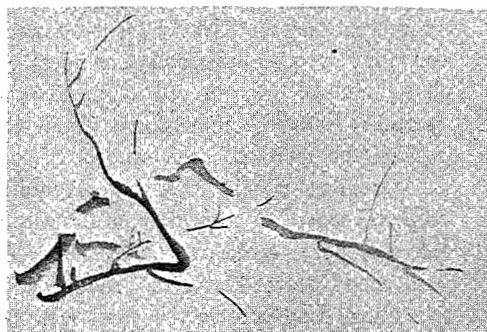
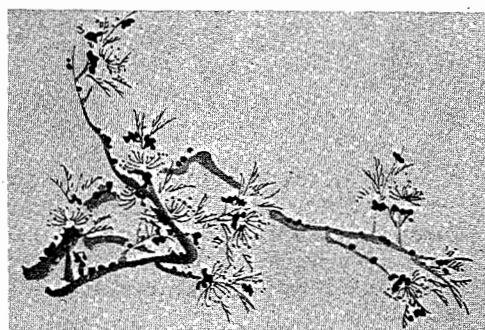


Plate 64



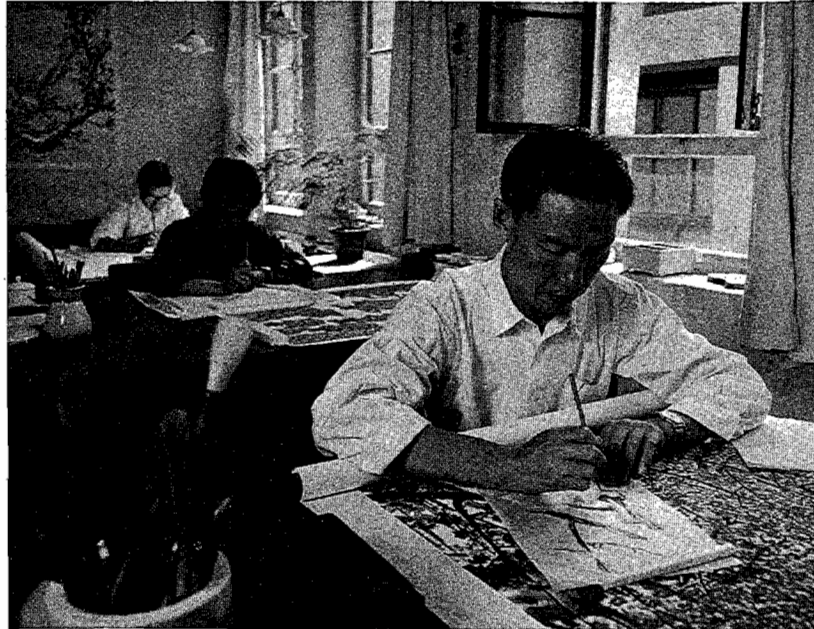


Plate 62
DESIGNING AND TRACING.
A print factory
in Peking.

These methods of woodblock printing are best demonstrated in old painter's albums, designed to define basic brushstrokes and painted forms for learners of water-and-ink painting. Of such albums, the *Ten Bamboos Studio Painter's Album* (*Shih-chu-chai hua-p'u* 十竹齋畫譜) and the *Mustard Seed Garden Painter's Album* (*Chieh-tzu-yuan hua-chuan* 芥子園畫傳) are still wellknown today. Carved in the year 1627 (late Ming dynasty) by Hu Cheng-yen 胡正言, a native of Anhui residing in Nanking, the *Ten Bamboos Studio Painter's Album*

is divided into sections explaining how brushstrokes depicting bamboos, plum-blossoms, rocks, orchids, fruits, plumes and feathers etc. should be executed. It is the first book to have illustrations printed in five colours, using a method called *tou-pan*, 餽版, i.e., separate colour blocks, which very successfully brought out the variations in colour and ink-tone. In the *Mustard Seed Garden Painter's Album*, carved in 1679 (early Ch'ing dynasty) by Wang Kai 王概 and his brothers, exegeses on the the art of painting were printed to line-cut effect, while the

different shades of black and red—

Plate 65



Plate 66



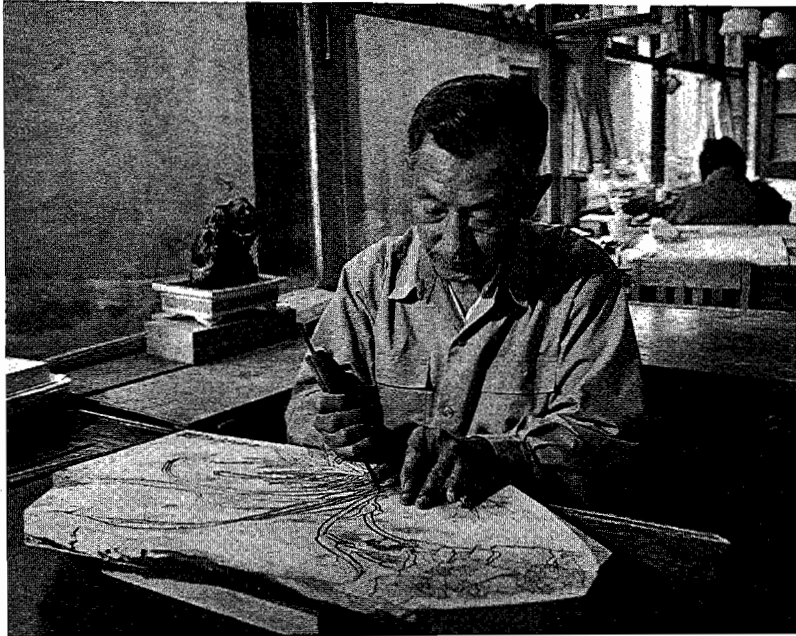


Plate 67 CARVING.

profuse illustrations of how brushstrokes and painted forms should appear when executed by brush in water-and-ink were printed either in line-cut, or multiple-blocks in water-and-ink, or blocks of different colours.

Today, water-and-ink woodblock prints are produced by Peking's Jung-pao Chai 榮寶齋, The Calligraphy and Printing Company of Shanghai 上海書畫店 (formerly known as Tuo-yun Hsuan Studio 朵雲軒) and the Woodblock Printing Studio of Hangchow 杭州版畫店. Jung-pao Chai Studio, now China's leading printing-house for water-and-ink woodblock reproductions, was opened roughly some 77 years ago (1899), in the reign of the late Ch'ing Emperor Kuang-hsu 光緒. Situated in the Liu-li Ch'ang 琉璃廠, Peking's old market for *objets d'art*, it started off as a small paper shop and became wellknown for the multi-colour letter-paper produced by its small printing-house. In the troubled years of late Ch'ing and after, Jung-pao Chai Studio had preserved the knowledge of *tou-pan* printing until now, under the People's Republic, its production was re-organized and much more ambitious programmes were introduced to make high-quality art reproductions more easily available to the public.

In the Print Factory

Water-and-ink woodblock reproductions of

Chinese paintings are loved for the same qualities possessed by their originals—the non-oily black ink (pine-smoke ink, *sung-yen mo* 松煙墨, as it is called), which when mixed with water can produce seemingly endless ink-tone variations; paper manufactured in Hsuan 宣 county, Anhui, uniformly used by painters for its fine quality and particular receptivity to water-and-ink; and the versatile array of brushstrokes, forming the painting, backed by so much tradition and learning. Whenever possible, a reproduction is executed in exactly the same kind of ink and paper in which its original was made. It is in reproducing the look of the brushstrokes that the ingenious imitative skill of the carver and printer takes over the creativity of the painter's brush. Within this process, the craftsmen's expertise is put to challenge through an elaborate system of division of labour.

Designing and Tracing

An original painting must first be traced out, to enable blocks to be made from it. In fact, block-designing and tracing is the most important step of all in the process of production, as those who undertake it must possess not only fine draughtsmanship but also a thorough understanding of the painting as a work of art. Sometimes, when the original is a mural or some other kind of painting that cannot be

easily transported into the studio, detailed copies of it have to be made, before analysis can proceed. With a connoisseur's knowledge of art, the block-designer then analyses the painting's content and composition, and decides how it is to be separated into blocks which can best follow the artist's use of brushstrokes, colour-combination and varying degrees of ink-and-water density. His analysis must be fine and exact, at the same time practical for block-carving and printing.

Very often, a fine analysis of a complicated painting results in its separation into several tens of ink-tone variations, each of which requires a block to be carved. Some masterpieces require even more blocks, hence more impressions. The shapes of the blocks can range from lines thinner than human hair, if it is a *kung-pi* 工筆 painting, to large amorphous areas which correspond to the washes of the *i-pi* 意筆 painter. Jung-pao Chai has improved upon the old *tou-pan* method by increasing the number of blocks, thus enhancing the fineness of the reproductions. For instance, fine copies of the T'ang painter Chou Fang 周昉's "Ladies with Flowery Headdresses" scroll (*Tsan-hua shih-nü t'u* 簪花仕女圖) were completed by the collaborated efforts of Chang Yen-chou etc. 張延

洲等 (carve) and T'ien Yung-ch'ing 田永慶 (print), using 48 blocks. There have been cases where the number of blocks designed for one reproduction reached over a hundred.

Having settled on the separation of the blocks, the designer covers the surface of the painting with pieces of transparent plastic film, on each of which he traces out the outlines of one block. The films are in turn placed under pieces of extremely thin "wild goose skin paper" (*yen-p'i chih* 雁皮紙), on which the outlines are traced out a second time, with constant reference to the original painting. Then the carver's proofs are ready.

Carving

Usually, carvers use rosewood (*hua-li mu* 花梨木) to carve their blocks, and, for blocks representing particularly fine and complicated brushwork, they use boxwood (*huang-yang mu* 黃楊木). To prepare for carving, the reverse side of the paper carrying the block-outlines is smoothed over the wood plane. Some parts of the paper are carefully scraped off to make the outlines stand out more clearly, and to lessen the resisting force which the paper might exert against the carving-blade. When the carver applies his blade to the wood, in order to

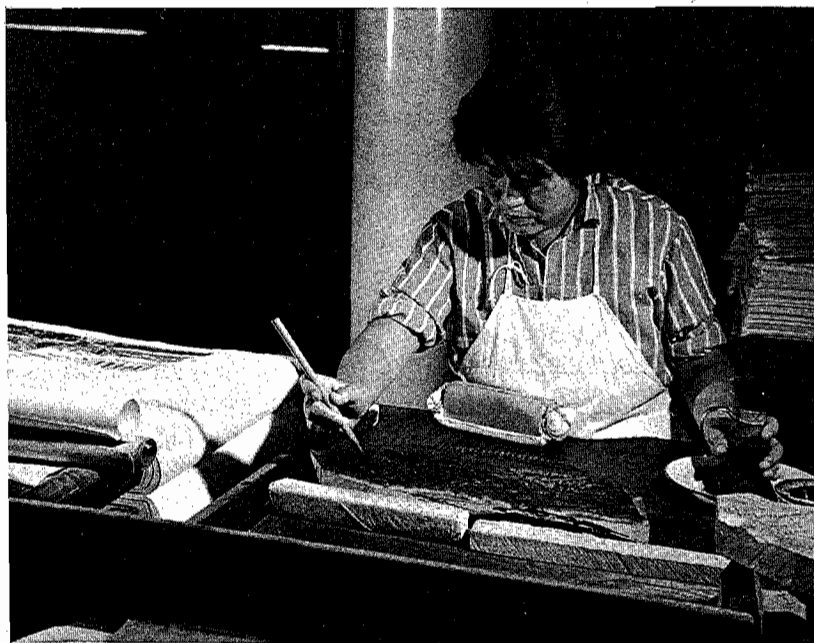


Plate 68 COLORING.



Plate 69 PRINTING.

achieve the effect of “using his blade like a painter’s brush”, he must do more than just follow the lines drawn on the paper—he must carve with thorough understanding of the spirit of the original painting. He must bear in mind how the painter actually executed the painting—how the round, full look of a stroke was achieved by running the tip of the brush vertically on the paper, i.e., by using the *chung-feng* 中鋒 of the brush; how a vigorous, broken appearance of brushwork was achieved through “dry” brushstrokes (*k’u-pi* 枯筆); how the rapidity of brush movement created jerks and inuendos in the brushwork; and how clarity, beauty and liveliness of style was conveyed thereby . . . all this the carver aims to re-create, without exposing any traits of the touch of his carving-knife.

Printing

When an entire series of blocks has been carved, there must be very careful consideration as to the order of printing the blocks, which is decisive to the final look of the reproduction. In the working process of Jung-pao Chai Studio, the first blocks to be put to print are those carrying the lines which in the original painting are the black ink outlines defining the shapes of the painted forms. Then follow other blocks

representing areas of different ink-tones. Where colour blocks are concerned, the general practice is for lighter colours to be printed first, but the order is sometimes changed to fit the actual situation.

The process of printing is as follows: The block is first run over with a wet brush, then dabbed with a painting-brush soaked to the same ink or colour concentration as the original painting. Then the printer lays the paper over the block, and rubs the reverse side of the paper strongly against the wood plane with a *pa-tzu* 耙子, a tool made of coir. One impression is thus completed.

As the paper is applied to more and more blocks, it gradually takes on the look of the original painting. The increasing likeness to the original is achieved in many ways. When printing parts of the brushwork where ink melts into water—typical of Chinese painting—the printer usually soaks his painting-brush to the right water-and-ink density and does an imitation painting on the block, then prints it. By this method, known as *t’an* 揮, he achieves a much closer proximity to the original. If the original brushwork has a heavily-inked and wet look, the block is run over with an additional layer of water, to ensure the effect of ink-play. If the original brushwork consists of dry brushstrokes,



Plate 70 LADIES WITH FLOWERY HEAD-DRESSES, woodblock print after the painting by Chou Fang. Section. Collaborators: Chang Yen-chou etc. (carve), T'ien Yung-ch'ing (print). 48 blocks.

tissue paper is applied to the block to soak away some of the water-and-ink painted on it. Thus, when the image is printed, it retains the dry, forceful appearance of the lines. The completion of the final impression yields a reproduction that bears very close resemblance to its original, almost indistinguishable from the original when mounted in the same way. It is an achievement in which the printer's skill successfully re-creates the technical mastery and imagination of the artist.

Where Its Value Lies

In China's local market as well as abroad, a water-and-ink woodblock reproduction is still priced many more times higher than its machine-printed counterpart. This is because by comparison its carving requires much more labour, and the

easy wear of the woodblocks during the process of printing puts a limit on the quantity of output. But it is also treasured more as a piece of handicraft produced by extremely skilled labour. While all kinds of methods of plate-making by photographic process, whether they be metal plates, synthetic plates, collotype or lithography, reproduce various degrees of light and shade by varying degrees of image density, the water-and-ink woodblock print, by directly applying water and ink onto paper through the use of carved blocks, captures the genuine shape, size and, most important of all, the tactile quality of an original Chinese painting.

Looking at the history of art in China, the development of the *mu-pan shui-yin* technique can be interpreted as a two-fold advancement. It represents a new level reached in the art of printing, by collective efforts. *Mu-pan shui-yin* craftsmen are so masterly in their methods of execution that even creative artists working on water-print woodcuts (*shui-yin mu-k'e* 水印木刻) have to learn from Jung-pao Chai. It also represents a liberation of the means of art appreciation from the monopoly of the élite. As increased production of these high-quality reproductions widen the circle of art-lovers who are able to enjoy them, art concepts conveyed in them also reach a wider public. In this respect, *mu-pan shui-yin* is also a useful tool for strengthening art education and education through art, a means by which more enlightenment can be brought to people on the meaning of art themes old and new.