

WOOD-BLOCK PRINTING

BY THE JAPANESE METHOD

The Origins of Wood-block Printing: its uses for personal artistic expression, for reproduction of decorative designs, and as a fundamental training for students of printed decoration.

The few wood-block prints shown from time to time by the Society of Graver Printers in Colour, and the occasional appearance of a wood-block print in the Graver Section of the International Society's Exhibitions, or in those of the Society of Arts and Crafts, are the outcome of the experiments of a small group of English artists in making prints by the Japanese method, or by methods based on the Japanese practice.

My interest was first drawn in 1897 to experiments that were being made by Mr. J. D. Batten, who for two years previously had attempted, and partially succeeded in making, a print from wood and metal blocks with colour mixed with glycerine and dextrine, the glycerine being afterwards removed by washing the prints in alcohol. As the Japanese method seemed to promise greater advantages and simplicity, we began experiments together, using as our text-book the pamphlet by T. Tokuno, published by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, and the

dextrine and glycerine method was soon abandoned. The edition of prints, however, of Eve and the Serpent designed by J. D. Batten, printed by myself and published at that time, was produced partly by the earlier method and partly in the simpler Japanese way.

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Familiar as everyone is with Japanese prints, it is not generally known that they are produced by means of an extremely simple craft. No machinery is required, but only a few tools for cutting the designs on the surface of the planks of cherry wood from which the impressions are taken. No press is used, but a round flat pad, which is rubbed on the back of the print as it lies on the blocks. The colours are mixed with water and paste made from rice flour. The details of the craft and photographs

of the tools were given in full in the Smithsonian Institution pamphlet already mentioned.

It is slow and unsatisfactory work, however, learning manipulation from a book, and several technical difficulties that seemed insurmountable were made clear by the chance discovery in London of a Japanese printseller who, although not a printer, was sufficiently familiar with the work to give some invaluable hints and demonstrations.

Further encouragement was given to the work by the institution, a little later, of a class in wood-cuts in colour under my charge, at the L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts,

which for several years became the chief centre of the movement.

Such are the bare historical facts of the development in our country of this craft imported from the Far East.

"My own experience also convinces me that whatever may be the ultimate value of the Eastern craft to our artists as a mode of personal expression, there is no doubt of its effect and usefulness in training students to design with economy and simplicity for modern printing processes."

