

ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

TRANSCENDING TRADITION:  
HOW THE CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE WOODBLOCK SURVIVED THROUGH  
IT'S HISTORY

submitted by

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Transcending Tradition:  
How the Contemporary Japanese Woodblock Survived Through Its History

Japanese woodblocks have attracted the attention of the West and influenced artists for centuries. One of the appeals of the Japanese print is its technique. This paper will examine the diverse art movements that Japanese printers facilitated and innovative transitions that created new and individual expressions from an ancient medium surviving well into the contemporary art world.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the woodblock was a dominant medium of expression. Images that were pulled from the woodblock produced bold and graphic images. There was a certain directness that left the medium unparalleled more than any other printing medium in Japan. Technologically, from the seventeenth century, through the twentieth century, the printing industry became more advanced with the use of metal plates, lithography, photography, and photomechanical processes. While multicolor woodblock printing was perfected in Japan, woodblock technology had been out of use in the West for more than two-hundred years. Publishers were receptive to all of these printing innovations yet still continued to commission woodblock prints in various publications. The Japanese woodblock printers maintained their appeal through their skillful ability to carve intricate subject matter. The Japanese woodblock printers were creating images that brought visual perspective and graphics to a level that only the woodblock could facilitate.

The Japanese woodblock continued to survive after the Second World War. Printmaking at this time fell into two movements: The Shin-hanga artists, who worked closely with publishers and the Sosaku-hanga printers, who maintained a Western influence after European models, carving and printing their own designs. The focus of this paper will be on the Sosaku-hanga artists and how they established themselves in the West.

The people of Japan were going through profound political changes after World War II and the American Occupation. Almost every aspect of Japanese life was altered in some way. The army was abolished, the schools were restructured, farmland was redistributed, and their industrial empires were broken. Even so, ironically, one of the results of the American Occupation was the Western discovery of the Sosaku-hanga movement.

William Hartnett could be credited for this discovery in the 1940's. He exhibited Japanese printers throughout Europe. These Sosaku-hanga artists share the basic ideas that printmaking is as valid a form of artistic expression as painting or sculpture. In many of the Sosaku-hanga artists studied Western style painting and spent time in Europe.

The discovery of the Sosaku-hanga movement by William Hartnett was revolutionary for Japanese printers. In Japan until this time, printmaking was regarded as nothing more than a means of reproduction and the artists rendering these reproductions were considered skilled craftsmen rather than artists. Now, after the Second World War, the Japanese woodblock printers were being exhibited all over Europe as distinctive artists. These Japanese woodblock printers were received by a well-established audience.

Within a few years, Sosaku-hanga work was being collected by Americans on a much broader scale than ever before. It was then that it became possible for many of the artists, for the first time in their lives, to live entirely from the proceeds of their work. This freedom gave the Sosaku-hanga printers the ability to expand in artistic directions that would have seemed impossible before the war.

Onchi Koshiro was one of the Sosaku-hanga artists who was exhibited in Europe after World War II by William Hartnett. Onchi Koshiro became a significant artist of the Sosaku-hanga movement. In (Figure 1), Koshiro

expanded the concept of block printing incorporating all kinds of ephemeral objects into his images. He was deeply rooted with the developments in the Sosaku-hanga movement. Koshiro succeeded to integrate an almost pure abstraction, derived from European examples, with a truly Japanese aesthetic of tone and textures. He expressed his work through woodblocks cut and printed on his own, an uncommon practice in his day since the printing process in the past was always collaborative.

During the 1950's, the Sosaku-hanga movement was thriving. Scale dramatically changed to larger formats and the introduction of less expensive plywood enabled block printers to carve out images that were not possible with wood. Figurative elements began to completely disappear while abstraction became more dominant. (Figure 2)

The next two decades diluted the Sosaku-hanga movement. During the 1960's-70's, Japanese printers began to explore other media and began to leave the woodblock behind. The Japanese printers became prolific in other printing mediums such as silk-screen, intaglio and lithography. Even so, Japanese printers found themselves coming back to the woodblock for its unique ability to facilitate bold and graphic images. The Japanese began to combine mediums with the woodblock to create work that continued to maintain the skillful abilities of the artist. (Figure 3) Despite the decline of the Sosaku-hanga as a movement, printers continued to integrate the quality of the woodblock surface into their work. Thus, the woodblock maintained its individual integrity as a contemporary medium.

One dominant figure in the contemporary Japanese printmaking movement from the 1950's well into the 80's was Shiko Munakata. (Figure 4) Munakata was indifferent during the 1960's to all movements, fashions and "isms". Munakata succeeded in existing within a class all by himself. Once Munakata described being awakened from a sound sleep because his

hand was quivering and he wanted to draw: “I think of this quivering as the Buddha wanting to create through me. So I put my mind at ease and let my tools work alone.”<sup>1</sup> Munakata possessed a pure and esoteric approach to printing which enabled him to maintain his individual way of perceiving the world. (Figure 5)

Munakata has a particularly unique approach to his work. He discovered that spontaneity enhanced the fluidity of his images. He would paint broad, bold images on large woodblocks and then proceed to carve. He also worked with the transparency of color by applying watercolor behind the print to allow the color to seep through to the front of the paper. Munakata describes his process: “a few dabs of ink are enough to position on the board the image that burns within me--the “monster”, I call it--and then, leaning close to the wood with an intensity sharpened by nearsightedness, I fight to make that image real. “<sup>2</sup>

The family of Munakata belonged to the Zen sect of Buddhism, an element which is strongly rooted in Munakata’s work. Buddhism influenced his use of subject matter. (Figure 6) Buddhism, being uninhibited by intellectualized concepts, inspired Munakata to print bold and decorative images. Much of his imagery consists of compositions that depict nature and Buddhist disciples. When one looks at Floral-Variations (Figure 7), there is an experience of Munakata’s delight in decorative elements that are influenced by his Japanese heritage. His work also succeeds in maintaining a sophistication that is contemporary. Munakata succeeds with this sophistication through his use of traditional printing combined with his subject matter.

One of the Buddhist disciples that Munakata depicts within his imagery is Soetsu. The basic philosophy of Soetsu is: “Beauty can only be

born where concepts of beauty and ugliness do not exist; only by transcending nagging intellectual awareness can one; create true beauty.”<sup>3</sup> This ethos is maintained throughout the work of Shiko Munakata. (Figure 8)

In a sense, Munakata has justified the element of the beautiful in a manner that is strictly subconscious. This has had a profound; influence on the artistic endeavors of the Japanese printers who are dominant at the present. The beauty that seems to be effortless for Munakata has been a source of inspiration for all artists concerned with portraying an image that is not bogged down in intellectual concepts. The beauty of Munakata’s work is something that is unpolished and almost primal. His images retain the most basic elements of nature in a medium that is completely organic. Wood is Munakata’s natural source of a print which highly contrasts other printmaking mediums which require profound chemical processes.

Ultimately, Japanese printing is not an issue of movements, but of the decorative elements in art. Munakata achieves this decorative element in a manner so effortless that it distinguishes him from other artists who strive to make their surfaces decorated with beauty. The beauty of Munakata’s work comes simply and naturally from within so that it is not forced. This effortlessness gives the work fluidity that is not labored and fresh.

Like the country of Japan, Munakata has gone through many transitions. He describes in his own words:

“Before the war I strove to be Japanese. Not today. I’m still Japanese and I love Japan, but I know that true beauty must rise above localism. I want to go beyond virtuosity; I want to strip my work of “effects” until it stands monolithic, based on reality and yet transcending

it. It must flow naturally from my materials, from the way of the chisel and the way of the block. This is very difficult but it is the only right way. It is the ultimate ideal.”<sup>4</sup>

Through his intimate experience with the carving process, Shiko Munakata has set a standard for contemporary Japanese printers to elaborate upon.

During the 1960's, the woodblock print began to strongly re integrate into the art world. One of the artists that utilized the medium of woodblock printing was Akira Kurosaki. In his print Between Moments I (plate 9), Kurosaki maintains a finish that appears to be a lithograph or a silk screen, but utilizes the surface and grain of the woodblock. Kurosaki is significant for he began to work in a style that brought the Japanese woodblock to the attention of the art world. Kurosaki works with a master printer who collaborates with him in the studio. This is a reversion from the practice of the Sosaku-hanga movement which declared that an artist should carry out all the cutting and printing processes himself. This is ironic, for before the Sosaku-hang movement, printing was always a collaborative process. In the 1960's, the actual printing is once again left to the discretion of the artist.

Sieko Kwachi is appreciated within the same period of Kurosaki, for many of the same reasons. Kawachi produces work that also revives the woodblock print from the melting pot of printing processes. Kawachi utilizes the wood blemished to give vitality to his surfaces. In '84 Katsura (XII) (Figure 10), one may sense the tension of monumental timber about to collapse. Kawachi's contrasting surfaces of architectural remnants along with the natural grain the wood, creates a juxtaposed force. This force illustrates a balance between modern technology and the natural process of woodcarving.

Unlike Kurosaki, Kawachi does his own printing, using the traditional baren pad to hand rub the impression from the block into the paper. Hence, his editions are varied and more individual, creating different opacities of color. Kawachi has evoked a new enthusiasm in younger artists who are now using the woodblock as a contemporary medium. The work of Kawachi puts artist back in touch with a technique that is versatile and utilized widely in Japan.

The Japanese woodblock has been fluctuating in popularity for the past four hundred years. Yet, even so, the Japanese have maintained the woodblock printing process throughout their history. World War II, The American Occupation, and the Industrial Revolution did not alter the wood printing process. In fact, all these transitions facing the art world broadened woodblock printing's use. There is no doubt that this medium will maintain its place in the art world.

Woodblock printing will hold on to a unique space that is truly within a class by itself. The effects and surfaces that the woodblock facilitates give it the integrity and individualism that is needed to be immune from disregard. The technique of woodblock printing camouflages itself from the passage of time and maintains its stability through its diversity with artists such as Koshiro, Munakata, Kurosaki, and Kawachi. These artists have utilized the medium for their own individual expressions and interpretations. These artists have also inspired others to confront this medium in countless and diversified images.

Japan is a society of political and artistic traditions. The contemporary art world is fluctuating continuously. One may find it comforting to discover the stability of the woodblock as a printing medium. This stability within a society of fluctuations is due to the dedication of the

artists who have utilized this medium throughout the history of Japan. The woodblock has survived because of its immediacy and natural intimacy. This "survival" is illustrated in an essay by Shiko Munakata in which he exposes the integrity of the woodblock print:

"If we speak in terms of colors, the woodcut print may be likened to gold or silver. It has color, but is colorless. Its character is elusive however hard one tries, one cannot create it. This is the greatness of the print. This is why its birth is a happy, teasing expectation. A print springs out by itself, just as joy, wonder or sorrow does. Its birth is spontaneous, and unsuppressible. What a blessing! It is only natural that it should grow and flower in our soil, but to make it grow and flower is not easy. When one is a true, sincere man it happens, but to be a true man is difficult, and cannot be achieved through mere thinking. Because the print comes to us inevitably if we are sincere, we must devote to it our entire mind, heart and life. Rains fall and winds blow because of what they are. Snow, fog frost, haze, cloud, all these are beyond our control. Lightning and tornado occur when they will; they cannot be controlled, nor can we produce them. A print is the same. I cannot produce it as a thing apart from myself, from my body and my life. As the universe rotates, so the print moves though all space and time.

Whenever I am working on a print, and, for that matter, even when I am not, I wish to be always, always in the rhythm of the universe. I wish to be the print itself, body and life and all. I thank heaven that my field is the print, for here alone I am able to achieve such bliss without being other than myself—a human being and myself. Such a blissful thing is a print! I

wish to fade away into such a world, gradually, eternally, until I become a blessed being myself I pray that there will not longer be the self of me, the life and body of me; I pray that my existence will become non-existence, until I become the print itself. I pray it.”<sup>5</sup>

Munakata expresses a profound experience that occurs from his working of the woodblock. The experience Munakata speaks of is a spiritual one that is all encompassing. Perhaps all artists may not approach the medium as esoterically as Munakata. Still, it is understood that the woodblocks surface is at least sensitively recognized.

In conclusion, despite alternative techniques and strict traditional standards, the woodblock continues to hold its place among Japanese artists within our time period. Perhaps, we, as artists, need to return to the basics to challenge ourselves away from sophisticated printing techniques. This challenge leaves artists vulnerable to what is natural and basic. We see this challenge embraced by the Japanese woodblock printers. They have created exciting directions which are inspired from the seductive surface of the woodblock. The resistive carving process creates unique work which lends itself to many bold and intricate interpretations.

The new directions that Japanese printers continue to initiate transcend their traditional way of printing, yet utilize its foundation. This transcendence enhances contemporary work that is coming out of Japan today. The work has a historical foundation and a sense of culture which secures a place for the contemporary Japanese woodcarver in the art world of our day.

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## **ENDNOTES**

- 1 - Merritt, Helen, - Modern Japanese Woodblock Prints. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990) p. 212.
- 2 - Yanagi, Sori, - The Woodblock and The Artist - The Life and Work of Shiko Munakata. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1991) p. 15.
- 3 - Yanagi, Sori, - The Woodblock and The Artist - The Life and Work of Shiko Munakata. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1991) p. 9.
- 4 - Yanagi, Sori, - The Woodblock and The Artist - The Life and Work of Shiko Munakata. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1991) p. 16.
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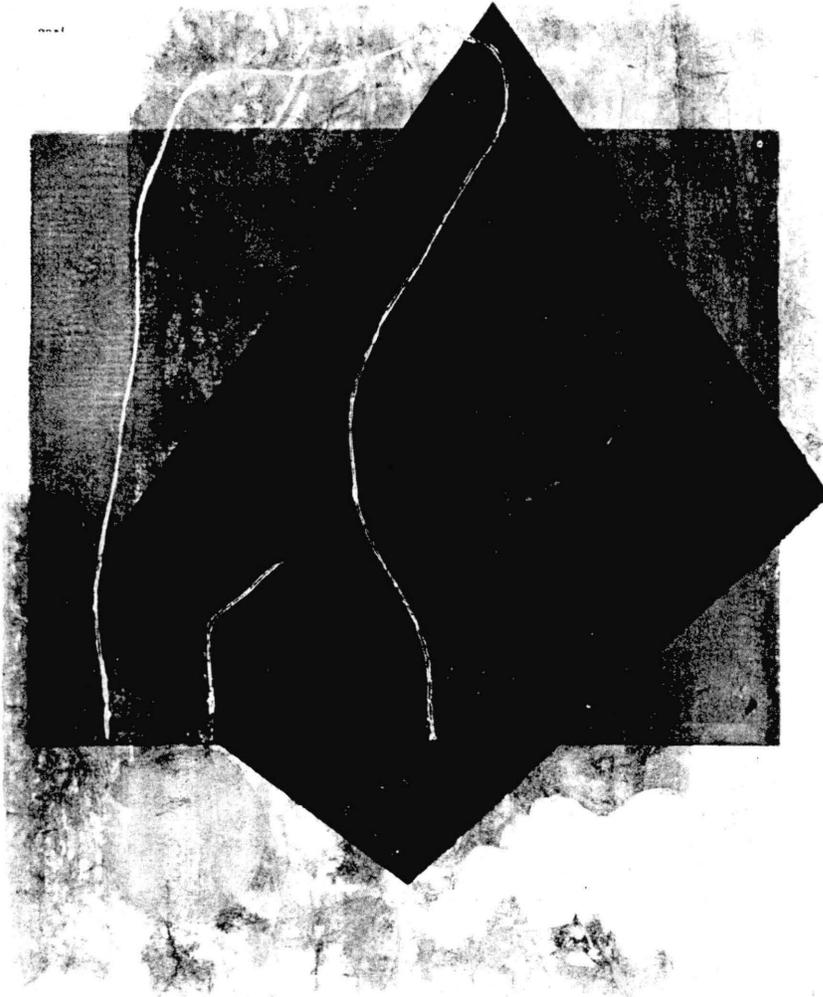


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

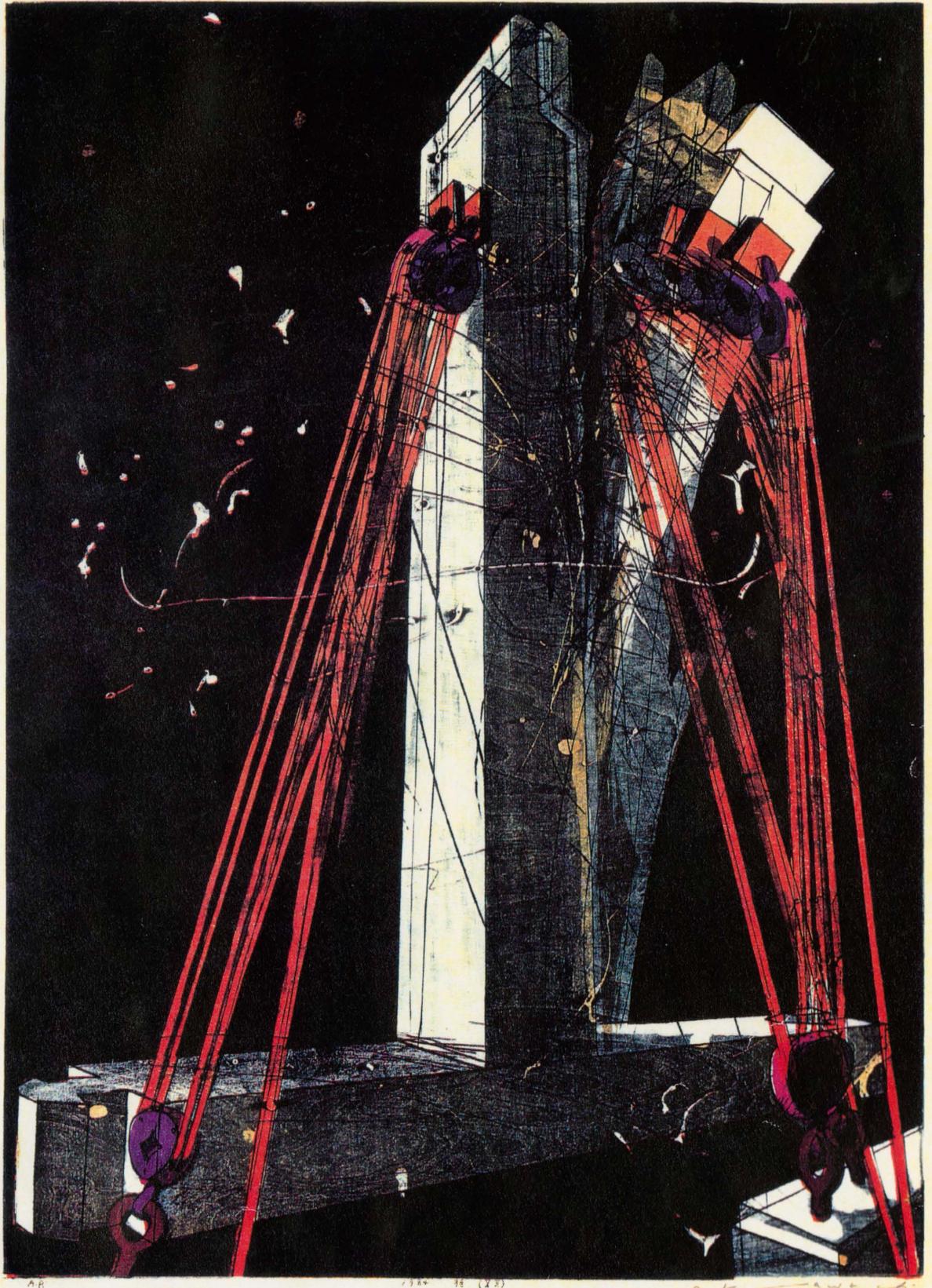


Figure 10