

Japanese Woodblock Printing

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Japanese Woodblock printing.

Woodblock print making was the original ancient communication and only source of communication in its era. You might say it was used the same then as today's multimedia explosion such as; the internet, TV, magazines, etc. It turns out that the first woodblock prints dates as far back as the 700's. They were not considered any type or form of artwork but as the first process for spreading the word mostly about Buddhist ways through text, called "Hyakumanto Darani".¹ The Empress Koken ordered one million of the woodblock scrolls to be made and delivered across the country side to temples and communities. Empress Koken apparently commanded that the million scrolls be printed because of the prevailing belief that if you put enough prayer charms in the temples, famine and plague could be warded off.

In the Tang Dynasty era (618-907), Woodblock prints were found in a Korean Temple, created by Dhara Sutra, one popular print was called "The Pure Immaculate Light" depicting a female emperor who established the Zhou Dynasty and also several other characters related to Wy Ze Tian.²

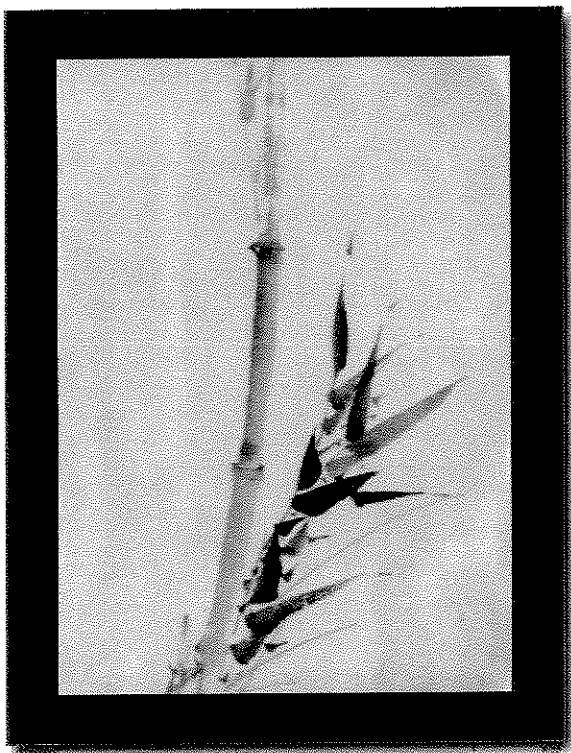
As that explains the early development of woodblock prints, a broader sense of the popularity did not come until the Edo era. This paper will attempt to explain that popularity in all aspects, as well as provide a description and process for making a simple woodblock print. As explained earlier, it was during the mid 6th through the late 9th centuries when the Buddhist in China began to spread their teachings of Buddha. It seems well over the centuries many more specimens were discovered, depicting poems about cities and Buddhist text.

By the Song and Yuan Dynasties (900's-1300's) various styles blossomed by artists that discovered the wood block technique. It was a great endeavor to make a print. The traditional Chinese

¹ Nussbqum, Louis Frederic and Roth, Kathe Woodblock Printing in Japan, Japan Encyclopedia (2005)

² Farrer, Anne, Chinese Printmaking Today: Woodblock Printing in China, 1980-2000-British Library (2004)

print had several processes; the actual print, the drawing, the engraving and printing all were performed by several different tradesmen, called Artisans, not artist. It was during the Ming Dynasty (1350's-1650) that the early graphic design exploded. There were famous, somewhat celebrated painters collaborating with the engravers and printers creating works of stunning artistic quality. Probably the most famous painter who painted commissioned works for a living was Qiu Ying.³ A Chinese painter noted for his gongbi (meticulous, defined) brush technique, used to produce highly detailed figure, architectural paintings and flower studies. His main patron was a wealthy merchant. The 17th century had yet another



leap in innovation, the creation of the multi block colored woodblock print. They would boast that the quality was that of an original painting.

Many famous works can be seen today such as scenes from the Huan Cui Hall, and illustration of writings from Little Yng Island called, "The Ten Bamboo Letter" and also poetry of the "Ten Elders". The above illustration is by Katsushika Hokusai a Japanese artist, ukiyo-e painter and printmaker of the Edo period. In his time, he was Japan's leading expert on Chinese

painting. He was born in Edo (now Tokyo). The Edo period, (1600's-mid 1800's) blossomed with this new style called Ukiyo-e prints, meaning "pictures of the floating world" such as the one to the left. It was the most popular of all styles. One must understand this was probably one of the last periods of Traditional Japan, as this was a time when wars came to an end, economic growth had begun and even a

³ Total History.com; 2012



time of somewhat political stability.⁴ Especially under the leadership of Tokugawa Ieyasu, known as the Tokugawa period. As Tokugawa was the Shogunate, meaning sort of similar to today's military dictator.

Tokugawa Ieyasu, (1543 – 1616) was the founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan. During his era, he achieved a balancing of power from possible hostile domains by placing allies across the region. So as the arts of war gave way to the arts of peace, this period blossomed with many forms of communication and entertainment, mainly in the larger cities, but mostly in Edo.

Edo, now known as Tokyo flourished as the most popular city, printed highly demanded informational materials possible such as: novels, poetry, maps, guide books and woodblock prints. This was the time when woodblock prints were mass produced. As referenced earlier, remember there were no newspapers, movies, photographs, internet, etc., all the power in communication was a woodblock print. They were bought up immediately as they were printed, because that is what depicted the times lifestyle, even as it changed rapidly.

It seems that as the government constantly came out with new rules, involving such items as to what people were allowed to wear, hair styles, what plays could be performed, books could be read, the population looked for guidance. That is why the woodblock print was of such importance. So imagine simple, honest expressions of the culture of the day that actually shaped the culture and in turn helped to shape the populous lifestyle.⁵ Woodblock prints were the most vital forces for social change.

⁴ Tokugawa period, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013

⁵ Encyclopedia, Woodblock.com

It is unbelievable that these artists were known as just simple workmen, but not until now do we consider them among the world's greatest artists.

As there were many famous woodblock print artists over the centuries, a couple well known of today are Kunisada Utagawa and Miyamoto Musashi. Utagawa, born in 1786 in Edo, was the son of a licensed merchant ferryboat operation.⁶ The woodblock print to the left was created by one of his



students, unknown as of today and believed to be one of not many portraits of him. Kunisada was a trendsetter in the art of the Japanese woodblock print. His prints represented daily lifestyles and kept up with trends of his time. He continuously developed his style, which was sometimes changed rapidly, but he would not give in to what he did not feel was represented by his prints. Kunisada was the most celebrated artist who specialized as an actor print designer in the 19th Century, and probably the most prolific, as he started as an apprentice at the age of 15 at a well known studio. Later in life his reward was to become the head of his own studio

school, which at that time he changed his name to Toyokuni II. It is said that over 20,000 prints were produced from his studio and possibly thousands more by numerous publishers. His specialty was designing actors and women facial shots that had landscape backgrounds. These seemed to be the most popular and in demand. As his new name Toyokuni II was used, it seems that most of the artisans used several different names. At this time, there was a great censorship and when woodblock prints were created that went over the line according to the strict rules of the law, they were subject to being arrested. He even went as far as using an alias "Matahei" on the title pages of his book prints that included many shunga (erotic art) pictures.

⁶ Izzard, Sebastian, Kunisada's World. New York; Japan Society and Ukiyo-e Society of America, 1993

Later in the 1800's, Kunisada collaborated with two of his fellow print makers, Hiroshige and Kuniyoshi. This was only because he wanted to participate in the solidarity against the politically motivated censorship regulations.

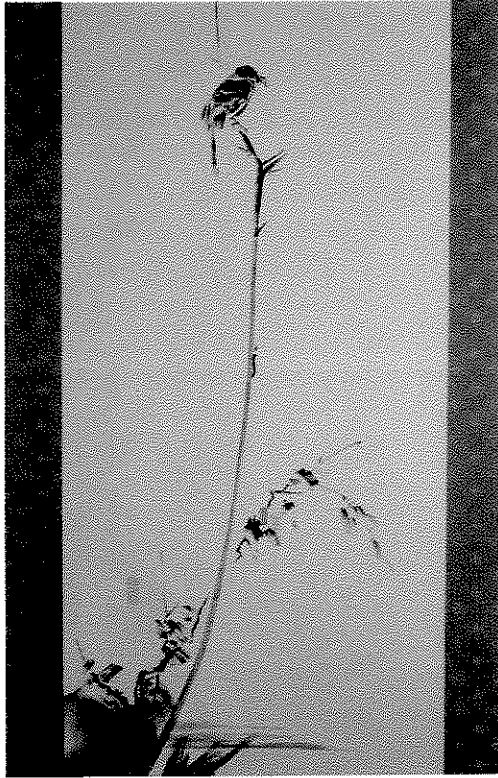
The second master worth investigating is Miyamoto Musashi, son of a warrior, Munisai Hirato. His relationship with his father was estranged and said to be of a complex, emotional and distant one. Miyamoto was left with in his uncle's care at the early age of seven years old. It was said by his uncle that he inherited a very aggressive temper, similar to his father. This was noticeable in his early age of training in Kenjutsu.⁷

Miyamoto, even at the early age of 13, began to use two swords towards developing his own style of fighting. At 16, he left his home and traveled to seek enlightenment in the way of perfecting his sword training. He followed the way of the samurai tradition, unfortunately, that meant total

commitment. He gave up all luxuries, from cutting his hair, grooming, bathing and never even thought about settling down and getting married. This also included, and probably the most important, never taking his swords off, in case they were needed immediately. It was inevitable that he became a natural ronin, (a samurai without a master). His life was one of battles after battles. He was a very shrewd and ruthless combatant and had little attachment to the idea of a fair fight, but that is in no way meaning he was not skilled enough to fight in a fair fight. It was not until very later in his life, Miyamoto became



⁷ Mr. Prophet, The Samurai's Sword, 2002



patient and a much more humble man than his youth. As he devoted his life to swords he also practiced to perfection many other arts of the samurai. He applied his keen insight and skills to writing poetry, books, sculpture and paintings among others.

One of his many writings included his great knowledge of strategies and the Art Way of the Sword. He wrote, *Heiho Sanjugokajo* ("The 35 Articles on the Art of Swordsmanship") a detail and indebt look at his philosophy and combat strategies. It was also thought of as the prototype of his most popular writings; *Gorin No Sho*, "The Book of Five Rings". Although, woodblock printing was one of his arts that were most popular, that he is so known of today, is certainly proof of his talent towards creating woodblock prints.

The most famous piece is that of a bird sitting on a long shoot of bamboo. Just the single impressive paint stroke of the bamboo shoot is evident of his skill level, which it shows his feeling and confidence in his work. The detail is immaculate, as the bird steadily sits upon the top of the shoot, watching and waiting as the small worm crawls up it ready to jump on it. As he has achieved numerous recognized masterpieces of calligraphy and classic ink paintings, his skill is notable by each brush stroke. He especially mastered the "broken ink" school of landscapes, applying this technique to all his prints.

Several years later around the 1640's, he wrote a book called *Hyoho Sanju Go* ("Thirty-five Instructions on Strategy") for one of his disciples, the same year he suffered attacks of neuralgia (an intense burning or stabbing pain caused by irritation of or damage to a nerve)⁸ setting up his future

⁸ FreeDictionary.com, Farlex

health issues. It was soon after that he retired to a cave named Reigando as a hermit to write what was previously discussed; The Book of Five Rings. He finished it just after the year 1645 and sensing his death approaching, he gave his manuscript to a younger brother of Terao Magonojo, his closest disciple. He died around June 13, 1645 in the Reigando cave.⁹

Several years after his death, in Kokur by Miyamoto Iori, a monument and funeral eulogy for him was erected. It was a monument called the Kokur hibun, also a scripture about his life, the Niten-ki was published in the city of Kumamoto in 1776.

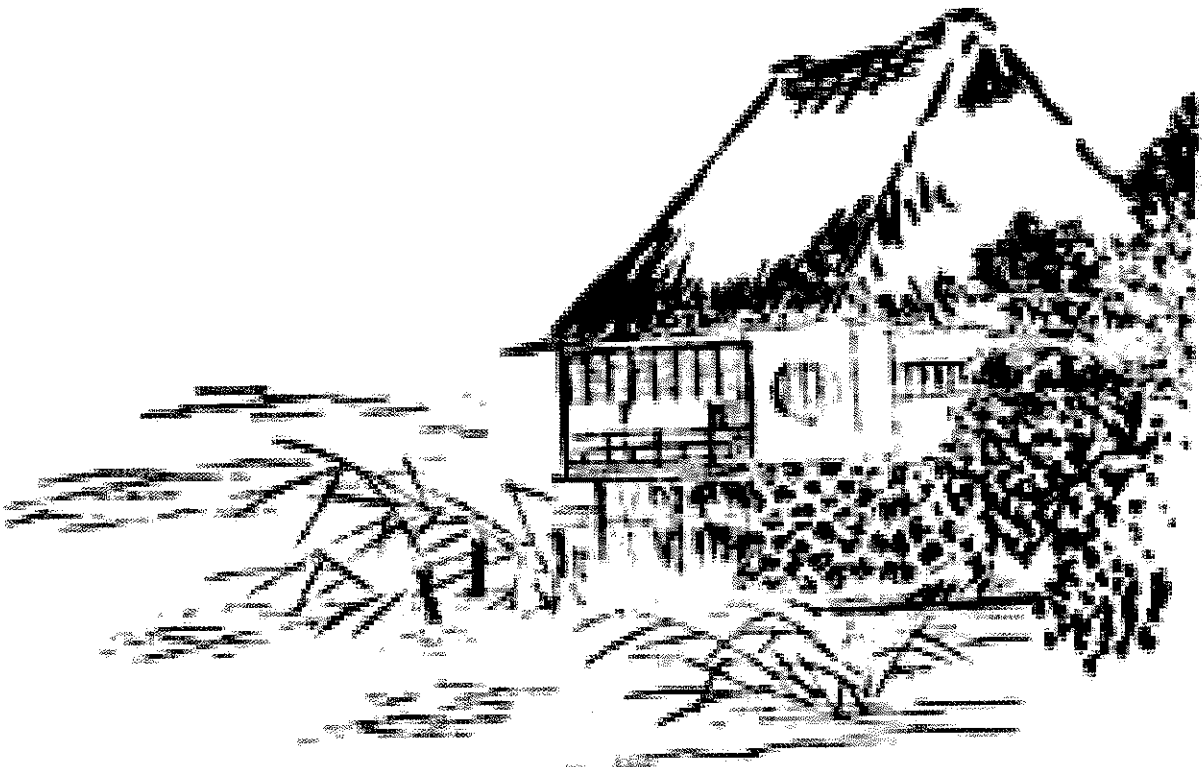
This is a correlation for many Edo period samurai were painters. An anonymous quote: "Slicing through a torso with a curving steel blade and putting ink to silk with a liquid loaded brush, both of these were strokes of arts. Both required the same swiftness, the same lack of indecision for the master of the brush and the master of the blade; the flawless stroke expressed a Japanese ideal, the beauty, the governed union of sure, unhurried speed and centuries-old tradition, utter self-assurance and zen purity of mind."¹⁰ It is ironic that the samurai and painters practiced both skills with such intense detail, as though it was their livelihood.

Paintings from the Edo period were very rich in drama and symbols, with many hidden meanings. One somewhat famous print depicts a carp swimming up a waterfall, which in all reality is probably not feasible. It is believed to represent the possibility of a fish changing to a dragon and viewed as one's climb up in their social status. Woodblock prints, known in Japan as ukiyo-e, actually mean "pictures of the floating world". The floating world is taken from a Buddhist metaphor that refers to the changing world of fleeting pleasures, which were often found both in seasonal changes in nature and the entertainment districts of Japan's major cities.

⁹ Tokitsu, Kenji; Miyamoto Musashi: His Life and Writings, 2004

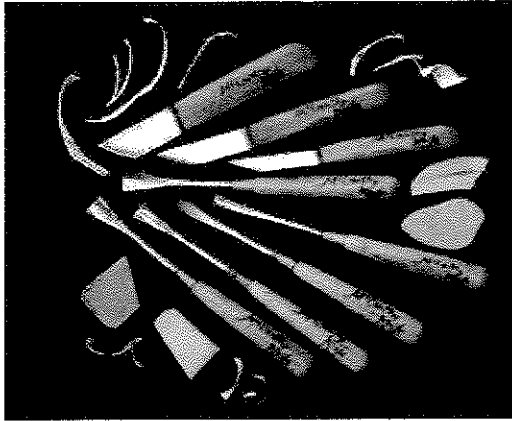
¹⁰ Salter, Rebecca, Facts and Details, Japanese Culture and History, 2001

Woodblock prints in Japan utilize two styles, traditional printing or creative printing methods. I will concentrate on the traditional print process as it is the original of the two. As mentioned earlier the printing process utilized several different workmen and sometimes many more. They consist mainly of a Publisher responsible for each design, production, and marketing of the finished prints. A designer who worked under the publisher was also commissioned by them would create the design on paper. A carver or group of carvers which ranged from experts to beginners carved the design in the wood. And of course a printer or even many printers were used at a time. And certainly other skilled workers were used for different involvements of the whole process.



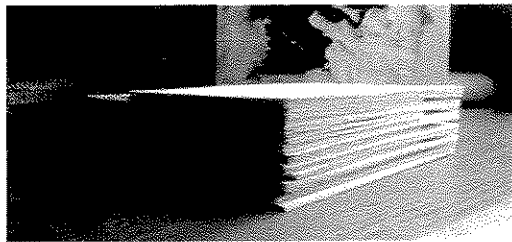
Example: The picture above is a basic woodblock actual print.

Now, before we get too involved in the actual process, one of the first steps is to prepare the paper for various sizes and moistening. They would use a special paper that to this day is still being manufactured called Hosho paper. The paper would be cut down the middle and would supply enough



for two prints of good size or sometimes they would be cut in thirds for larger images spread out on them.

Painting on dry paper would expand the ink unevenly as it was absorbed from the wet blocks, and applying several colors would make it impossible. So, one way to moisten the papers would be to press the paper between wet sheets of newspaper as layers of both. Then conceal them into large plastic sheets or between large boards so they could soak evenly for the next day.



Next, we should have access to the proper tools;

this was a master carver's necessity! The following tools used, in their Japanese names are; Hangi-to, Ai-suki, Maru-nomi, Kento-nomi, Kama-suki, San-kaku to and Soai-nomi. I will attempt to describe each of them.

These are just their basic must have tools, there are a number of other devices that they also used. The Hangi-to is the basic carving knife that is considered the main tool. It is the only one that is asymmetrical and also available in many sizes. All the knives are made to remove the blade by taking off the brass ring around the handle so that the blade could be sharpened or replaced. The Ai-suki actually is a flat blade with a slightly rounded nose and is used as a pushing motion to clear away the wood between the carved lines. The most rounded of chisels or the Maru-nomi, is used with a hammer or mallet. It is designed to remove large areas at a time. The Soai-nomi have somewhat slightly rounded corners but are shaped as a wide chisel with a hammer head square end to be used by the hitting method for larger areas. One of the last utilized blades, the Kento-nomi, has a simple straight blade and is kept extremely sharp for the most accurate cut possible. Another push chisel blade is called the

Koma-suki, used mostly by hand and not with a hammer, it also is pretty wide for larger areas. And lastly, the San-kaku to, or triangle knife, is a "v" shaped gouge, and are also available in many sizes.

One special sophisticated tool that is hand made from scraps of paper and shreds of bamboo skin is the Baren. This has an unknown origin, and was widely used then as it is now by professional woodblock printers. It is a simple device that imitates something close to a hard roller. As the paper is placed on the woodblock, the person would use it to rub the areas of concern. There are several books dating back hundreds of years on how to make this very special tool, from very complicated to easier ones, based on the skill of the workmen.

As this is somewhat a complicated process, you can see it has many facets involved in making such a print. It is certainly very complex although, I will attempt to describe the most basic simple print.

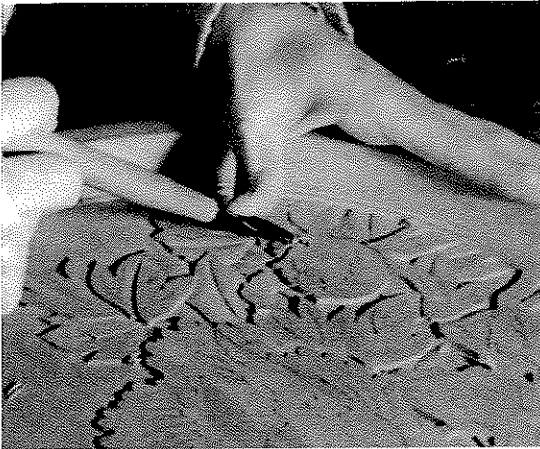
Also, during this writing I am attempting to create my own woodblock print, using a method I found that does not utilize wood. I will be substituting the wood for a square foot piece of flooring for my carving. The sample above is that of simple sketch.



My first step is to create a design, just a very simple sketch with a sharpie or

marker on a regular sheet of paper. I must remember that the image will be placed down and seen it its reverse. So this will be pasted to the wood like board. Basically, I will be cutting over the paper around the block lines of the shape. I will be using a watercolor paper as it absorbs water and will keep it moist, as also, I do not have access to the special Hosho paper. The sheets will be moistened evenly as they

will be stacked over sheets of wet newspaper and pressed together. At this point, it is not determined if color will be added.



As the carving is now ready to begin, cutting will take place around the lines throughout the image. Once all the lines have been cut, the cleaning of the waste area is removed. This can be a very tedious and time consuming process as each tool must be utilized for its specific area. If color will be added the next step would be to prepare several sheets and mark out the colors for

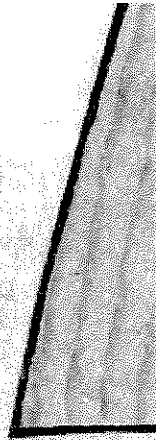
the individual inking and have more woodblock available. One step that must be remembered is to make sure the board is washed after all the carving is finished to remove any remaining debris left behind. When the printing is started on the key block, all materials must be within range as many steps are involved. So, let's say the first color is applied to the block and the moistened paper is properly placed over it. The Baren, or in this case a hard roller would be pressing the paper over the block and



then the paper would be carefully removed. This is where your choice would be to add layers of color, by repeating the first application.

Many woodblock prints carried the impression of some type of seal, either in place of or in addition to the artist's signature. That seal is actually the artist's signature.

There are two common methods to make such a seal on woodblock prints. One way was to have the desired image carved in reverse on a blank seal made of stone, ivory or bone. Or secondly, just have it



on carved on the woodblock print and have a separate color applied to it. Here is an example of an artist signature.

Imagine one million scrolls created by an Empress, specifically designed to be delivered to temples across the country with text about a spiritual warning to ward off the plague. Was this our version of today, spreading news maybe

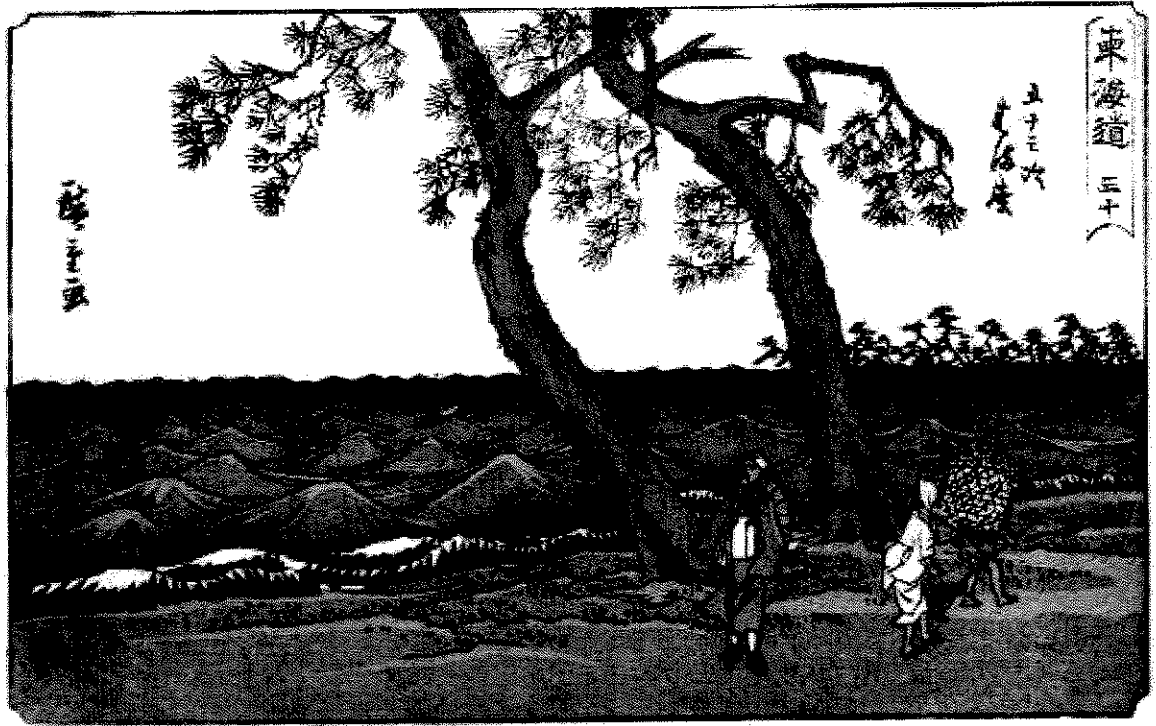
via the internet or on National TV in order to get a message out to the public? This must have taken a spectacular feat; one must realize the hundreds or maybe even thousands of workmen that were involved in the production of them. Long painstaking hours of manpower, and probably hundreds of deaths as oppose to our days modern machinery for printing and our way of life such as mass media like the internet to get a message out.

As I think back about how woodblock prints evolved, they seem to be even more powerful than anyone could imagine. From their first use, a text disclaiming a Royal Empress's passage, the Buddhist exclaiming prophecies, various pictures representing everyday living to fascinating art work of mimicking samurai or countryside landscapes. These were their captured life events. And so, as the eras passed by, leaders came and went, and they all did what they could do to suppress their population into living by their strict laws, for it was yet, a huge help from the artisans that led the way to change. Many woodblock artists, even known today, stretched the barriers of what was allowed to be shown in threat of being imprisoned. They would eventually push this limitation, the people demanded for it and this was the start of the lives changing forever. As the prints were so popular, they were bought up as soon as they were available. That was their statement, as the prints showed everyday portrayal; it was their opportunity for growth as a people and a country. So, they were more than what we see them as of today, more than just art, they were life itself.

東海道 三十一

五十三次
東海屋

松屋



This, unfortunately is my first three attempts at applying ink to my board. As you can see, they are very crude attempts at that. As this has turned out to be a very delicate process, although intriguing; it definitely has been a challenge. With only using two layers of ink, the background and the face, it took several hours to complete, it had to be a very tedious job for all involved.



A few more attempts, these were made using various types of paper, you can see different results with each one.





Final print with my signature stamp up in top right corner.