**The influence of Japanese printmaking on the early 20th century British woodblock printing revival and the Central School of Arts and Crafts**

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The Central School of Arts and Crafts (which was funded by the London County Council) was set up in 1896 by W R Lethaby, an architect and educator with an interest in reviving ‘forgotten’ crafts. The College’s pedagogic ethos was predicated on the importance of studio practice and close links with industry, and under Lethaby’s watchful eye the College put together a dedicated staff of craftsmen and designers who were well placed to deliver against his aims. He also put together a collection of art and design objects which was actively used in teaching.

The collection originated in the London County Council Technical Education Board’s Schools Examples Collection, Lethaby having been an Art Inspector for the Board. In 1894 Lethaby and his fellow Inspector George Frampton reported to the Board on their aspirations for the teaching collection, stating that ‘what may appear at first sight rough gothic carvings, ugly Japanese prints and crude Durer woodcuts, will we believe prove of the greatest value by way of stimulus and suggestions as to methods’. The collection was originally stored in the Board’s Central Art Department in the former Stationer’s Hall in Bolt Court. In 1906 to Southampton Row to the new permanent buildings of the Central School (Beckemeyer, 1996, 8).

Among the items acquired for the teaching collection were indeed a number of ‘ugly Japanese prints’ whose means of production was printing in colour from wood blocks. With the rise of copper plate engraving in the 1500s and (later) metal plate etching, woodcutting and wood engraving had largely fallen from favour in the West. However, wood block printing continued to be at the heart of a burgeoning printmaking industry in Japan and the prints purchased by the Central School display a variety of techniques that would come to have a significant impact on printmaking in the West, playing into the wood block printing revival in which the Central School played a key role.

We can establish with reasonable confidence when these items came into the collection as a note in the Technical Education Board minutes for 1898 states that ‘Japanese and other books were purchased for the sum of 14s and 4d’. A further note confirms that in 1903 six Japanese colour blocks were bought for £5 10s.’ We also know from contemporary accounts that Japanese prints were displayed in the entrance hall of the school (Beckemeyer, 1996, 11).

It is impossible to give more than a flavour of the prints and blocks that remain in the collection (some 250 in all). They comprise images of Japanese actors, courtesans, sumo wrestlers, beautiful ladies, folk and history tales and landscapes. Albeit a small collection, they represent the kind of images typically found in Japanese ukiyo-e prints. The name ukiyo-e or ‘floating world’ is generally used for all Japanese woodblock prints of the Edo and early Meiji period, but the term 'floating world' describes the culture of pleasure and entertainment that evolved in the dynamic urban centres of Edo period Japan, with their theatres, brothels and culture of glamour and eroticism.

Ukiyo-e became enormously popular in the West amid the vogue for Japonism in the latter half of the 19th century (Itabashi, 2015, 51) and printmakers such as Kunisada, Hokusai and Hiroshige became names to be reckoned with in the West as well as in Japan. Lawrence Binyon (a curator at the British Museum and leading scholar of ukiyo-e prints) felt that the way ukiyo-e prints had been mass produced for sale at affordable prices was a realisation of the Arts and Crafts ideal. (Itabashi, 2015, 52) bringing beautiful art objects within the reach of the common man.

Where printing in the West was traditionally done using oil based inks and a press, ukiyo-e used water soluble pigments brushed onto the block, and printing was done by hand which allowed the blending and gradation of colours. Each print required a designer, engraver, printer and publisher. The overall design was separated into different colours, drawn on fine tissue paper and pasted onto the block. The cutting of registration marks enabled multiple craftsmen to work at carving blocks that would be printed together to form a whole image – with up to 20 blocks making up a single image. Paper from the bark of the mulberry tree was often used as it was both robust and absorbent. The prints were relatively inexpensive to buy. The Central School actor prints, published in Edo and Osaka in the mid 19th century, could be purchased for around 20 mon – the price of a bowl of noodles (Clark in Backemeyer, 1996, 51.)

It is important to note that ukiyo-e were made by wood cutting rather than wood engraving and it is worthwhile spending a little time outlining the differences between the two techniques. There has been much confusion about the distinction, not least due to fudged descriptions in museum catalogues and even scholarly works. Wood engraving uses tools similar to metal engraving and the design is carved on the grain end of the wooden block. Wood cutting is done on the plank side of the wood using knives and gouges. Both techniques use a hard wood such as cherry, and wood engraving in particular allows for an incredible level of detail. The key difference between the finished prints is that in a wood cutting the outline is cut in relief creating a black line, whereas wood engraving draws with white lines, like chalk on a blackboard.

It is also interesting to note that there was an element of competition among those involved in the wood block printing revival and printmaking more widely in the late 19th and early 20th. With new (or revived) disciplines emerging there was a jockeying for position amongst practitioners and a snobbery around emulation rather than using traditional techniques to express something new. Those engaged in the production of black and white wood engravings so favoured for book illustrations looked down on those who adopted the Japanese technique as derivative. Why, they asked, would you bother cutting blocks to replicate the look and feel of a watercolour? (Itabashi, 2015, 52.) Both wood cutters and wood engravers looked down on lino cutting, which was seen as a childish art, while reproductive engravers were seen as little better than factory workers (Itabashi, 2008, 141 – 142).

At the time when ukiyo-e first became popular in the West neither wood engraving nor wood cutting was taught at the few existing art schools (Selborne, 1996). However, at the hands of the Arts and Crafts movement and with the influence of artists such as Lucien Pissarro a revival or sorts was underway and the Central School, with its focus on more traditional means of production, would prove to be a driving force. One of Lethaby’s defining features was his ability to identify talented makers and persuade them to come and teach for him in the College. One of the first to join his staff was Frank Morley Fletcher, who was at that time also Head of Reading School of Art.

Morley Fletcher had studied in Paris at the Atelier of Fernand Cormon and was credited by Campbell Dodgson in Contemporary English Woodcuts (1922) with creating the first woodcuts in the Japanese style with John Dickson Batten in 1895. The Central School prospectus for 1899 states that ‘Mr Morley Fletcher takes a class for Design, Engraving and Printing of Colour Prints from Wood Blocks in a method based on the Japanese practice.’ The class took place on Wednesday evenings. Where ukiyo-e involved a different craftsman in each stage of the process, Morley Fletcher encouraged his students to undertake all aspects including design, block cutting and printing.

Morley Fletcher left the Central School in 1904 and went to teach in Edinburgh School of Art, where he remained from 1906 to 1923. However, even after leaving the Central School he continued to collaborate with his old employers, publishing in 1916 his book *Wood-Block Printing: A Description of the Craft of Woodcutting and Colour Printing Based on the Japanese Practice*. The book was part of the Artistic Crafts Series edited by W R Lethaby.

In the book Morley Fletcher claims that the few woodblock prints shown in the UK were the ‘outcome of the experiments of a small group of English artists in making prints by the Japanese method’ (Morley Fletcher, 1916, 15). He describes his early experiments with Batten and their adoption in its entirety, of the Japanese process. He also describes the classes he taught at the Central School ‘which for several years became the centre of the movement.’ (Morley Fletcher, 1916, 15).

The book gives detailed instructions on how to design and print in the Japanese style, working from a key block which should suggest the form of the print and act as a skeleton for the design as a whole. Colour blocks are then planned by means of impressions taken from the key block. Illustrations show each element of the print making process from the most appropriate knives and brushes to cutting, inking and printing.

Morley Fletcher’s reach through teaching alone was considerable; an exploration of the lists of those who exhibited colour wood block prints in the early part of the 20th century with the Society of Gravers Printers in Colour or the Colour Print Club reveals that many successful practitioners were taught by Morley Fletcher at Reading, the Central School or Edinburgh. The publication of *Wood-Block Printing* was to extend his influence even further. Writing in the Colour Print Club Journal, 1932, Muriel A F Grove describes how in 1924, a group of girls in a Midland art school discovered Morley Fletcher’s ‘little book’ in the library. Their enthusiasm for the book resulted in the foundation of ‘The Central Club of Colour Wood-Block Engravers’ and a few students are reported to have spent sleepless nights and foodless days printing, printing, printing.’ (Colour Print Club Journal, 1932, 49.)

Morley Fletcher was followed by the lesser known, but similarly influential, Sydney Lee, a ‘pioneer and early exponent of wood engraving as a fine art medium’ (Meyrick, 2013, 12). Lee was an incredibly versatile artist, a founder member of the Society of Wood Engravers and a member of the Royal Academy, but unlike Morley Fletcher, he is barely remembered for his extraordinary output of paintings, lithographs, woodcuts, wood engravings and mezzotints or his work as a teacher. His work in colour woodcuts utilises the Japanese techniques of unexpected perspectives, graded bands of colour and flattened backgrounds with high horizons.

Lee studied at the Manchester School of Art and the [Académie Colarossi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acad%C3%A9mie_Colarossi) in Paris. One of the things that makes his prints so distinctive is that he coated his blocks in India ink before carving to yield greater detail. Lee taught at the Central School between 1905 and 1910 and later sat on the Council for the Original Colour Print Magazine.

It has been incredibly hard to track down those who studied with Frank Morley Fletcher and Sydney Lee at the Central School. Archive material from the early days of the School is scarce and neither Morley Fletcher nor Lee left behind personal archives of any significance. Combing catalogues of the Colour Print Club Journal and the Original Colour Print Magazine have yielded but one definite student of the Central School from this period – Ethel Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick is remembered for her marine themed prints and exhibited widely at the Royal Academy, Society of Graver Printers and the Colour Woodcut Society (Green, 2006, 33). The influence of the Japanese style is clear in her work and it is hoped that further research will uncover more of her type.

Another key figure in this story is Noel Rooke. Rooke started working at the Central School in the same year as Sydney Lee and has been much feted for his contribution to the wood engraving revival. Joanna Selborne, author of the extraordinary British Wood-engraved Book Illustration 1904 – 1940, claims that by the 1930s few wood engravers had not come under the influence either directly or indirectly of Rooke, who helped raise the status of wood engraving to an independent graphic art form (Selborne in Backemeyer, 1996, 42.) Rooke taught wood engraving covertly in his illustration classes from 1905, but it was not until Lethaby’s departure in 1911 that he began to teach wood engraving as a dedicated class.

Although Rooke’s specialism was wood engraving rather than wood cutting he was capable in handling both. The prospectus for 2011 states that ‘if sufficient applications are received a course of 12 demonstrations in *Woodcuts in Colour* based on the Japanese method will be delivered’. By 1912 Rooke was offering Engraving and Wood Cutting for Printing in Colours. Here you can see Rooke’s four colour woodcut design for a poster produced for the London General Omnibus Company in 1922. We are lucky enough to have representations of several of the printing states in our collection. Rooke was an incredibly dedicated teacher, sacrificing his own artistic career to commit a lifetime to working with students (he would eventually leave the Central School in 1947). His personal output comprises wood engraved book illustrations and various prints and posters, many of which reflect his personal passion for mountains.

As archive material is much more plentiful for the Central School from 1906 when the College moved into permanent buildings, it has been much easier to identify Rooke’s students. One of his earliest acolytes was Robert Gibbings, who studied with him just before the First World War. Like many of Rooke’s students, Gibbings’ true specialism was wood engraving for book illustration and in 1920 Gibbings (alongside Sydney Lee and Noel Rooke) became one of the nine funder members of the Society of Wood Engravers. In 1924 he acquired the Golden Cockerel Press, a Private Press which ran until 1960, publishing the work of Eric Gill, Blair Hughes Stanton and Eric Ravilious.

While much of Gibbings’ own output was in black and white he did produce a number of significant coloured woodcuts including Albert Bridge, Chelsea (1919), Evening at Gaza (1918) and Shipboard: the Llandovery Castle (1918), all three of which show the use of graded colour washes, a distinctly Japanese technique and one which Gibbings must surely have been based on close study of original Japanese prints.

This paper has talked a great deal about wood cutting and wood engraving, and rightly so. But the techniques of ukiyo-e, such as the cutting of registration marks to allow separate colour areas to be printed on top of one another to create a whole image, were also used by lino cutters and textile designers.

In the Modern Woodcut (1924) Herbert Furst suggests it is ‘no co-incidence that the creator of the Japanese woodcut, Monobo (1638 – 1714) was a designer of textile patterns’ (90). Interestingly Sydney Lee also had a long standing connection with decorated textiles through family connections. Writing in Making Their Mark (2000) Joanna Selborne claims that the Central School’s ‘multi-disciplinary approach helped erode the barriers between the fine and decorative arts’ allowing students to study several disciplines simultaneously.

One of the students who benefited from this inter-disciplinarity was Joyce Clissold who studied at the Central School from 1924 to 1927. She studied printing under Noel Rooke and textiles with Bernard Adeney. The result was a creative understanding of pattern repeats which Clissold used to design her Footprints range of fabrics. Clissold chose to use lino mounted on wood blocks because it was much softer and faster and easier to carve. Though Clissold was producing a fairly high-end product (all of her fabrics were hand printed and all of her garments handmade to be sold in shops in Knightsbridge and Bond Street) the relatively cheap form of experimentation through lino printing led to the creation of an extraordinarily innovative range of fabrics.

In conclusion, the staff and students of the Central School of Arts and Crafts played a key role in the adoption and dissemination of Japanese printmaking techniques in the early part of the 20th century. It is interesting to note that while the Central Saint Martins Museum & Study Collection is awash with black and white wood engravings, there is very little work in colour. The reason for this is simple: colour woodcuts did not lend themselves to book illustration (it being impossible to print in colour in the early part of the 20th century) and colour prints were produced in far fewer numbers so are consequently more expensive. Hence we have a frustrating lack of material to support what seems to me a key story of the early years of the Central School. As a result of having researched this short paper I will be keeping my eye out for examples of work by Frank Morley Fletcher, Sydney Lee and Ethel Kirkpatrick and I hope that we may be able to grow the collection to better represent this fascinating story.

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