Woodblock Printing: Re-creating Art

With ever-improving technology, the art of printmaking in Europe and the United States has attained a high standard. It captures accurately the colours, strokes, moods, and even textures of mediums and textiles. If one were to apply a fresh coat of oil on a full-scale replica, frame it and call it an original work, many would believe the claim.

It is, however, a completely different matter to use such outstanding technology to make prints of Chinese ink painting — the results look incongruous. Why is this? It is because Western printmaking entails the use of machines, Western paper and oil-based ink, all of which conform to the rich, realistic and colourful characteristics of oil painting.

The main feature of Chinese ink painting is its empty space, liberal spirit, and emphasis on the charming interaction between brush, ink and water. Colour is occasionally used but kept minimal. It is not treated as the main focus of the art. Thus, orthodox Chinese ink painting relies purely on the transformation of ink, the manner of brushwork, and the elegance of artistic conception. Such special effects can be achieved only with the use of Chinese rice paper, Chinese ink brushes and ink. Chinese ink painting is created in this way and the same should also apply to its printing.

Printing is in effect a re-creation of art. The workers must possess a certain level of artistic cultivation, technical expertise, and knowledge about the concentration of the ink, intensity of the colour layer, wetness of the brush, strength of the lines and the amount of water used, in order to be successful.

Sketching, carving, and printing are the three procedures in printmaking. First, a person adept at drawing will sketch and organise all the brushstrokes and sections of similar tones onto the same block. The number of colours involved determines the number of blocks needed. A simple painting will need only two to nine blocks. The more elaborate and complicated ones (such as Song Dynasty paintings of hunting scenes) may require a few scores of blocks. Large paintings, like Ma Yuan’s landscape paintings and his Dancing and Singing — Peasants Returning from Work, may require a few hundred blocks. The sequence of printing can be indicated with ink on a piece of transparent paper before sticking this on the pearwood blocks for carving. Pearwood is tough but fine, allowing the knife blade to move about easily. It is heat tolerant and water resistant, and is thus most suitable for carving. The carver carves according to the inked outlines, at the same time referring to the original painting hanging on the wall to correctly interpret the essence of the artwork. When the carving is done, printing takes place according to the sequence indicated. The executor of this last procedure is almost the personification of the original artist. He needs to understand where to use ink and where to apply faint colours, when there should be dryness or wetness, and how to manoeuvre them to the most beautiful effect. Sometimes, he would specially sprinkle water onto the rice paper to heighten the dreaminess of the work. These various methods can only be mastered by someone who is quick-thinking and nimble. The materials used, such as paper, silk, ink, and colour are completely similar to those used in the original painting. Moreover, Chinese rice paper is highly water-absorbent and allows for the myriad gradations of ink to show clearly. It is thus hard to distinguish between a painting and a print produced in this way.

Since every procedure in printmaking is executed manually, it is inevitable that there should be minor differences in the final prints. Generally speaking, however, the prints do not usually fall below a 98 percent similarity to the original work, and they do preserve the key spirit of the work. In fact, these prints reveal the adaptability of the craft. This is the value of woodblock printing.

Western printmaking only requires one carefully planned arrangement for exact replicas to roll out continuously from the machines. These products are nothing more than a visual medium. The prints are meaningless in themselves because the appeal lies in the original artwork.

Chinese woodblock printing is brought about by combining the thoughts, talents and labour of many people. This process is, in itself, a form of art. It resonates with its audience not just because it captures the essence of the original artwork, but also because it brings to the fore the many unknown heroes responsible for it. This is why woodblock printing can be described as a re-creation of art.
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