

White-line Woodblock Prints

by Dan Hardison

During the early days as an art colony in Provincetown, Massachusetts, artists normally chose to leave during the harsh winter months. But during the winter of 1915/16, a group of six artists decided to remain in Provincetown and concentrate on woodblock printmaking. The group shared ideas and experiences in both traditional black and white woodblock printing and in Japanese color woodblock printing. Impatient with the technique of color woodblock printing that required a separate carved block for each color, B.J.O. Nordfelt developed a method of carving a single block from which all the colors could be printed. The result became known as the white-line woodblock print or Provincetown print.

Nordfelt introduced his method to the group and they continued to develop the technique through the winter. The following summer the group held exhibitions to display the new work that had been created during the winter months. Interest in the new printing technique grew, and in 1918 one of the first American print societies was formed – the Provincetown Printers.

The creation of a white-line woodblock print begins with a simple outline drawing of an image on a block of wood. Grooves are then carved in the wood to represent the lines of the drawing. Each area of color is separated by a groove.

A sheet of paper is attached to the edge of the block to maintain registration during printing. Colors are painted on the block using watercolor paint. The paper is laid over the block and rubbed with the back of a spoon or burnisher to transfer the image. Each color is printed individually



Dogwood Blossoms by Dan Hardison
white-line woodblock print, 3" x 5 1/4"

while working through small areas of the block. The resulting image on the paper will have an embossed white line separating each area of color – thus its name.

The process makes it virtually impossible to create two prints exactly alike. These original printmakers chose to make their editions open-ended in number. The image may have been the same, but the colors would vary within the edition.

The best-known artist to work in this field was Blanche Lazzell who continued to produce and teach the white-line woodblock print until her death in 1956. Lazzell used the technique to produce some of the first abstract prints created in the United States.

The technique continues today on Cape Cod with artists such as Ruth Hogan, Kathi Smith, and Bill Evaul. The white-line woodblock print appears both primitive and modern – the printing technique a combination of craft and art form.



Carved block used for *Dogwood Blossoms*
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