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Home » Archeologia sperimentale » Articoli e News

The Japanese art of using an inkless printing - by Amelia Carolina Sparavigna

Redazione Archaeogate, 24-02-2013

Embossing or gauffrage is a technique that creates a relief on the surface of a substrate. We find it on paper or cardboard, fabric, leather or wood and even metals. As an artistic technique, embossing is hand-made by artists, using specific tools to create a relief model of the desired design. Therefore this technique creates a very limited number of samples or even a unique non-replicable object. To accomplish it, techniques of dry or hot embossing can be used. In dry embossing, it is the pressure to act on the substrate, pressure that the hot embossing combines with the effect of heating up the substrate material. For common products, when a large number of replicas are required, matrices on rolls are used. On them the model of a relief is carved in the opposite direction, so that when the matrix is pressed against the substrate, the desired pattern will be displayed in correct forms. In printing therefore, embossing is enriching the production.

There is a country where embossing preponderantly entered the artistic prints: the country is Japan. Experienced collectors are usually well aware of the several printing techniques that they are often encountering in collecting Japanese woodblock prints. Refined printing techniques, having quite complex iconographies, are the Ukiyo-e and the Nishiki-e [1,2]. Beside embossing, the print is enriched with gold and silver dusts [3,4]. Nishiki-e, the "brocade picture", refers to the Japanese printing using multi-colored woodblocks. It was invented in the 1760s, and perfected and popularized by Suzuki Harunobu [5], artist and printmaker, who produced a large indefinite quantity of Nishiki-e prints, between 1765 and his death five years later. Formerly, most prints had been simply in black-and-white, colored by hand, or colored with the use of one or two color ink blocks.

A Nishiki-e print requires having separate woodblocks for each color (Fig.1), and the use of them in a proper stepwise sequence. An engraver named Kinroku is credited with the technical innovations that allowed each block of the separate colors to fit perfectly onto the plate, in order to have the complete flawless image [4]. In the Meiji period, from September 1868 through July 1912, various Nishiki-e prints illustrated new fashions, imported goods, some events, such as the railroad, and other new topics. The Nishiki-e newspapers (Shinbun Nishiki-e) were very popular during this period, in particular during the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). The brilliant colors and the exciting scenes, accompanied by their relatively inexpensive nature, made them a good alternative to the black and white photographs [4].

Besides the woodblocks to print colors, sometimes the artists are using some woodblocks for embossing. The embossing is told in Japanese Karazuri, "empty printing", that is, inkless printing [6]. As previously told, this technique gives to a flat sheet of paper or cardboard, a relief. Depending on the lighting used, in particular using a grazing light, the effect of embossing is visible, because the relief is casting shadows on the printed surface. Karazuri is done in exactly the same way as a normal printing, by rubbing the paper with a "baren", a disk like device with a flat bottom and a handle. For Karazuri, no pigment is applied to the block first, so the resulting lines appear in a purely embossed area. The back side of the paper remains flat, and the embossed effect is apparent only from the front of the print. Usually Karazuri is done with paper moist. The pressure required is the same as when printing with inks. However, if the paper is thick and a good deep Karazuri is required, the pressure can be quite large.

The subjects of this art of printing are ladies, actors, samurais and also landscapes, nature and animals. The relationship of the animal kingdom to the world of human beings is quite close in the Japanese society. As a result, birds and animals, even trees, are often perceived in anthropomorphic terms in the printing iconography [7,8]. Therefore we can see ladies with rich kimonos, accompanied by white herons. And there, the brocade robes and the birds' feathers are given by the Karazuri. Another example is the rendering of the surf of waves in marine landscapes, and the waves of rivers as in the upper panel of Fig.2. And, not surprisingly, ghosts are a favorite subject of this inkless printing too. Let me suggest the reader to visit the web gallery www.ukiyoe-gallery.com/gauffrage.htm, where it is shown how Karazuri is able to represent the evanescence of a ghost.

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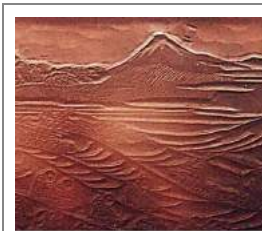
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A cherry woodblock and its multicolor Nishiki-e print. Museo di Arte Orientale, Torino



Details of Nishiki-e prints with Karazuri (waves, leaves, rays of the sun and brocade robes). On the right, we can see a work by Utagawa Toyokuni II (Toyoshige), 1825-1830, representing a ghost, Museo di Arte Orientale, Torino.

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[inizio pagina](#)

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Figure 1: A cherry woodblock and its multicolor Nishiki-e print. Museo di Arte Orientale, Torino



Figure 2 Details of Nishiki-e prints with Karazuri (waves, leaves, rays of the sun and brocade robes). On the right, we can see a work by Utagawa Toyokuni II (Toyoshige), 1825-1830, representing a ghost, Museo di Arte Orientale, Torino.