

# Preface

Ever since Papillon's *Traité historique et pratique de la gravure en bois* (1766), writers on the history and technique of printing from relief wood blocks have speculated widely on the circumstances of its development in Europe. Some scholars have credited the Venetian merchant/explorer Marco Polo with learning the art of printing from wood blocks in China, where it had been practiced for centuries (or, by one account, for over two millennia), and carrying it back to Italy with him in 1295. Or perhaps, as Pliny relates, the great Roman scholar and polymath Marcus Terentius Varro first employed the technique in the first century B.C.E. to illustrate copies of his *De imaginibus*, a biographical dictionary now lost. Papillon himself, while recognizing the priority of the Chinese, claimed to have seen prints from wood blocks cut in Ravenna by the Alexander and Isabella Cunio in the 1280s, and ascribed to these "ingenious and amiable twins" the spontaneous invention of the technique in the West. Best of all, in 1932 crusty J. J. Lankes stretched the argument a bit by tracing its roots all the way back to the anonymous Paleolithic artist who imprinted an image of his hand on the ceiling of a cave in Altamira.

Whatever its origins, the craft of block cutting and printing was certainly well established in Europe by the late fourteenth century, where it was used primarily for the printing of single-leaf devotional images, playing cards, and decorative patterns on cloth. By the middle of the fifteenth century relief woodblocks were locked up with metal type on the bed of large wooden presses to produce the earliest illustrated printed books. And even though books began to be embellished by pictures printed from intaglio copper plates soon afterwards, the marriage of relief wood block and metal type has continued very felicitously to the present day. Indeed, a great many of the books that issue from contemporary fine presses are illustrated or decorated by woodcuts made in the age-old way.

For centuries the technical "mysteries" of cutting wood blocks were transmitted from journeyman to apprentice in the manner prescribed for artisans in all craft fraternities until the dissolution of the guild system in the seventeenth century. After that, the fresh

new spirit of free enterprise and competition gradually supplanted the ancient guilds. This had an enlivening effect on all sectors of economic life and craft practice, and over time gradually permitted almost anyone to take up the trade of his (or, later, her) choice, whether they had been bound to a master or not. These unaffiliated aspirants needed some sort of instruction or training, hence the publication of practical manuals for most crafts beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

At the end of the eighteenth century the illustrious Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) refined the traditional technique of cutting a design with a knife on a block of soft wood sawn plank-wise, by instead plying an engraver's tool called a burin across the end grain of box, a very hard wood. The burin cuts thinner and more precise incisions than the knife, and the end grain of box (or any other dense wood) accepts finer detail than the plank side. Bewick was thus able to create small, sometimes miniature, compositions bursting with detail and nuance. This is the technique so brilliantly elucidated in the present volume by Barry Moser, who can be said to be an heir to Bewick's innovation. The great critical success of Bewick's *General History of Quadrupeds* of 1790, illustrated by dozens of exceedingly fine cuts executed in the new manner, insured that wood engravings would supplant woodcuts for most relief work in books and broadsides within a decade of its publication.

Bewick trained a number of able apprentices, some of whom – like Charlton Nesbit and Luke Clennell – had distinguished careers of their own. Later in life, when pressed as to why he never codified his method, Bewick insisted that it could not be explained concisely in written form: "I think no exact description can be laid down as a rule for others to go by; they will by practice have to find out this themselves." But many young engravers who had the misfortune of living far from Bewick's Newcastle, like his American disciple, Alexander Anderson (1775–1870), were forced to teach themselves to engrave boxwood the hard way, simply by imitation. Anderson was greatly impressed with the breathtaking fineness of Bewick's illustrations in a copy of the *Quadrupeds* that made its way across the Atlantic, and sought to recreate the same effects in his

own work. He had no teacher besides trial and error, but he persevered and was ultimately successful. Anderson's early efforts resulted in the suite of thirty-nine "elegantly engraved" illustrations (reversed copies of Bewick's) to Berquin's popular *Looking-Glass for the Mind* of 1795, the first book to be illustrated with wood engravings in the United States.

Both Bewick and Anderson drew their own designs, either directly onto the block or on paper for later transfer to the block. Later, as publishers of popular newspapers and magazines demanded ever more illustration, they were forced to employ hundreds of skilled engravers to meet strict production deadlines by reproducing the drawings of commercial artists. Wood engraving turned out to be the perfect reproductive medium, just right for the creation of facsimiles of free-flowing pen and ink drawings or spontaneous pencil sketches. Then in the 1860s it was discovered that designs could be transferred photographically onto wood blocks, by coating the surface with photographic emulsion and exposing it beneath a negative. This new process required engravers to devise ways of mechanically imitating the range of continuous tones and subtle chromatic effects found in photographs or, in other words, of "interpreting" the work of the camera. In a further development in the latter part of the century, the more "impressionistic" palette derived from the use of photographs finally gave wood engravers a glimpse of the artistic potential of the medium, and freed it from its conventional origins. Yes, wood engraving could reproduce art and could "interpret" it as well; but, with the greatly amplified graphic vocabulary and more dramatic means for suggesting tone and texture, wood engraving could be art, too. And it was as a flexible and highly expressive artistic medium, long after its commercial usefulness was spent, that the twentieth-century fine press movement embraced wood engraving and nurtured it until our own day.

The first detailed description in English of the technical aspects of cutting wood engravings *à la* Bewick comes only after the master's death, in the final chapter of John Jackson and W. A. Chatto's *Treatise on Wood Engraving, Historical and Practical* published in London

in 1839. Here Jackson the practitioner and Chatto the historian actually do lay down the rule, and in great detail, too. They optimistically predicted that “the art will never want encouragement, nor again sink into neglect, so long as there are artists of talent to furnish good designs, and good engravers to execute them.” Remarkably, given the enthusiastic response by American publishers to Bewick’s “white line” engravings, the first book devoted to instruction in the technique on this side of the Atlantic came only much later. In 1867 a little *Manual of Instruction in the Art of Wood Engraving* by S. E. Fuller was published in Boston. Readers of the time did not know it, but the author was a woman, Sarah. If the title page prevaricated on the matter of her gender, the drift of the introduction may have given her away, as it makes quite a strong case for wood engraving as “a fine employment for woman,” although with certain modifications in the daily work routine (“not more than five or six hours” of engraving per day).

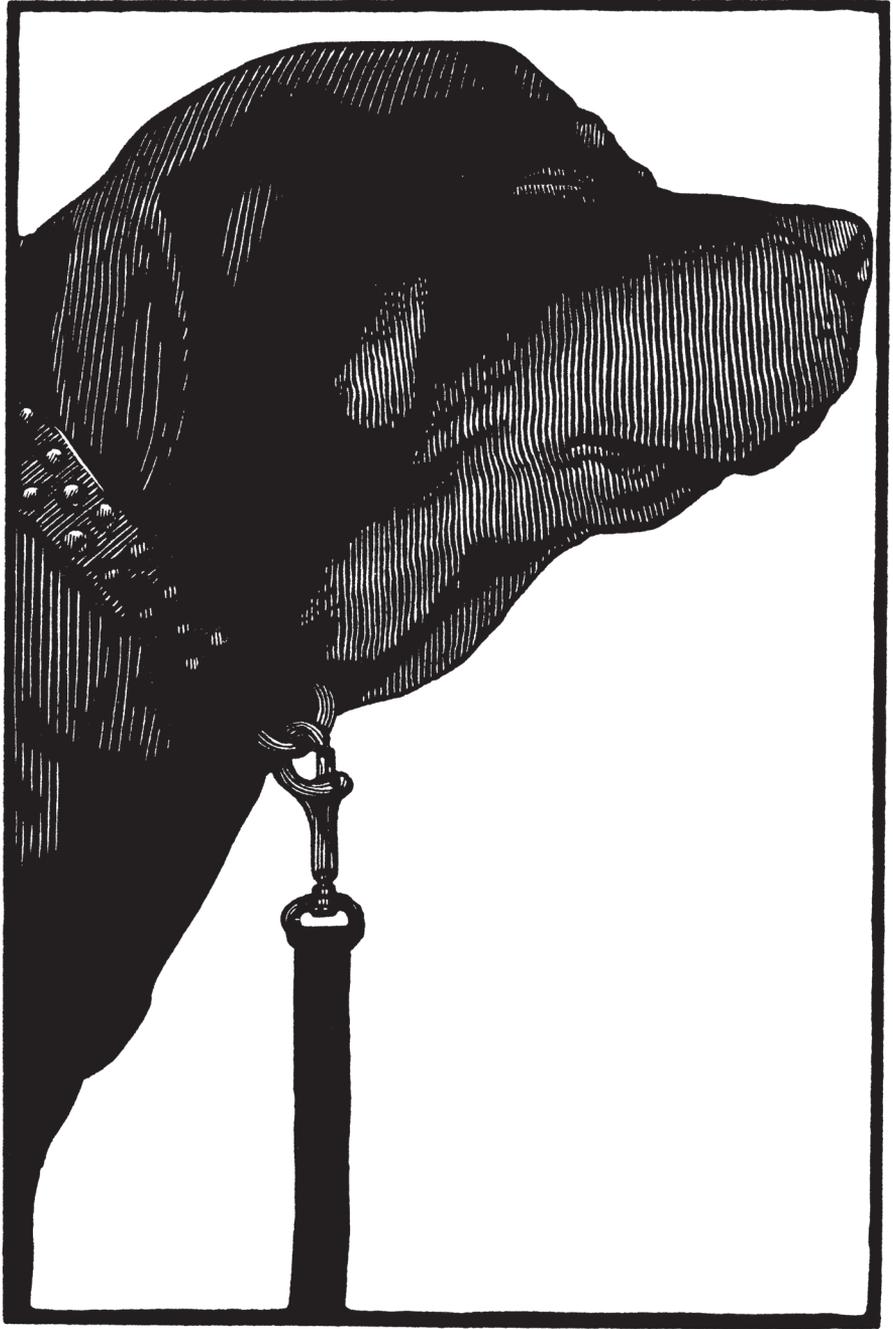
The publication of these early manuals, along with the adoption of photographic techniques, encouraged the efflorescence of artistic, as opposed to strictly reproductive, wood engraving after the Civil War. In 1887 William Laffan expressed the novel notion that “a block of wood has possibilities now that were not dreamed of in the days when Bewick practiced white line, nor, indeed, in days more modern yet.” Laffan was the general editor of the monumental *Engravings on Wood*, a compendium of the work of members of the Society of American Wood Engravers that vividly demonstrated the medium’s astonishing expressive possibilities. Even though Laffan modestly states that “the principal characteristic of American wood-engraving is its simplicity, its sincerity of purpose, and the cheerful self-effacement of the engraver,” we now recognize that the great achievement of late nineteenth-century wood engravers is to have discovered at last how to achieve wonderfully lush and diverse results from these limited resources: black and white, black line and white line, black dots and white pick.

Since this period, often considered to be the second golden age of wood engraving in both the United States and Europe, there have been several revivals of interest in the art. The publication by

St. Dominic's Press of John Beedham's *Wood Engraving* (Ditchling 1921), with its odd moralizing foreword by Eric Gill, gave new life to wood engraving as the medium of choice for the Arts & Crafts "fine printing" movement. Campbell Dodgson, in his introduction to Douglas Percy Bliss's important *History of Wood Engraving* (London 1928), cites the "copious literature on Wood-Engraving" of the past century while at the same time lamenting the dearth of modern works which might fuel the "remarkable revival" of interest in the craft in his own day. And even Lankes himself published a *Woodcut Manual* in 1932, "cleared ruthlessly of dead facts and fictions" so as not to "confound the poor novice to the point of distraction." Each great surge of interest in the medium has been catalyzed by instructional manuals that attempt to answer the question "how did they do that?" This manual by Barry Moser fits squarely into that tradition. After thirty-five years of "indefatigably doing it over and over and over till it's right, reading all the literature, and looking at all the engravings I can find," this celebrated modern master takes his place with Jackson and Beedham as the principal exponent and teacher of the medium for his own epoch.

In his *Memoirs* Bewick reflected on the future of the art that he so dramatically reinvigorated: "The more I have since thought on the subject the more I am confirmed in the opinions I have entertained, that the use of wood-cuts will know no end, or, so long as the importance of printing is duly appreciated and the liberty of the press held sacred." Well, photography (completely unknown to Bewick of course) has changed the graphic arts landscape in ways that the master from Newcastle couldn't possibly have imagined. But he was nonetheless accurate in his prediction that those who love printing will continue to esteem wood engraving. Indeed, in our own day more artists of the book seem once again inexorably drawn to wood engraving as the illustrative medium of choice, just as earlier generations of iconophiles have been. What they need now of course is a manual for our own days that explains "how he did that."

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