

Margaret J. Patterson's *Petunias*

The Making of a Multiple Color Woodcut

By Holly Bird

The MAACM has recently acquired *Petunias* (1920-1950), a color woodblock print by American printmaker Margaret Jordan Patterson (1867-1950), along with the six original carved wooden blocks used in printing this signature floral woodcut. By examining the original blocks, we can see the artist's process in producing the print.

Margaret Jordan Patterson's career spanned the Arts and Crafts Movement in America and her work is among the very finest of the period's printmakers. An art educator for over forty years, Patterson began as a student at Pratt while woodblock pioneer Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922) was an instructor there and was taught the Japanese method of printing woodblocks by a student of his in Paris, Ethel Mars. This method of woodcut, *moku hanga* ("wood" and "print"), uses watercolor pigment combined with rice paste or gum and brushed directly onto carved wooden blocks. The print is then transferred by placing a sturdy piece of damp, blotted, fibrous paper directly on top of each inked block in turn. The artist rubs the back of the paper vigorously with a baren (a round flat tool originally made of folded bamboo leaves) to transfer the image, or with simple wooden implements such as spoons.

Patterson's method of *moku hanga* woodcut was important to her subject matter. While many artists of the period, such as Gustave Baumann, chose the European method of printmaking, which used oil-based inks for intense colors, smooth application, and slow drying time, Patterson's technique of printing wet-on-wet in watercolor on grained wood produced its unique texture, as well as softer shading and subtle blending. These prints were similar in feel to gouache and oil paintings, and the brushed watercolor also allowed for transparent layering and mixing of color directly onto the paper.

Unlike the traditional collaborative teams of artists, carvers, and printers in Japan, the printmakers of the Arts and Crafts Movement handled every phase of creating a print themselves. Patterson would have initially produced a painting or a sketch to determine colors needed for the desired effect; as many colors as possible would be fit on each block, as enough

space was needed to brush watercolor around the carved relief areas without getting that pigment on others. Patterson would then draw a pencil outline on thin translucent onionskin or mulberry paper and trace copies the size of the blocks, one for each, placing only those flowers and elements that needed to be carved on that particular block in those colors, and omitting the others.

The drawings would be glued with a thin wash right to the surface of the prepared, sanded boards. Sharp carving tools would cut the wood through the thin paper, paring away everything that did not need to be printed, making sure that each element left in relief fit with the other blocks in register.

Each block used by Patterson has large registration marks carved on the right where the sheet of paper would have aligned with one of the long edges to keep the print in registration from block to block. There were many different methods of registration used by printmakers; not all used the traditional carved *kento* marks on two sides of the blocks.

Because the original blocks still retain their pigment stains, we can guess some of the printing sequence. One block contains the white and sky-blue background and would have been printed first. In fact, it may even have been impressed twice: once with the white underlay over the cream paper and a second time with the mottled sky blue brushed on. The “key block” with the dark blue border and deep-colored shadows would have been printed last on top of all other colors. It’s difficult to tell the exact print order of the four other blocks in between, but they would have followed a general light-to-dark sequence.

Since a multiple color woodcut is done in a single printing session when the paper is still damp, the results can be seen immediately. By layering color, changing its intensity with brushwork, vigorous use of the baren, and even by changing the printing order of the blocks to suit, Patterson could make a series of proofs until she was satisfied with the end result.

As many Arts and Crafts printmakers discovered, the color palette could even be changed to reflect different times of day or the change of seasons, from print to print, using the same block. Then as now, the attraction of making color woodblock prints for the artist was not just the economics of making multiples of an image but also for the luxury of changing one’s mind and even making varied editions of the same print.

Woodcut and linocut prints are deceptively simple when viewed. Patterson's *Petunias* is a fine example of an Arts and Crafts Movement printmaker working at her peak, revealing a glimpse of the sophistication of this fascinating medium.

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