

Mokuhanga Fundamentals

*Core Skills to Successfully Make your First
Japanese Woodblock Prints*



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This book has been adapted from the notes written to accompany the Mokuhanga Fundamentals online workshop at: www.mokuhanga-school.jp and follows the order of the workshop.

Use the website address above or QR Code to view the website.





Introduction

Welcome to the World of Mokuhanga!

You are joining a long line of artists and craftspeople, both Japanese and Western, who have learned or are learning this fabulous technique. Mokuhanga is unique as both a historical and environmentally friendly technique, using the simplest of materials and tools that are at the same time functional and beautiful.

This book is intended to teach you the grounding and practical knowledge which forms the basis of creating successful mokuhanga. The techniques you learn are a blend of traditional techniques developed and practised for hundreds of years in Japan, and newer techniques using modern adaptations or materials. This book teaches *Sosaku Hanga* (“creative print”) as distinct from *Ukiyo-e*, meaning that the artist will do every stage of the work themselves.

There is no absolute right or wrong mokuhanga technique, many different ways to achieve results have been used – the end result is what we see and what counts for the viewer of your artwork. Having said that, techniques can be used in the wrong way, giving less than perfect results. This publication gives you the opportunity to have advice from an experienced and skilled practitioner that helps you avoid common mistakes. (I’ve made them all myself!) It may also help you make sense of the range of information already out there, which can be confusing.



Why Mokuhanga

My background and original training as an artist was in oil painting, where the qualities, look, feel and beauty of the materials is an inseparable aspect of the finished artwork. Mokuhanga is the same, the materials themselves are beautiful and complement each other in the finished artwork. The process of making the artwork is also pleasant, working with natural materials, no odours or toxic substances, and no loud noise or machinery. Most importantly it is a wonderfully flexible medium for the artist to create images and express themselves through print. So many things are possible. It is also a great production technique, allowing the serious printmaker to efficiently produce an edition for sale, without demand of a huge studio space and expensive equipment.

Learning a new technique is not easy, but with persistence you will succeed. Creating mokuhanga requires both knowledge and skill, which you can acquire from this book and through practice. It also requires a calm and responsive attitude, which are qualities that you unfortunately can’t learn from this book, but you can develop through your own efforts.

Successful work depends on being responsive to the materials as you work with them, and this is actually no different from other art media, but is more important in mokuhanga. It is easy, for example to try to force your carving and damage the wood, in contrast to responding to the nature of the wood and tool at that moment, and trying a different carving direction or approach. Printing is even more so, as the materials are changing as you work with them.

This book gives you advice and processes to follow that will help you avoid the common mistakes for beginners, that are often so frustrating. I know this myself from my own efforts to learn, and I wish at that time I had a book like this available.



Structure of This Book

This book outlines the mokuhanga process in stages, where each step is a particular stage in the process and forms the foundation for the next. Each chapter is structured to include the essential information to complete that stage, with details about the tools, materials and including step-by-step guides to the process. To complete mokuhanga you will normally follow the process as it has been laid out in this book, however you can also go directly to a chapter as you need to.

You can skip ahead to see what you will be doing, but in practical terms you generally won’t be able to do the work until you have completed the previous stage.

The aim of this book is to be the most comprehensive and best English mokuhanga learning resource available yet. There are a few good books, but in my opinion, they are all difficult to really learn from. My own experience with learning from books and then from an experienced teacher, showed me the value of specific teaching about all facets of the technique. Most books have a general overview of the whole technique, with less detail. This book goes into details about the fundamental skills and step by step processes you will need to build further progress on.

I hope, through learning and experiencing mokuhanga, you will come to enjoy it as much as I do, and produce beautiful and accomplished artworks in this historic and beautiful printmaking medium.

Materials You Will Need

You will need a small range of materials and equipment, some of which you are likely to have, some that will be readily available and some you may need to purchase from specialist suppliers.

General Supplies		Mokuhanga Supplies	
Drawing paper	Any sturdy paper will do to create your design on	Wood for carving	Appropriate wood* blocks for an A5 print. 6mm Shina 225mm x 150mm recommended
Pencils, ruler and eraser	Any type is good, we will need a hard pencil H2 or similar as well as a softer one.	Carving tools	A simple set, Michihamono 7 tool "Woody" set recommended
Tracing paper / film	Heavy tracing paper, or Polyfilm / Frosted Mylar	Brushes for printing	15mm or 20mm hake And 60mm burashi recommended
Carbon paper	Double sided is best and single sided works as well	Baren	Beginners baren, Michihamono plastic baren, Kurosaki plastic baren or similar
Newsprint / old newspaper	Any clean paper is good, for rubbish / test prints and to hold damp printing paper	Printmaking Paper	A5 proof paper 6 to 8 sheets and A5 washi, up to 18 pieces*
Small containers	Small, lidded containers for mixing and storing colours and glue	*Based on an A5 size project <i>Optional Mokuhanga Items</i>	
Short brushes	Short handled, ordinary brushes (hogs hair or similar) for mixing colours	Pigment paste	Pigment paste for bold. Bright colours
Gouache	Gouache, watercolour, or similar non-permanent water-based pigments	Nori (starch paste)	Commercial nori
Starch glue	Any starch glue. Instructions to make some are provided	<p>You can find a short list of suppliers at the end of this introduction, and you may already know of some yourselves. The great thing about this technique is that your materials and tools can be relatively inexpensive and take up little room. You can produce great work in the space you have at home.</p> <p>More extensive information about materials and suppliers is in the Appendix.</p>	
Spray bottle	Clean spray bottle for water		
Brush	A wide, soft brush for dampening paper		
Plastic bag			

Mokuhanga Context

A little about Ukiyo-e

Ukiyo-e ("Pictures of the Floating World") is a generic term for a period form of woodblock print. An analogy is Impressionism and Oil painting, Ukiyo-e is a style / period like Impressionism, mokuhanga is a technique, like Oil Painting. Ukiyo-e is synonymous with Japanese prints, but there is a much greater variety, both historically, and in contemporary practice.



Most people recognise this print, it is easily the most famous woodblock print in the world! Many people also know the artist was Hokusai, however most people don't know that Hokusai and other similar woodblock artists didn't actually make the prints at all. They were part of a team of people making all kinds of printed material in Edo period Japan.

The team were managed by a publisher who owned and sold the prints. The artist, woodcarver and printer were separate people who specialised in their skill. Teams of artisans worked together to produce these beautiful prints quickly and cheaply.



Above: Kunisada's entertaining image of the workers!

Many times students have the ambition to create or emulate Ukiyo-e, the problem is that you can't compare your noble efforts as a beginner to work that highly skilled professionals, with long training, and supported by teams and systems to focus on their particular skill could produce. It's great to imagine that you will make something like Hokusai's wave, but it will take you years of practice to get the skill. It's better to understand and admire the wonderful skills of these mostly anonymous craftspeople and step by step produce your own unique artwork, that will have its own admirable properties. Art also has its time and place, and arises from the social conditions it is created in. Why not make mokuhanga for today's world?

Contemporary Mokuhanga in Japan

Mokuhanga is three Chinese characters: 木版画 which mean wood+board+picture, and is one word in Japanese. (It is incorrect to say or write Moku Hanga as two separate words.)

The same system of collaboration between skilled craftspeople that produced Ukiyo-e still exists in Japan, but it's relatively rare. Some organisations exist to re-produce Ukiyo-e and do so to the highest standards. Individuals also work as traditional contractors either as carvers, printers or both. These individuals or organisations also produce modern designs by contemporary artists or designers.

Contemporary artists produce a range of mokuhanga, either as self-taught, university trained or having learned from a private teacher. Many people make a *nengajou* (New Year card) as a hobby each year. There are also quite a few craft-oriented mokuhanga books available in Japanese as well. The artworks produced by contemporary artists range from high-level prints, experimental contemporary work, quirky original works, through to crafty images. One of the great things about visiting Japan, and especially living here, is that you have the opportunity to see many wonderful and inspiring mokuhanga exhibitions.

Around the world

In the last ten years availability of teachers, materials and resources has grown and there are many practitioners now all over the world. Over the years, a lot of print makers have travelled to Japan to learn fundamental skills to incorporate into their practice. There is a strong interest in the technique as it offers so much, however it is still difficult to find learning opportunities that don't involve travel. You may find contemporary mokuhanga exhibited near you, but the easiest place to find examples is on Instagram.

We've kept this part of the publication very brief, to keep a strong practical focus where you can learn the technique from this book. Rather than show you examples of the many wonderful artworks produced by skilled practitioners; we show you real examples made by students. In the Appendix you will find a list of mokuhanga artists you can follow on social media.

About this Technique

Mokuhanga requires a sensitivity to materials, concentration and vigilance of the changing conditions of your materials. Success depends on learning a variety of skills, which realistically takes some time, repetition and practice.

Every workshop when students are starting their first ever print, I say "Don't be disappointed that you are disappointed!" It's great to have high expectations, however in reality it takes repetition and practice over many projects to master this technique, which is no different from other art techniques. Take your time and use the steps in this publication to guide you, I'm sure you will have good prints at the end. At the same time, it's really helpful to think of your first project just as a learning experience, from which to build on.

Some Initial Sources for Tools and Materials

USA	
McClain's Large range of mokuhanga supplies	https://imclains.com/
Hiromi Paper Mokuhanga papers	https://store.hiromipaper.com/collections/sized-papers
JAPAN	
Karuizawa Mokuhanga School Selected range of tools. Set of tools and materials selected for this book project.	https://www.mokuhanga-school.jp/
Woodlike Matsumura Wide range of mokuhanga supplies. Downloadable PDF catalogue	https://wx30.wadax.ne.jp/~woodlike-co-jp/zen4/
More suppliers are listed, with their details, in the Appendix.	



More Information about Tools and Materials

Shina Plywood

Our demonstration project uses 2 pieces, 6mm thick, approximately 225mm x 150mm in size for our A5 project. Another wood the same size will be suitable as well. We will carve both sides, so will have 4 blocks to print with.



Carving Tools

These Michihamono tools (or similar) are a good quality, affordable set. Avoid very cheap sets, as they won't have good quality blades.

Your set must have a knife tool, which is the third tool from the left in this photograph. There is some more information about tools at the end of this chapter.



Baren

The black plastic baren is a very affordable choice for the beginner, but if you want to spend a little more and get a much better result, the white Kurosaki baren is a good choice.

There are some notes about baren on page 26.



Washi (Japanese paper)

It may seem difficult and confusing to choose washi. For a beginner you want middle weight paper that is sized. The choice of colour (white or buff) is your preference.

There is more specific information in the chapter on Papers to help you choose, and some recommended papers as well.



Pigment

Gouache which gives excellent results, is readily available in art stores everywhere. At left are *Pigment Paste*, a specialist pigment mix that have been made for mokuhanga. With bold, strong colours at a very affordable price, they are worth purchasing if you can buy them. If you can't, do not worry, as gouache or watercolour can be used.



Nori

Several commercial *nori* (starch paste) preparations are available. Usually made with tapioca starch, they also have a mould inhibitor which makes them long lasting.

It is also easy to make your own, and instructions are included in the Appendix.

Sets Selected for This Book

These are sets of tools of materials with which you can complete the same, or similar project as this book. These give you an idea of what you will need for your basic kit.

Budget Set

Good quality, but with the most affordable choices of baren, tools and brushes. This set includes:

Design template, polyfilm, double-sided carbon paper, proof paper (x 6), washi (Kitaro hankusa student x 18), 6mm shina plywood (small x 3), black plastic baren, 15mm hake, 60mm marubake, and 5 tool Michihamono student carving tool set.



Standard

With a Kurosaki plastic baren and better carving set, you will get better results with these tools. This baren provides better pressure, and some additional tools makes carving more efficient.

The set has the same materials as the budget set.



Quality

Including a traditional baren, and extra brush, and a kentou chisel, this is for the learner who wants to continue on and further develop their skills.

All these tools and materials can be sourced individually, similar sets are also available, and these example sets are available from Karuizawa Mokuhanga School.

A list of suppliers is included in the Appendix.



About Carving Tools for Beginners

There are a large variety of carving tools from different manufacturers available for woodworking, however only some of those are suitable for mokuhanga.

The most essential tool to have is a knife tool, next to that is a variety of gouges in different sizes, and a flat chisel. Plain, comfortable handles are the most versatile and easy to use. Avoid specially shaped handles to begin with, as these make your hand hold the tool in a certain way. It is better to be flexible and to be able to change grip as you need to.

Sets, such as pictured below from Michihamono, have a suitable range with which you can complete mokuhanga similar to the demonstration print and student examples in this book.



Above: the knife tool, which has an angled bevel. This is a right-hand tool and left-hand tools are also available.



A seven tool set, with a variety of tools, all of which are useful to complete mokuhanga. This set has the knife tool, three sizes of gouge, two flat chisels and a v-gouge.

About Baren for Beginners

There are several good choices for beginners, and also some widely available baren which are better to avoid. The black plastic baren already listed is a good starting point for a beginner, as are the next two.



Above: a Kurosaki baren gives a good result, and is low maintenance.



A sosaku Sumi baren will also give a good result



This "School King" baren is frustratingly low quality and performance, and is better to avoid.

More substantial information about baren is in the **Printing Ready** chapter, and for tools in the carving chapters and Appendix.



Carving Step 1

The Most Important part of Carving – Using the Knife Tool

In this stage of carving we will cut a small “V” shaped groove which accurately follows our design on the block. The cut is made in two strokes, the first being cut accurately right beside our red line and sloping away from the print area, the second making the other side of a “V” to meet our first cut. We will do the entire outline of each colour area this way. This step defines what you will see in your print, so it is critical to do well.



Before you start

Each block should be clearly marked out with the colour areas as completely enclosed shapes. If you have multiple small areas or shapes close to each other, it’s very helpful to have cross hatched in the colour areas to avoid confusion as you cut.

Your knife should also be as sharp as possible for best results. Our YouTube channel (mokuhangaschool) has some free to view videos on how to do this. We also have another publication, “Sharp Tools” with comprehensive instructions on sharpening mokuhanga tools.

The Knife Tool, or Hangi-tou

The knife tool has an angled cutting edge and is designed to cut the wood in a slicing motion. In Sosaku-hanga technique we cut while pushing the knife away from ourselves, while the Ukiyo-e technique is to pull the cutting edge towards yourself. Both techniques work well, the first is suitable for softer wood, while the second is suitable for harder woods. Both techniques are used to cut the same sloping edge that defines the colour area in an identical way.

The shape of the blade varies little; however, the handles can be quite different in size and shape. Generally, we need to grip the tool close to the cutting edge for good control, so many Western style carving knives with long, extended thin blades are not suitable, as accuracy will be difficult.



The shape of the knife blade. The back is perfectly flat, an angled bevel is ground on the front, giving a sloping, sharp cutting edge.

There are variations in size and angle, but the shape is essentially the same.



Student level knife with plain handle.

This is from Michihamono and is a good quality but easily affordable tool.



Professional knife for Ukiyo-e carving, with a shorter, round handle. This shape of handle can also be used for Sosaku hanga technique.



Both left (upper) and right hand (lower) bevels are available.

Process

Cutting Technique

The accuracy of your finished print depends more on this stage than any other part of carving. Take your time and do this well. Place your marked out block on a piece of non-slip mat.

Hold the knife just as you would hold a pencil or pen in your natural hand. If you are a left hander it's better to have a left-hand knife. (More for left-handers at the end of this section)

The knife naturally leans over the marked out area at about 45 degrees and the cutting edge is facing away from you. The knife stays about 90 degrees relative to the direction you are cutting.

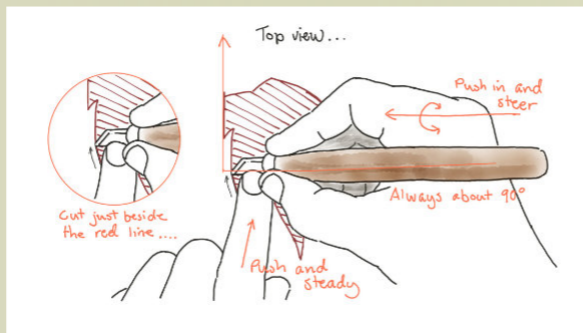
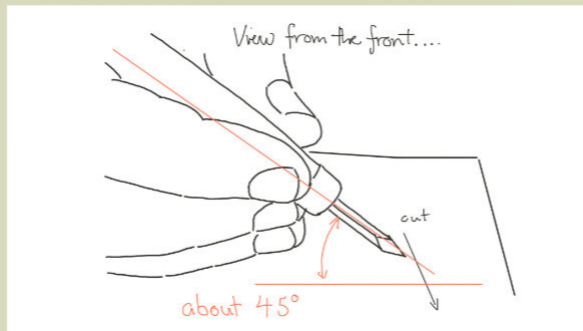
With the flat side of the knife against the red line you have marked your colour blocks with, the knife cuts a smooth cut about 1.5mm deep.

This cut is at an angle **always sloping away** from the colour area. Another way to think of this is that the handle of the knife always leans over the printing area.

Your main hand holds the tool firmly and pushes the tool into the wood as well as steering the cut. The extended finger or thumb of your other hand helps push and steady the knife. Use whichever finger or thumb feels more comfortable.

Proceed with the cut, holding firmly (not too tight) to keep accuracy, bit by bit moving along the very edge of your red line.

Cut *just* on the outer edge of the red line, that is, not into the red line, or into the colour area. Guide the knife, and the moment that the knife leaves the correct cut, stop, back up, and with a little effort regain the correct line of cut.



Process (cont.)

Continue to cut, following the shapes closely, straight along straight lines, curved along curves.

You will make a complete circuit of the shape, with a regular and accurate cut. Now turn the board 180 degrees, so you are cutting in the opposite direction.

Holding the knife in exactly the same angles, now start a cut about 2mm away from the first cut. This cut should slope down to meet the first cut, creating a "V" shaped sliver of wood that comes out, or chips away.

Continue around the shape in this direction until you have a "V" around the perimeter of your colour shape.

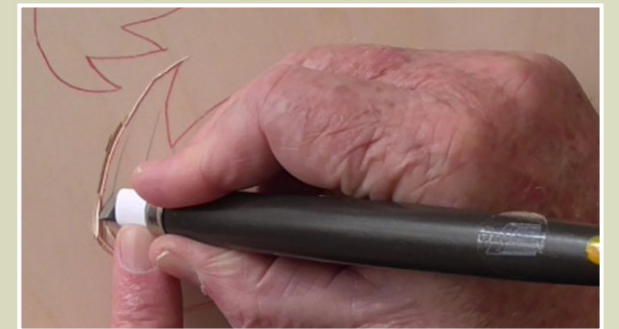
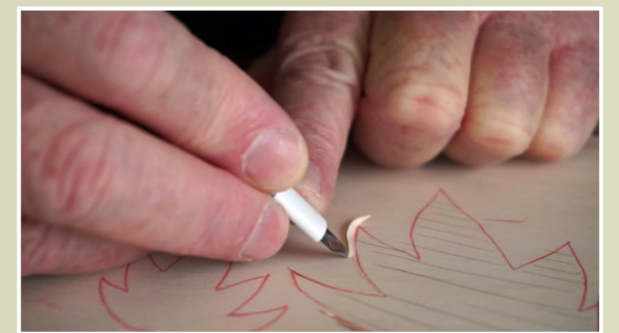
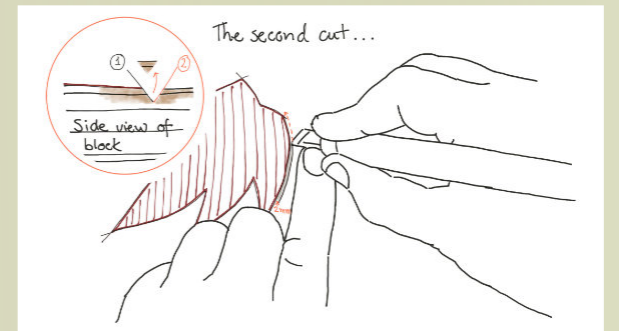
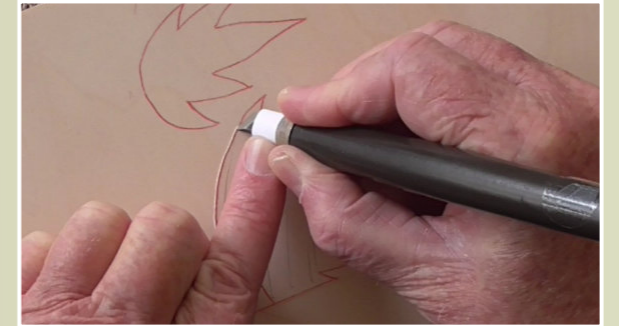
Take care not to undercut the first cut, this happens if you go too close to the first cut. If you do this, it will cause problems later in printing. We want a nice, clear slope falling away from the printing area. It only needs to be 1mm or so, but it is really important for crisp, trouble free printing.

If the sliver of wood doesn't come out, re-cut the first cut a little deeper. Take care not to make the second cut too deep or too close to the first cut.

The final "V" should only be quite small, about 2mm wide at the top and 1mm deep. It doesn't matter if it is wider and deeper, but you are working harder than you need to!

Tips for Beginners

1. The first cut is the most important, take care to be as accurate as you can. This is what you will see in the final print. If you cut into the red line or into your printed area, your print may have white areas where the colour has been cut away.
2. You can stop and start the cut as needed. Feel with your finger where the wood has been raised by the cut to place your knife into the previous cut.
3. The sharp cutting edge of the knife is slicing through the wood away from you as you push it. Some beginners have difficulty with the motion. Persist, once you get it, the way of holding and cutting is very natural. If it's not working (the wood is scraping and scratching) check that the knife is facing the right way, not backwards or sideways. Think about the sharp end of a boat cutting through the water.



Process (cont.)

4. Relax! You don't need a lot of tension and strength, as the cut is very shallow. Hold the knife firmly and steadily without tension in the rest of your body.
5. Look over the top of your hands to focus on the point where the cutting edge is disappearing into the wood. This is where the cut is actually happening. Steer the tool to follow your lines accurately this way.
6. It's helpful to work section by section on complicated blocks. Cut the first then second cut in a small area and shape, then move on to a new section until the whole block is complete.
7. Take care with negative shapes. The cuts will be on the **inside** of this shape, rather than the outside as you have been doing.
8. Take care with smaller details and areas, cutting underneath will mean the colour area may come loose and be lost. Any pieces that break away can be re-glued immediately with super glue.
9. Why not use a "V" chisel? It's quick and easy, however not nearly as accurate. If you want to gain skill in accuracy, persist with using the knife. You know all those amazing details in Ukiyo-e? That's right, all cut with the knife tool!

Finish the entire block before moving on to the next block. One by one, complete this stage for all of your blocks.



For Left Handers

The good news for mokuhanga is that with the exception of the knife tool, there is no difference in tools and technique for left or right handers. The knife is the exception.

The author is a natural left hander and appreciates that instructions and tools often neglect left handed people, so here is some guidance about the left handed knife and how to use it.

When cutting outlines with the knife tool we want the flat side of the blade to be against the outline we are cutting, and the bevel facing outwards. A left handed knife (top knife at right) has the bevel ground at an opposite orientation to the standard, right hand knife (bottom knife).



Holding the tool is just the same, except the hands are reversed. You can use a right-hand knife with the bevel against the wood, but a left-hand knife will give you better results.



First cut with the left hand, using a left-hand knife



Second cut, to remove the V

Below: Blocks with the first stage of carving completed

Shin-hanga Style vs Ukiyo-e Style Technique

You may have seen the traditional style of holding the knife for this stage of carving. The knife is held in your fist and the free hand supports the cut, while the cut is pulled back towards your body.



Many Westerners have learned this technique from traditional carvers in Japan, and in fact it is what I first learned. It has the advantage of tighter control in harder timbers, so is ideal for accurate carving in cherry. The Shin-hanga style, that I am teaching in this book, and which I learned from my teacher, is easier to master, uses less strength and arm / shoulder tension, and is suitable for shina, which is softer. You will find different ways of doing things, if the end result is good, there is nothing wrong with a different technique. Actually the quality of the tool, the skill, concentration, responsiveness and judgement of the carver are all more important for success than the technique used.





Paper

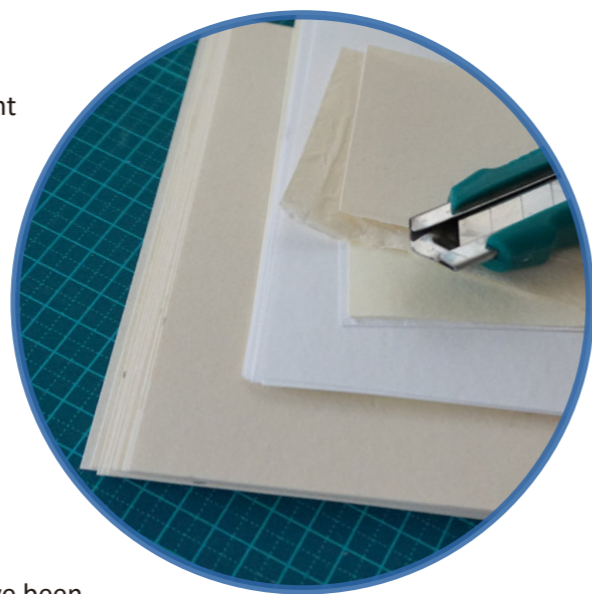
About Paper for Mokuhanga

In general, mokuhanga is very forgiving with paper as you can print on almost any paper. However, results vary widely and you will **definitely** get the best results with *washi*, Japanese Paper. Although any paper will take a print, results will be very poor with the wrong paper. For edition prints and prints of any value, then quality printmaking paper is essential and washi is recommended. For test prints, as I mention above, any paper will work.

Washi is two Chinese characters - 和紙 which mean Japan + Paper, so in your local shop when you see 'Washi Japanese Paper' (Japanese paper-Japanese paper) you can have a little chuckle to yourself with your superior knowledge.

When we are talking about papers in this book, it's those that have been made for printmaking, as there is a huge variety of different papers made for different applications. Printmaking papers vary widely in characteristics: material, thickness, texture, colour and sizing. Only a limited number of printmaking papers are suitable for mokuhanga, the reasons for this, and the papers we can use, we will discuss later in this chapter.


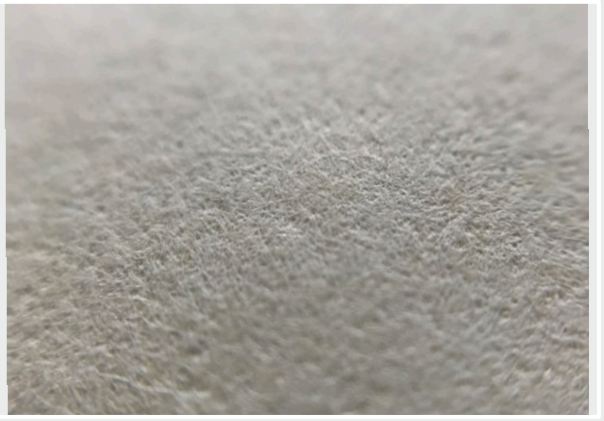
Using good quality, suitable paper (washi) even from your earliest attempts at finished prints will speed up your progress in printing.



Western Paper vs Washi

There are some key differences between Western papers and Japanese papers that makes washi more suitable for mokuhanga, where we print by hand with lower pressure than a mechanical press. Washi and mokuhanga have been developed together over centuries and work together beautifully.

This table compares the two papers.

Washi	Western Papers
Made from bark fibres, or bark fibres mixed with other fibres / wood pulp.	Made from cotton, or cotton / wood pulp mix
Not strongly compressed	Compressed and hard
Lighter and softer	Heavier and harder
Longer fibres	Shorter fibres
Natural subtle colours	Bleached or whiter
Weight / thickness measure - <i>monme</i>	Weight measure GSM (Grams / Square meter)
	
<i>Close up of washi</i>	<i>Close up of Western Paper</i>

Individual papers have a range of characteristics that will influence their quality and cost: handmade vs machine made, 100% pure fibre vs mixed fibres, thick vs thin, the makers reputation, availability, for example. The characteristics of washi outlined above make it more suitable for mokuhanga, where we we print by hand with water-based pigments.





Basic Printing

The Mokuhanga Printing Cycle

The usual print production cycle is:

1. Make several proof prints. These allow us to see how everything is looking together and to find any mistakes that (most probably!) are present.
2. Make some corrections to fix any mistakes in carving or registration and, importantly, adjust the colours. Inevitably the colours will not be perfect, so we need to adjust some or all of them.
3. Make another small batch of proof prints, and again make any adjustments as necessary. Depending how fastidious with colours you are, and the complexity of the print, you may choose to repeat this several times. Usually I do two or three proofs to get the print just right.
4. Make our edition of final prints. How many you make in an edition is up to you.

In this chapter we will go through steps 1 to 3, and step 4, printing your edition, is in the next chapter.

Consistent, successful printing is difficult. Many problems can happen, and everything you are working with is changing as you work. Luckily, the best methods and procedures have been worked out over the centuries by amazing craftspeople, and you have the benefit of that knowledge.



The correct attitude is to be calm and attentive to what we are doing and what our materials and tools are making, and practice makes perfect! If this is your first time, *expect* to make mistakes.

Setting up should be done according to the previous chapter, with everything ready to go, and on the table in easy reach. How you set things up is your preference, and for less troubles, if everything is handy and not cluttered you have a head start.

Prepare Your Printing pack

Using your spray bottle, dampen all sides of your printing pack. We just need dampness, not to be wet. If you are using newspaper, allow ten minutes for the moisture to even out. You will have dampened your paper earlier, and now it will have had time for the moisture to even out, and for the paper to expand.

Checking Your Paper

Take your paper from the plastic bag and check the moisture level. Is it sitting perfectly flat? Does it feel cool and soft, but not wet / damp? If so, then put it face down into the top pocket of your dampened printing pack. If your paper is still dry, spray some more moisture and wait for an hour. If it is too wet, quickly blot it between sheets of clean newspaper to reduce the moisture content, and it is ready to go. If it is perfect, put the sheets you will be printing in this session face down in the top pocket of your printing pack.

