Urushibara Mokuchū (1889–1953): Japanese Print Artist in Britain

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Urushibara Mokuchū, whose given name was Yoshijirō, was born in Tokyo on 12 March 1889, the fourth son of Kanryō and his wife Tsuru. The family were craftsmen, Urushibara’s grandfather having been a calligrapher and self-taught woodcutter, the second son, Eijirō, became a block carver and the third son, Sanjirō, a printmaker and artist. Urushibara, described by Laurence Binyon as a ‘consummate craftsman’, learnt the arts of carving and printing woodblocks in Tokyo before travelling to London aged only nineteen to demonstrate wood-block printing at the Japan-British Exhibition held in Shepherd’s Bush in 1910.¹ He continued to live in England and France until he was repatriated in 1940.

THE CONSUMMATE CRAFTSMAN

In England the woodcut tradition had declined after the sixteenth century in favour of that quintessentially English art, wood engraving. In the latter the artist cuts with a graver or burin across
the end grain of a hardwood (usually box) and since the box tree is slow growing, the blocks are very small, although larger images can be made by fitting the blocks together with tongue and groove joints. Woodcuts, on the other hand, are made by cutting with a steel knife along the grain of soft woods (for example apple, beech, cherry, pear and sycamore) and the resulting prints can therefore be much larger in size. Japanese colour woodcuts have a key or outline block which provides the main detail and the colour, a mix of water-based paint and rice paste, is brushed rather than rolled on to separate subsidiary blocks thereby permitting the artist to produce gradations of colour. Interest in woodcuts and colour wood-block printing was revived during the late nineteenth century by the craze for all things Japanese – Japonisme (a word coined in 1872 by the French author and collector Philippe Burty, indicating the study of artistic and historic artefacts from that country). Ukiyo-e prints, paintings and pictures produced during the Edo period became available, depicting the theatre, girls, prostitution, excursions, daily routine; altogether embodying a vital reality, glorifying ordinary men and women. Although the intellectual Japanese considered the prints vulgar, the demands of the growing nouveau riche for ‘delightful images of their “floating world”, mere bubbles on the stream of time, had to be met.’ It was the anti-establishment element of the ukiyo-e, which vastly appealed to European artists eager to escape convention, and they wanted to learn traditional Japanese methods, using their tools and materials. Urushibara took advantage of this excitement, collecting fever and revival of interest in printmaking by not only producing original prints, but also being highly influential in teaching the craft and interpreting the works of other artists.

In the early twentieth century the traditional ukiyo-e methods were revived by the shin hanga (‘new prints’) movement which maintained the hanmoto system (‘collaborative system’) whereby four individual people were involved in the production – the artist, carver, printer and publisher. However, Urushibara was a sōsaku hanga (‘creative prints’) artist, advocating the principles of jiga (‘self-drawn’), jijoku (‘self-carved’) and jizuri (‘self-printed’) – ideals which would resonate with Arts and Crafts practitioners. His method was to cut a key block and further blocks for each colour, a long process in itself. No press was used, printing being entirely by hand. For each impression he had to dampen the paper, place it on the block, ensuring accurate registration and then rub the back – sometimes as many as ten blocks were required for the completed print – great speed, physical prowess and concentration were therefore required before the paper contracted or expanded too much. Urushibara’s importance in reviving colour woodblock printmaking in Britain is illustrated by the fact that he is listed in Robin Garton’s definitive