CHAPTER 2

Colour Printing in Relief before c.1700: A Technical History

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The accepted history of relief colour printing in the hand-press period, especially c.1450–1700, is episodic, artist-focussed and divided between medieval books and renaissance or early modern art. Early woodcuts printed in colour are considered as rare, special things aimed at the elite end of the print market. So few artists were thought to have produced so few colour woodcuts that speculation has arisen about the difficulty or expense of production. However, it is becoming apparent that this extreme rarity reflects cataloguing standards that do not systematically include colour printing rather than the actual quantity of surviving colour impressions; although only a very small percentage of woodcuts may have been printed in colour, the number of known impressions is growing rapidly. It includes hundreds of book illustrations, few of which have been described as colour prints, from the fifteenth century and beyond. Now, the spread of colour printmaking techniques seems to be linked to printers, not artists/designers. From this, it follows that the production of colour woodcuts is not sporadic, in few areas, for a limited time, and for an elite audience of collectors, but relatively continuous across a large geographical area in products aimed at diverse markets.

Particularly but not exclusively in the German-speaking lands, much can be gained from considering single-sheets together with book illustrations.1 Scholars have long been puzzled as to why designers would create just several colour woodcuts before giving up, but the question is flawed because they were issued by printers not designers. From this, it follows that the production of colour woodcuts is not sporadic, in few areas, for a limited time, and for an elite audience of collectors, but relatively continuous across a large geographical area in products aimed at diverse markets.

True, False, Real or Almost? Defining ‘Chiaroscuro’

The term ‘chiaroscuro’ normally denotes the extreme contrasts of light and dark in painting, but, in graphic art, it can designate images printed in any colour.5 In its first application to printing, in Italian in 1516, it was used in reference to woodcuts that imitated Italian chiaroscuro drawing (see Takahatake, Fig. 10.1, p. 117). A distinction continued to be made between images printed in colour in general and images printed with carefully modulated tonal contrast even in Italian; Naoko Takahatake has pointed out the distinction between ‘colore’ and ‘chiaro et scuro’ in sixteenth-century documentation of colour prints.6 The first colour prints were instead described in terms of materials or techniques in German, and there

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1 Colour-printed book illustrations in the early modern German-speaking lands, as well as and the materials and techniques with which they and other images were printed in colour, will be discussed in E. Savage, Vivid Prints: Colour Printmaking and the Transformation of Visual Information in Early Modern Germany, 1476-ca. 1600 (in progress).
3 On the spelling of Le Blon’s given names, see the Foreword, x, nt. 8.
seems to have been no term for relief colour printing for centuries after it was first practiced.7

The disconnect between the vocabulary used by the producers and later collectors of these prints grew into arbitrary and contradictory distinctions between categories such as ‘precursors to chiaroscuro’ (the incunabale printer Erhard Ratdolt’s colour woodcuts and/or later simpler woodcuts); ‘false/German chiaroscuro woodcuts’ (variously, those that involve fewer than three blocks, with a black key block, without highlights cut from the tone block, in contrasting tones, and/or other categories); and ‘true/Italian chiaroscuro’ woodcuts at the top of the hierarchy. This has led to surreal explanations of why German colour woodcuts that meet various exacting criteria, such as having fewer than a minimum number of highlight lines cut from the block, are insufficiently chiaroscuro-esque to be considered a lowly ‘German chiaroscuro’ or even ‘real colour printing’. For this reason, Ratdolt’s colour woodcuts of the 1480s have been criticised for failing to achieve an aesthetic that emerged in Venice forty years later.

Especially in early- and mid-twentieth century literature, translations for ‘chiaroscuro’ (‘Helldenkela’, ‘clair-obscur’), ‘colour print’ (e.g. ‘Farbendruck’), variants (‘coloured print’ vs. ‘colour-print’) and collector’s categories (‘camaïeu’, French: cameo; in graphic art, woodcuts printed in the related tones of carved cameo stones) have been considered synonyms, antonyms and subcategories of each other. For example, from the 1980s, a number of English-language texts have mis-translated ‘camaïeu’ as its opposite: a colour woodcut in any colours with an independent black key block, also called ‘German chiaroscuro’ or ‘false chiaroscuro’. Bafflingly, ‘colour print’ has also been used as a subcategory of itself; in oppositions like ‘Far cry as it would seem from the chiaroscuro to the colour-print’, it denotes either older material perceived as garish, cheap or tasteless or later material produced on a relatively mass scale (either in Le Blon’s manner after c.1710 or chromolithography after the 1830s). Many variants of and exceptions to these schemes have been asserted as authoritative, creating stumbling blocks for research.

Previous Italo-centrism and emphases on primacy have also shaped investigations into early colour printing in relief. The tendency for chiaroscuro to be called a technique exaggerates the leap from Ratdolt’s book illustrations to the artist Hans Burgkmair’s and then Ugo’s single-sheets in the 1510s. From a printer’s perspective, it is better understood as a style within the technique of printing in relief because removing areas of highlight from a tone block is a conceptual, not a technical, advance from printing solid areas of colour from a tone block. Designing interdependent blocks is more complex, but not all woodcuts printed from interdependent blocks involved tone blocks or imitated chiaroscuro drawing. Burgkmair, for instance, issued a two-colour woodcut and a three-colour woodcut with what could be called interdependent hatching blocks in the 1510s.

The terminological confusion has been bemoaned for decades, and other ways of distinguishing production along national lines have been put forward. The most common is that German colour woodcuts are usually original designs but Italian are mostly reproductive. Regardless, the term ‘chiaroscuro’ remains inaccurate for prints that do not imitate Italian chiaroscuro drawing; it was not a goal to which some colour printmakers could have aspired, especially those active in the decades before it was coined 1516. In this study, it is used only where historically appropriate, namely in reference to woodcuts in imitation of Italian chiaroscuro drawing.

Monochrome Printing, from c.1452–55

In some copies of the first volume of the first book printed with moveable type, the Biblia latina (c.1452–c.55), Johannes Gutenberg inked rubrics on folia 1v, 4v, 5v, 129v in red.9 That was the first text printed in red. He quickly stopped – in the others, the red of the rubrics, initials and printers’ decoration is supplied by hand – which may suggest that he did not arrive at a satisfactory working manner, the red ink was relatively expensive, extra labour was required, or any number of other issues. In 1456, his former financer Johann Fust and Fust’s associate Peter Schöffer (who became Fust’s son-in-law at an unknown date) took over his workshop. The following year, Fust and Schöffer may have issued the first image printed in monochrome colour in the Mainz Psalter of 1457, the second book ever printed; their printers’ device in monochromatic red survives in only one copy, to

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7 On the absence of a term in languages besides Italian through the late 1600s, see C. Kemmer, Von Cranach bis Baselitz: Meisterwerke des Clairobscur-Holzschnitts, exh. cat. (Braunschweig: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 2003), 12.