

Splashes of Colour

MARIBETH GRAYBILL curates an exhibition of Chinese woodblock printing across four centuries at the Portland Art Museum.

IT SHOULD BE no surprise that China, where ink and paper were first invented, was the culture to first perfect the art of making colour woodblock prints. Yet the achievements of Chinese woodblock artists remain largely unknown in the West—as opposed to Japanese prints, which have been avidly collected and studied since the late 19th century.

Chinese colour prints were designed from the outset as luxury items for the educated elite. Long held in private collections in China, these prints seldom found their way to the West. Published in multi-volume books, they featured the classical subjects of Chinese painting—especially nature studies—and were often embellished by beautiful calligraphy. Designed to replicate paintings as closely as possible, Chinese colour prints make use of sophisticated techniques to evoke the nuances of brushwork and watercolour pigments on paper.

The current exhibition at the Portland Art Museum (June 24–October 9, 2016) opens with a selection of rare, early prints from *The Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting*. First issued in 1633 in the southern city of Nanjing, *Ten Bamboo Studio* was not only one of the first books to be printed in multiple colours, but also introduced shading and overprinting, techniques that give the prints a loose and exuberantly painterly feel. The most deluxe editions include blind printing, for designs in low relief.

The next landmark in colour printing appeared half a century later, again in the city of Nanjing, with the publication of *The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual*. Issued in stages between 1679 and 1701, it was intended to provide models for aspiring painters. As a visual art history textbook, it was immensely popular in both China and Japan.

After 1701, for reasons not yet understood, colour printing in China receded into the background, only to be reinvented in the late 19th century with a revival of decorative

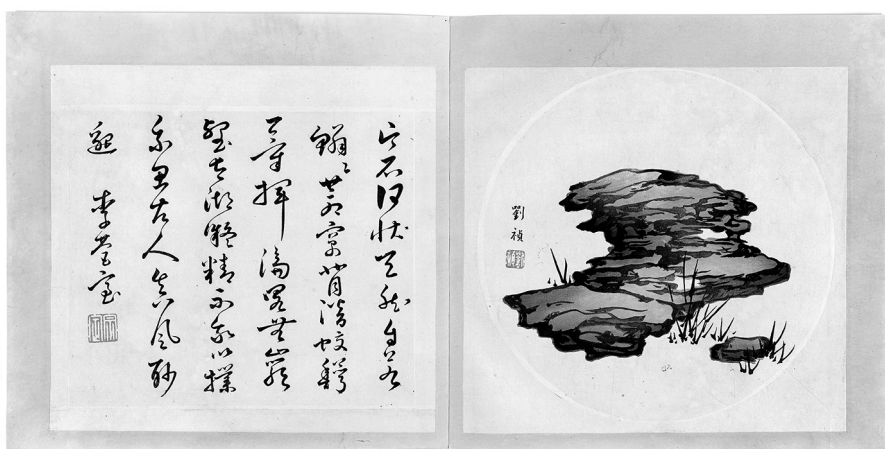
letter papers. Under the aesthetic leadership of the leading writers and painters of the day, publishers in Shanghai, Tianjin and Beijing revived old designs and created new ones, with a palette more vibrant than ever.

This exhibition, thanks to generous loans from the privately held You Wei Du Zhai Collection in Seattle, brings a rich array of masterworks of Chinese colour printing to Northwest audiences for the first time.

EIGHT VOLUMES OF NATURE STUDIES

The Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting (Shizhuzhai shuhuapu) is the fruit of the vision and labour of one extraordinary man, Hu Zhengyan. Trained as a physician, Hu was a skilled painter, calligrapher, seal carver, papermaker and printer who lived and worked in Nanjing, a great metropolis on the Yangtze River that had been an important cultural centre since ancient times. Hu's lifetime coincided with the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)—a tumultuous period when many forms of artistic production went into steep decline. Astonishingly, Nanjing remained a vibrant centre of literati culture and the publishing industry through this era of chaos.

Brilliant, innovative and well connected, Hu took up the then-current vogue for printed painting manuals (*huapu*) and orchestrated several printing projects. The most ambitious of these was *The Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting*, for which he persuaded some 30 painters and 120 poet-calligraphers to contribute designs. The resulting 356 leaves were organized into eight volumes, each focused on a category of nature studies: orchids, bamboo, plums, ink flowers (round compositions), scholar's rocks, birds and fruit, along with a general introductory volume. The series, possibly begun as early as 1619, was completed and published in 1633.



Hu Zhengyan, publisher; Liu Zhen, artist; Ling Yingshi, calligrapher. Stacked Rocks and Grasses and Poem, from *The Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting, Volume of Round Compositions*, 1633, colour woodblock print with shading and overprinting, You Wei Du Zhai Collection.

Hu personally supervised the carving of the blocks and oversaw the printing, and he is given credit for introducing history-making innovations that served to make a woodblock print more closely resemble a hand-brushed painting. Shading, achieved by partially wiping colour off an inked block, captures the effect of washes and varying degrees of pressure of the brush, and overprinting (overlapping different tones or hues of ink) produced a broader and more nuanced palette of colours. A few

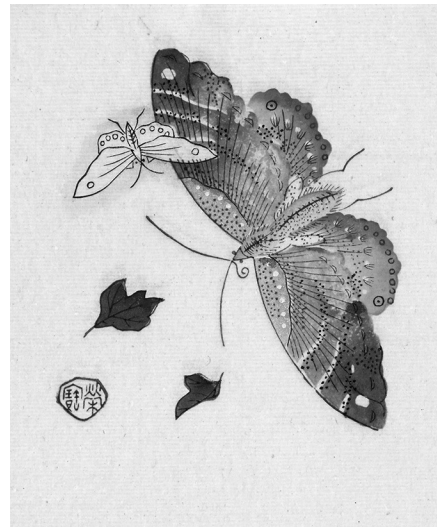
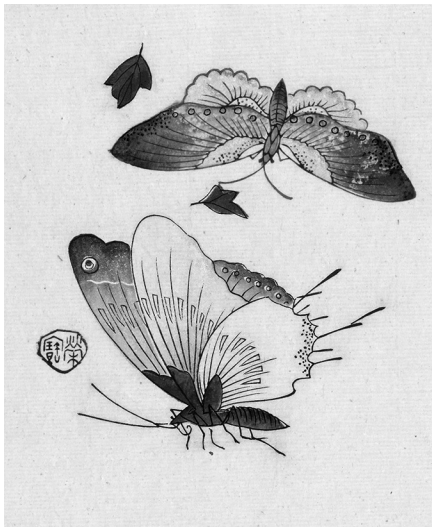
leaves even employed embossing or blown ink, although these time-consuming and expensive touches were dropped in later printings.

Today, no complete set of the original *Ten Bamboo Studio* prints survives; even partial sets are extremely rare. The works in the exhibition are all from very early printings.

MASTERWORKS TO SERVE AS MODELS
The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual
(*Jieziyuan huazhuan*), which followed *The Ten*



Hu Zhengyan, publisher; Gao Yang, artist; Wen Zhenheng, calligrapher, Eroded Rock and Poem, from *The Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting, Rock Volume*, 1633, colour woodblock print with shading and overprinting, You Wei Du Zhai Collection.



Rong Bao Zhai, publisher, Butterfly Letter Paper, from Letter Paper: Rong Bao Zhai Woodblock Water Prints, 1930s, colour woodblock print with shading and overprinting, You Wei Du Zhai Collection.

Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting half a century later, is without question the best-known opus of Chinese colour woodblock printing. It was also a product of the fertile environment of Nanjing.

The impetus for this publishing project is attributed to the dramatist Li Yu, whose estate in Nanjing was known as the *Jiezi yuan* (Mustard Seed Garden). Li persuaded his friend Wang Gai to compile and create designs that instructed the reader how to paint, beginning with simple motifs and components such as rocks, trees and figures, and advancing to complex landscapes. Many of the images of completed landscapes were based on Li's private collection, while others drew on prestigious private collections in southern China.

Li's son-in-law Shen Xinyou published the first set of books in 1679. Two decades later, in 1701, Wang Gai and his two brothers, Wang Nie and Wang Shi, collated part 2, with two volumes each on orchids, bamboo, plum blossoms and chrysanthemums. Later the same year, they issued part 3, with designs of plants, insects and birds.

While many designs in *Mustard Seed Garden* were printed in monochrome ink—true to the paintings on which they were based—the plum, chrysanthemum, and bird and flower pages are masterworks of colour printing. Carrying forward the innovations of *Ten*

Bamboo Studio, shading and overprinting were used to create prints of remarkable beauty.

Mustard Seed Garden would prove to be enormously influential in Japan as well as China. Educated Japanese could read the Chinese texts, and aspiring painters eagerly studied the pictures for models. To meet the growing demand, a Japanese publisher in Kyoto issued a partial reprint in 1748, followed by a supplement in 1753.

The exhibition includes several examples from very early Chinese printings and a volume from the 1748 Japanese edition.

LETTER PAPERS REVIVAL

Decorated paper for writing sacred Buddhist texts was a highly developed art form in China by the Tang dynasty (618–907), whence it travelled to Japan. Not long afterwards, it was taken up by courtiers and scholars for writing poetry or letters. These exquisite papers featured collages of dyed paper, marbled ink, and stamped abstract or nature motifs. Printed designs for letter paper came into use by the 11th century. The genre was brought to new heights by none other than Hu Zhengyan, the polymath who had created *The Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting* in 1633. In 1644, Hu issued *The Ten Bamboo Studio Letter Papers* (*Shizhuzhai jianpu*), a collection of deluxe paper

samples with designs by many of the artists he had recruited for his earlier publication.

Hu's volume of letter paper was rediscovered in the 1930s by two luminaries of the literary world in modern China, the writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) and the journalist, archaeologist and scholar Zheng Zhenduo (1896–1958). Eager to show the artistry of this volume and the new letter papers being designed by contemporary artists, Lu and Zheng published a very limited edition of a collection of letter papers titled *Beiping Letter Papers* (*Beiping jianpu*) in 1934. (Beiping, “Northern Peace” or “Northern Plains,” is an alternative name for Beijing, which means “Northern Capital.”)

The work caused a sensation and so encouraged Rong Bao Zhai, a prominent publisher in Beijing, to issue an edition of its own letter paper (*Beiping Rong Bao Zhai Letter Paper Collection*) in 1935 and again in 1952. The artists who contributed designs to Rong Bao Zhai were among the foremost painters of the 20th century, such as Qi Baishi, Zhang Daqian and Puru.

Even before the 1930s boom in letter papers in Beijing, artists and publishers in Shanghai and Tianjin had begun to design and print decorative papers. The exhibition includes examples from all three cities, dating from the 1880s to the 1950s.

Today, Rong Bao Zhai operates a stylish bookshop and coffeehouse in its long-time location on Liulichang Street in Beijing. They continue to specialize in woodblock prints of the highest quality, but now their focus is on reproductions of famous paintings rather than letter paper. In an age of global e-mail, the custom of writing letters by hand is fading away.

RECOMMENDED READING

Thomas Ebrey, “The Editions, Superstates and States of the *Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting*,” *East Asian Library Journal* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1–119.

Clarissa von Spee, ed., *The Printed Image in China from the 8th to the 21st Centuries* (London: British Museum Press, 2010).

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 ~ Maribeth Graybill is the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Asian Art at the Portland Art Museum. The exhibition *Splashes of Color: Chinese Woodblock Prints from the You Wei Du Zhai Collection* is at the Portland Art Museum June 24–October 9, 2016.



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