



Winter Jasmine © 2002 Michael Kluckner

The Necessity of Woodcuts

Michael Kluckner

NCESSITY IS USUALLY THE MOTHER OF INVENTION, at least for my artwork. Although I had always intended to create some woodcuts and linocuts I had never gotten around to it, instead spending my time painting watercolours, many of which I used to illustrate the books I was writing.

For a time my main muse was our farm, which became the subject of a 1997 Raincoast book called *The Pullet Surprise*. I had been painting small, vertical-format watercolours of the farm and the animals, many casting long winter-time shadows, and talking with designer Dean Allen about the books I recalled from my childhood, which had cloth bindings, gold stamping on the spines and glued-in colour plates. All of this inspired him to create an unusual, 6 1/4" x 10 1/2" book (the "golden section" proportions, more or less) with an elegant "PLC" (printed laminated cover) and a black cloth spine. The result, printed in Milan, won an Alcuin Prize for book design in 1998.

Like most elegant things it was too good to be true, creating minor cases of sticker-shock amongst book buyers who just wanted a charming tale of back-to-the-landism and didn't want to pay for the art, and stock-shock amongst booksellers who had chopped all their bookshelves down to 6" x 9" size. So when the inevitable need arose for a sequel, the publisher determined that it had to be standard size and cheaper than *The Pullet*. Out went the expensive art and the literary arcana, including proposed titles such as "Embraceable Ewe" and "A Ruminant of One's Own." In came the need for some black-and-white illustration.

I tend to dislike line art in books printed on inexpensive book stock—at least *my* line art—because the lines themselves are generally thinner and fainter than the main elements of the typeface. Woodcuts would obviously have more impact. In addition they had the potential to annoy the printer, who would have to lay down solid blocks of black ink without blowing it through the back of the page.

The challenge with this type of art, at least in the way I wanted to do it, was to create form and space using mainly shadows. Thus, solid foreground objects were to be defined by the "negative space" of the shadowed forms behind them, rather than by outlines. Images would succeed by the strength of their composition—classic Renaissance perspective and the *chiaroscuro* arrangement of white and black space. It is far more difficult than painting, where the artist can nuance form and pictorial

space using the additional techniques of colour, tone (near objects are brighter and sharper) and atmospheric perspective (distant mountains are blue, for example).

I eventually produced about 15 brush-and-ink drawings as templates for the woodcuts, which were published to illustrate the sequel, *Wise Acres*. About a decade earlier, I had had a brief flirtation with Japanese *ukiyo-e* printing, during a delusionary phase when I thought I could produce multicoloured woodblock prints of the subtlety and brilliance of Walter J. Phillips, and so was familiar with the cutting tools and the general process. However, this time I was more interested in the stark, graphic potential of the medium. Instead of using a *baren*, the dimpled, hand-held disk used for printing in the Japanese style, I started looking for a press and eventually found one, on eBay on the internet, that the seller obligingly shipped from Boston. Besides its value for woodblock printing, it had the additional advantage of being useful for hand-binding watercolour sketchbooks.

Of the *Wise Acres* set, “Embraceable Ewe” (our cover illustration) has the most complex arrangement of interlocking black shapes, proceeding on two diagonals, one from the bottom right to the tree that dominates the left-hand edge of the frame, the other into the distance to a second, smaller tree. “Purposeful Hen” (see p. 19) was the easiest to print as it has relatively small blocks of black and a textured surface reminiscent of the rabble of straw and muck in the barnyard. “The Farmer” (see p. 31) has the strongest composition, a diagonal tilled field in black which, together with the high horizon and the sunshine from the right-hand side, define the man and his machine, especially the shadows cast by the lugs on the tractor tires.

Another image started off as a watercolour published in the book *Michael Kluckner’s Vancouver* in 1996. “Vancouver Man” (see p. 2) makes the distinction between a walking, umbrella-holding, briefcase-toting executive and his reflection on the wet sidewalk. It being a woodcut, man and reflection are the same intensity but the reflection is abstractly curved compared with his alert, well-tailored form.

The most recent set of woodcuts illustrated Christine Allen’s *Growing Up: Climbing Plants for the Pacific Northwest* (Steller Press). I tried to stylize the plants without going too far down the “decorative” road of *art nouveau*, leaving something of the pictorial space intact. Large black



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patches of “background” abstract the images and add to the impact of what are, after all, small (5” x 8”) prints.

I was interested to see, during a recent trip to Australia, the number of woodcuts and linocuts there which are hand-coloured (with watercolour) by the artists themselves. Those executed by Margaret Preston in the 1920s and 1930s, many of which are hand-coloured, are as avidly collected there as W.J. Phillips multiblock colour prints are in Canada.

As much as anything, it is the visual impact of woodcuts that draws me to them. A few pieces on a wall can dominate a room. But it seems to me that the level of visual literacy required to appreciate them is gradually being crushed by the jackboot of photography and its version of pictorial space. And of high-intensity colour: regrettably, we live in a polychrome world, where for most people the photographed image is an adequate substitute for imagination.