

Woodblock art | from sketch to print

Woodblock printing, from woodcuts and wood engravings, is one of the oldest methods of reproducing a picture many times. It is a simple handcraft requiring only a suitable piece of wood, a good set of sharp gouges or knives, ink, and sturdy paper for printing the carved image. Making detailed woodblock prints is a time-consuming, meticulous process: designing the image, drawing it onto the block and carving the block can take well over 50 hours.



Artist Claire Emery's process:

1. Finding inspiration. Emery's love of sketching and the natural environment takes her outdoors daily into the mountains and along the streams near her home in western Montana. In her field journal Emery sketches the nuances of the landscape and the flowers, trees and wildlife she observes.

2. Preparing the image. Emery uses her field journal sketches as the inspiration for her woodblock prints, first tracing her sketches on tracing paper and transferring her design onto a woodblock. Emery prefers to use a five-ply block of Japanese basswood. When contemplating her design, Emery considers her subject; the time of day, season and weather; and meaning she aims to portray. To emphasize the image and prepare the block for cutting, Emery darkens the image with marker and paints the entire woodblock in one transparent watercolor.

3. Cutting the block. Emery uses V and U-shaped gouges and knives to cut away everything she does not wish to print — the areas of wood highlighted in watercolor. The image that's remaining on the block, the non-carved sections, will ultimately become the printed image. Her woodblocks can range in size from 3 by 3 inches to 24 by 36 inches and take up to 50 hours to carve.

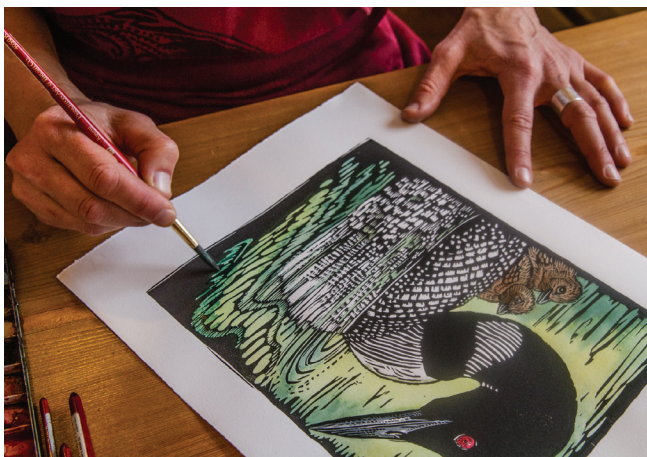




4. Inking the block. Once the image is fully carved into the block, Emery rolls out black ink with a brayer onto the raised ridges she wishes to print. Just enough ink and not too much is the trick to preparing the block for printing.



5. Printing the block. Each of Emery's woodblock prints is printed by hand. Emery either burnishes the block, rubbing vigorously with a burnisher to transfer the inked image from the block to the paper, or she cranks the roller of a heavy printing press transferring the image onto the paper. Hand-burnishing is a delicate process using handmade Japanese paper. After applying pressure to the block and before lifting the paper off the block, Emery checks to make sure that the print is dark enough and fully transferred onto the paper. If the paper slips at all, the print is ruined.



6. Painting the print. After the ink is dry, Emery paints layers of luminous watercolor to add the intense color of her signature art pieces. Although every block produces a small limited edition of prints, each painted print is one of a kind.

