

# Japanese Block Prints

## Grades 3+

### Goals of the lesson plan:

1. Understand some of the artistic history behind Japanese woodblock prints.
2. Understand and demonstrate the process of creating a block print.

Japanese woodblock prints are an art form that has been common in Japan for centuries. Many prints depict scenes of everyday life. Frank Lloyd Wright was fascinated by these beautiful prints and became a dealer – someone who buys and sells prints. Some of the buyers of his prints were clients who hired Wright to design a home for them. The Martin family purchased many prints from Wright and were an important part of the overall design of the home.

To the right is an example of woodblock print in the Martin House.

- What is depicted in this image?
- Do you see a theme or pattern?



Woodblock printing requires you to carve an image on a piece of wood, then use paint to add color to the wood before pressing the image onto a piece of special paper. For this lesson, we are using an easier way to do this with soft cut prints, linoleum cutters, brayers and block printing ink. You can purchase these at any art supply store.

*Note to parents: If you have little kids, or want to use what you have on hand, try using Styrofoam and a pencil & ballpoint pen. Instructions are below each step for this version.*

## Part 1

- Find a place where you can get a little messy, like a kitchen counter. Make sure you are wearing clothes that can get dirty - dress for mess!
- Think about what image you might want to carve. A good tip is to try something *simple*. The more complex the image, the harder it will be to carve. An example of something in nature, like a flower or animal, might work perfectly for a first try. You can even carve the first initial of your name! Use scrap paper to practice.

## Important note:

Anything that you draw will be backwards when you carve it. Once you are done drawing your image, take it to the bathroom and look in the mirror – that is what your image will look like on the block.

For example, if your name is “David” and you want to carve the letter “D”, carve it backwards (Ⓛ). When you hold it up to a mirror, it will be facing the right way (D).

- When you are ready, draw your image in *pencil* on the soft cut block. If you make a mistake, you can erase it. When it is done, use your lino cutters to carve out the image.



*For the Styrofoam activity: It's suggested to use a veggie/meat Styrofoam container bottom and cut off the edges so you have a flat surface. Draw the image onto Styrofoam with a pencil, and then use a ballpoint pen or dull pencil to “carve” the image into the surface.*

- Make sure to carve away from you!
- Try to make shallow cuts. You don't have to carve deeply to create a good image. If you carve too much away, you might develop a hole in the bottom.
- If you make a mistake, find ways to make it work! Or simply flip your block to the other side.
- You should only carve out either the positive space or negative space.



This image is an example of positive vs. negative space. When you are carving, decide if you want the tree to be what presses into the ink. Or, do you want the tree to have negative space, and the space around the tree will create the image and press into the ink?

Image cred: Josh Greenwalt

## Part II

Once your image is carved, it is time for the paint!

*Note to parents: Finding the right surface for paint can be challenging. Using a kitchen countertop and securing parchment paper to the counter is a good option.*

- Choose which paper you would like to use. Regular computer paper works just fine, as does construction paper, rice paper, or print paper.
- Choose your color. Try out one color first, then as you practice you can try using two or three colors on one print.
- Take your paint and squeeze a little on to the surface. Use your brayers/rollers to spread out the paint. Once it is thinned out, roll the paint onto your soft cut block.
- Carefully press your painted print onto the paper.
- Carefully pull print away.
  - Another way to do this is to place your painted print painted side up. Then place your paper on top of the print. Use a spoon to make sure all of the paper connects with the print. Carefully peel away paper.



### Extra challenge?

- Do some research on Japanese prints. Look up the history of “The Great Wave,” possibly the most famous print.
- If you have mastered one color, see if you can use up to three or four colors on one print to create an image.

## **Materials**

water soluble paint (speedball is a good brand)

brayers (print rollers)

linoleum/lino cutters

soft cut linoleum blocks

scrap paper

pencil

printing paper (any paper should do)

Styrofoam for younger children

## **Vocabulary**

Japan

block prints



FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT | ARCHITECT