

Morris and the 'White-line' Method

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This is written in response to an item in the Lathams' Bibliography published in our last issue, which recorded under Book Design, item No. 126 by William Vaughan, 'From Menzel to Beardsley: Pen Line Design and Facsimile Wood Engraving': "Argues that Morris deliberately chose the 'white-line' method for his Kelmscott *Chaucer* border designs but sent Burne-Jones's illustrations to a commercial engraver who copied the lines exactly." (p.xviii). This assertion must not be allowed to pass, least of all in *The Journal*.

Morris's borders, and Burne Jones's pictures, were put out to a carefully chosen commercial engraver, Hooper, for cutting. Both artists, as early as their 'Cupid and Psyche' collaboration in the mid 'sixties, set themselves against the so-called 'white line' technique then universal in commercial printing, taking as model the open cutting used by Dürer and other artists, Italian as well as German, who provided the first printers with their illustrations. These cuts reproduced exactly, line by line, dot by dot, the drawings made, in reverse, with the quill pen on the surface of the woodblock which the block cutter (*form-schneider*) then worked on with knives and gouges, cutting away all areas meant to remain white, leaving standing only the black lines, just as the artist had drawn them. The wood of these blocks was pear, cherry, or apple, and the cutting was done on the plank (side) grain. The same technique survived, only a little modified, in block-cutting for wallpapers or chintzes, well into this century. All the Morris papers and chintzes were printed from such blocks, and we know the names of the block cutters.

The alternative mode of printing pictures/patterns was from copper plates, deriving from Middle Eastern damascening of armour. For this the graver – what the French call the *burin* – had been evolved: a small bar of steel, square or diamond-sectioned, set in a short half-round handle and sharpened at an angle to give a point with two sharp edges. This gave at a single stroke an incised (intaglio) line, whereas every line of the woodblock needed four strokes to clear it from its ground. Copper plates were printed by forcing stiff ink into the lines, and using extremely heavy pressure to deposit that ink on the paper, while the ink of the woodblock lay on the surface of its raised parts, to be transferred to the paper with far less pressure.

Copper-plate printing began to displace block print in the latter sixteenth century, and woodcut illustrations fast came to be the "slovenly stamps" of Horace Walpole's description. But in the mid seventeenth century the Frenchman, Jean Baptiste Papillon, busy in the wallhanging trade as well as in book-printing, began to use the graver on his wood blocks – probably not the first to do so: it has been claimed that this began in Armenia under the Ottomans. But to use the graver on wood, that wood must be very hard and dense-grained, and to avoid the oblique and unintended lines caused by the tool slipping into the grain of the wood, it was necessary to cut the block *across* the grain. Our hardest wood was box, and an endgrain boxwood block has

no such hazards. Papillon's fine and fast technique was taken up by tradesmen elsewhere, including London. It was the Newcastle engraver Thomas Bewick who seized on it and perfected it beyond any dream of Papillon. In the mid-seventeen fifties, he was an apprentice in the workshop of Ralph Beilby, and it was for the illustration of Charles Hutton's book on Mensuration that the new technique was first used there. Beilby was a copperplate engraver, and did not at all take to the woodblock. Hutton, a Newcastle pitman's son, brought from London the necessary tools (gravers) and boxwood blocks, and these were handed over to the apprentice, leaving Beilby free for more lucrative jobs. Bewick – much admired by Ruskin, by Kingsley, by Philip Webb – quickly mastered the technique and went on to use it with ever-increasing skill and invention, winning a Premium from the recently installed Society of Arts. He was a sensitive if untrained draughtsman, and his work much in demand for illustrations of a new kind. He won a national, indeed an international, reputation, and his skills and those of the many apprentices whom he trained, reinstated woodblock letterpress illustration everywhere. This technique has been entirely inappropriately called 'white line', but its great characteristic is that it is a *non-linear, tonal* technique.

Among the many delightful Burne-Jones caricatures of Morris is the familiar one which shows him seated at a table engraving a block. On the table, and scattered on the floor are a dozen or more discarded gravers which he has either broken or been too impatient to sharpen. But he is here using, as we know, from the surviving pulls of the 'Cupid and Psyche' blocks – and others – the single-stroke graver to cut clear bold lines, *not* to create tones. Thus were cut thirty and more of the 'Cupid' blocks, partly by George Wardle, by Campfield, but mostly by Morris. For the *Chaucer* and all the Kelmscott Press books, all illustrations and ornaments were similarly but professionally cut. Morris's *Chaucer* borders and Burne-Jones's pictures were put out when the designs had been fully transferred to the blocks, to a trade engraver, W.H. Hooper, no doubt recommended by Emery Walker. The misnamed 'white line' technique they never used.

The first identifiable product of newly-set-up Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co, in 1862, was the frontispiece to Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, which came out from Macmillan in April at the same time as the Firm's bold Prospectus. Designed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the block was cut – just as we see Morris in the caricature – by Charles Faulkner, with gravers, on a boxwood block, onto which Rossetti's finished drawing had been reversed. In the bottom left-hand corner appear the famous initials – M M F & Co. Faulkner, only son of a Birmingham engraver, was familiar from infancy with the tools he now used. Though this was a first attempt it pleased not only Gabriel and Christina, but Macmillan. And the technique was exactly that used at the turn of the century by Gordon Craig, and in the 1920s and 30s by Eric Gill.