

Woodcuts

The earliest extant piece of printing, the Diamond Sutra (868AD, from China) was printed from wooden blocks, cut by hand, & printed by placing a sheet of paper over them & rubbing the back. Printing from wood blocks was certainly used about a century earlier, but the exact date of first use is unknown. This method of printing continued to be used in the Far East, & eventually spread to Europe, but was limited in usefulness until the fourteenth century, when prints started to be produced in quantity using adapted wooden presses based on designs used in agriculture. This evolved further into the production of entire books, each page being cut from a piece of wood, with the text cut at the same time as the illustrations. The limitations of this process are obvious, & with Gutenberg's introduction of type, such *block books* became obsolete. He must have been aware of such books & their method of production, & probably adapted his inks & press from the ones already in use.

As an aside from woodcuts in relation to letterpress printing, it should be mentioned that among the finest examples of woodcuts are reckoned to be those of the late fifteenth-century German artist, Albrecht Dürer. As an art form, woodblock printing (in multiple colours, but printed by hand-rubbing) was most fully developed by the Japanese over several centuries until the arrival of Western influences & printing in the late nineteenth century, when



it in turn influenced Western artist such as Toulouse-Lautrec who was working in lithography.

Producing illustrations by cutting wood to form the printing surface, however, was still very much a useful process even after printing's introduction, & continued to be used. Apart from the lack of alternatives (etching & engraving were developed later, but neither suited fast or high-volume production), woodblocks were printed by the same basic process as type, & so could be printed either separately on the same press, or alongside the type. Wood cutting survived commercially until the rise of wood engraving, in the mid-eighteenth century, when it declined, though still used by artists.

Linocuts are essentially woodcuts using a different medium: linoleum offers a cheap, ready-made, & easy to use material but not one of use in commercial printing. It has no grain, & a consistent texture, making cutting simpler. It is weaker than wood, so on the whole must be cut with bolder designs, & is usually printed with less pressure than metal or plastic surfaces, leaving a slightly speckled effect to the printed areas.

Top: a woodcut from an early printed book. Woodcuts were for a long time the only method of illustration available other than hand illumination. Some cuts were re-used in different books, simply re-titled!

Bottom: a block-book page. Some block books had no pictures, just lettering, but each page was cut as one piece from wood.