

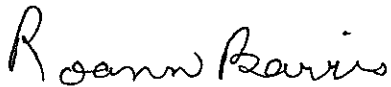
Woodblock Printing: Creative Techniques and A Series of Vietnamese Scenery

by
Lam Tung Dinh

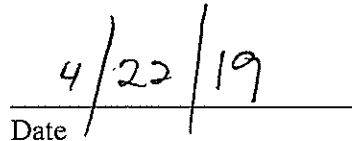
A Thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University,
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Studio Art
Graduate Program in Graphic Design

April 2019

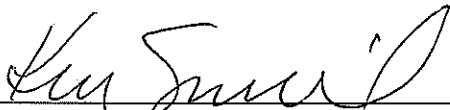
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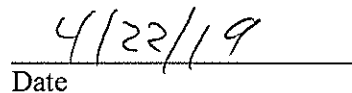
Prof. Roann Barris
Thesis Advisor



Date



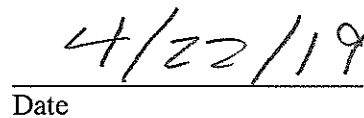
Prof. Kenneth Smith
Committee Member



Date



Prof. Joseph O'Connor
Committee Member



Date

ABSTRACT

I am devoting my research project and exhibition to woodblock printing. I produced a series of woodblock prints (6 prints, 14.5 inches x 14.5 inches) about scenery, nature, people, and the country of Vietnam (see Appendices 1-6). I also used this series of prints to design a calendar and publish it nationally and internationally (attempting to print and publish for the year 2020) (see Appendix 7). These woodblock prints and calendar will contribute to tourism, welcome international friends to visit my beautiful country, and demonstrate my graphic design and fine art skills.

Woodblock printing was my medium of choice because it has the ability to express the uniqueness about my country that other media, such as oil painting, silk painting, and pastels, could not fully deliver. In addition, my father is a printmaker. I learned a special technique of woodblock printing from him. The love of doing woodblock printing has been growing in me since childhood.

Woodblock printing has been starting to disappear because of the growth of technology. Many people do not know what woodblock printing is. I would like to develop, teach, and expand this area of printmaking so people will be more interested in this method of art.

In this thesis, I will explain how I use this technique and how I departed from traditional woodblock printing. Unlike traditional woodblock printing, I use only one block of wood when I do multicolored woodblock prints. Traditional woodblock printmakers use different blocks for different colors that they want to use on their prints. Using one block of wood allowed me to keep the registration correct and facilitated the design process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Smith and Professor O'Connor, my advisors, for their patient guidance, enthusiastic encouragement, and useful critiques of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Barris for her professional advice, valuable support, and assistance in keeping my progress on schedule. My grateful thanks are also extended to professors and staff in the art department at Radford University. It was a great opportunity for me to come and study here at Radford. Finally, I wish to thank my parents for their support and encouragement throughout my study.

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CHAPTER I

HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE WOODBLOCK PRINTING AND HOW TYPICAL VIETNAMESE WOODBLOCK PRINTS WERE CREATED.

Woodblock printing might sound familiar to many people, but not everyone understands what it is, where it is from, when it was invented, and how to do it. What is woodblock printing exactly? People have been printing images and words for thousands of years. The printing process invention was started in China before 220 AD; several religious texts and calendars were produced. It spread to Europe, America, and many countries in Asia, including Vietnam.¹

In woodblock printing, an image or text is carved away from a block of wood (areas that will not be printed are removed). The block is inked and printed on a material like paper or fabric. People can print black/white or multicolored. However, creating a multicolored print is a time-consuming process because the artist must use different blocks for different colors.



Figure 1: Example of a carved woodblock.

Woodblock printing is a time-honored art that holds a special place in Vietnam's cultural history. Many collections of Buddhist sutras were produced through woodblock printing by the late 11th or early 12th century.² In the late 18th century, the use of woodblock printing for

1. *Tranh Dân Gian Việt Nam - Vietnamese Folk Pictures*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Dân Tộc, 1995.

2. Cohen, Barbara. "Woodblocks." *ThingsAsian*. <http://thingsasian.com/story/woodblocks>.

decorative purposes began. Historically, the primary purpose of Vietnamese woodblock printing was to relate a well-loved and known theme or folk tale, but the creativity in woodblock printing was discouraged. Furthermore, older Vietnamese prints rarely carried the name of the artist, but the name of the location where it was produced because the emphasis was on recognition rather than artistry.

There are four dominant styles of Vietnamese woodblock printing: *Đông Hồ*, *Hàng Trống*, *Kim Hoàn*, and *Sinh Village*. The first two are the best known. They originated at two locations in the Red River Delta. The first one came from the village of *Đông Hồ* in the *Hà Bắc* province. The village is still known for its production of woodblock prints. The subject of the prints from this village reflects the daily country life and people's innermost feelings and wishes. In addition, it is executed with a coarse but fresh technique in bold, clear outlines. Artists from *Đông Hồ* village coated *dó* paper, the Rhamnoneuron paper, with *điệp* powder (a white powder made from scallop shells). This technique helped the paper to have a silver luster look. Sometimes, yellow flower pollen, called *Hoa Hòe*, is used to make colors more elegant and shiny. All of the materials for creating the colors of these prints come from nature, such as black comes from bamboo charcoal, red from ochre, brown from yams, and yellow from daylilies. Figure 2 is an example of a print from *Đông Hồ* village.



Figure 2: *Đám Cưới Chuột*.

The second style comes from *Hàng Trống* Street in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. *Hàng Trống* Street produced a more urban type of print. Around the 17th to 18th century, the subject matter in these prints was more elegant and the lines were more subtle than those of *Đông Hồ* village. Unlike prints from *Đông Hồ* village, *Hàng Trống* prints used imported paper and brightly colored paints. The content of these prints was strongly influenced by Chinese drawings. *Hàng Trống* prints were popular as worship prints in temples, and they were hung in holy places. Figure 3 is an example of a woodblock print from *Hàng Trống* Street.



Figure 3: *Ngu Hồ*

The styles of these prints are different; however, they were created based on two concepts. The first one was *Đơn Tuyến Bình Đồ* (single line, simple designs), which used lines to bend the colorful shapes and to make a border for the print. Another method was *Thuận Tay Hay Mắt*, which means easy to draw and see. Because of these design methods, the folk woodblock prints did not depend on the rules of perspective. The deities were drawn large and took upper positions, while the ordinary people were drawn on a smaller scale. In addition, the size of the animals and the natural scenery depicted depended on their relationship to the sentiment or story being expressed. These unique characteristics made Vietnamese woodblock prints profoundly impressive.³

Multicolored woodblock production techniques were complex because they used quite a lot of woodblocks to print in color according to the number of colors and shades in the picture. For example, if a picture had sixty colors and shadings, the number of woodblocks would be sixty. Therefore, in order to print out a print, a woodblock might have a color applied three times, and it took up to over 200 printings. In addition, each block must be printed in an equivalent position to make all the woodblocks match one another without bleeding. If one block was shifted, the whole print would be destroyed. It required artists to take time and register the blocks perfectly.

Vietnamese woodblock printing techniques will fade away or disappear because the youth now pay less attention to this kind of art. In addition, woodblock printing production was discontinued because of modern day technology and information for woodblock printing was not

3. Hays, Jeffrey. "VIETNAMESE PAINTINGS, WOODBLOCK PRINTS AND SCULPTURE." Facts and Details. http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Vietnam/sub5_9e/entry-3426.html.

transmitted to the next generation. Therefore, it is important to develop, teach, and expand this area of printmaking so people will be more interested in this method of art.

CHAPTER II

ARTISTIC IDEAS AND THE TECHNIQUES OF MY WOODBLOCK PRINTING

The subjects of this series of Vietnamese woodblock prints were scenery, nature, and people of Vietnam. These prints were very culturally specific; they described the Vietnamese culture. My country has 54 different ethnic groups; we all live in a land that has a tropical monsoon climate. It is graphically diverse; we have high mountains, deep forests, valleys, and an ocean that runs along the eastern side of the country. Vietnamese people live on agriculture such as hunting, farming, fishing, and artisanry. In addition, we have many different festivals such as *Tết* (Lunar New Year) and mid-autumn festival. Moreover, the architecture here is unique because each ethnic group has its own architecture. The French also came to Vietnam in 1945. They built many buildings and bridges that have the colonial look to them. All of these were my inspirations to create these artworks.

In this series of woodblock prints, I captured Vietnam's historic charms such as a street corner of the 36 Streets in Hanoi, a peaceful village, a Vietnamese highlander trading her homemade goods outside her house, a traditional highland Vietnamese stilt house, and a Vietnamese family and a tray of five fruits on their ancestral altar, called "*Ngũ Quả*." These prints embrace the traditional spirit of Vietnamese culture. They encompass architecture, customs, and practices that are very dear and close to the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese society is changing rapidly. Through my woodblock prints, I want to retain the quintessence of my country when it is integrating to the globalizing world.

What made this series of woodblock prints different from what I had done before is that my works are square. In my opinion, it is a way to focus the viewer's attention for a deeper look

at details. In addition, I used this series to produce a calendar; therefore, square format prints worked better and fit better in the calendar than the rectangular prints.

Unlike traditional Vietnamese woodblock printing technique, I only used one block to create a multicolored print. This technique of using one woodblock helped me to keep the registration correct throughout the printing. In addition, I did not have to change the woodblock every time I needed to print a different color; therefore, it saved a lot of time and effort.

Because I only used one woodblock to print multicolored, I could not coat the entire block at once. I had to use a brush to paint and print one color for one area at a time. Furthermore, one edge of the paper was always attached to the woodblock during the entire printing process by a couple of clips, because if the paper moved, the registration would be wrong. Figure 4 is the picture of the paper being attached to the woodblock during the printing process and how I painted the block to print.



Figure 4: Picture of the paper being attached to the woodblock during the printing process and how I painted the block to print.

Moreover, what made my technique different was that I used black Canson paper instead of white or ivory paper like traditional Vietnamese prints. These papers need to have a textured surface instead of a smooth surface because the ink will catch on the paper more easily, dry more

quickly, and it creates a nice ink texture when printing. The black lines, in my prints, came from the paper. These lines helped to separate the colorful shapes. These black lines were created by carving away lines of the design on the woodblock. I will recount the process of creating this woodblock printing technique from the beginning to the end. This discussion serves as the basis for a future textbook.

CHAPTER III

CREATIVE PROCESS

1. THUMBNAIL SKETCHES AND ROUGH DRAFTS.

This was the most important part of the creative process. I used pencil and paper to sketch out the position of the subjects. When artists draw the final rough sketches, the forms, shapes, and lines need to be stable and correct because it is harder to fix it after they trace it on the block and carve it (see Figure 5).

My prints have bold lines, strong earth tone colors, and some colors were repeated in each print to make them look consistent. However, each print still has its own beautiful distinct characters. This creates a variation in this series of woodblock prints.

During this creative process, I always had to pay attention to the artistic style of these prints. Because this was a series of woodblock prints, the consistency of the style was very important. When I created these sketches, I also needed to have an idea where my colors were going to be and what they were. This process requires lots of thinking and analysis. Sometimes an artist will need to fix the sketches right away if he/she sees a shape or an object on these sketches that looks out of place or unbalanced. One very important point to remember is that everything that the artist draws on the rough draft will be in reverse after the woodblock is printed. If an artist has any text in the sketches, the text needs to be written in reverse as well.



Figure 5: An example of one of the rough drafts.

I created at least four rough draft sketches for each print and picked out the one that I liked the most. Once I had made the decision of my favorite draft, I traced that rough draft sketch on the woodblock and got ready to carve.

2. PICKING WOOD AND TRANSFERRING THE IMAGE.

The most traditional of Vietnamese woodblocks were made of *Thị* wood, which is soft and smooth with an ivory color. This kind of wood was very good for preserving the shape of the carvings; therefore, the woodblocks were still in good condition after hundreds of years passed. In addition, pear and apple wood were also used for carving woodblocks.

I used medium-density fiberboard (MDF) to carve because it does not have any grain and it is very soft. Moreover, it is easy to find in the United States. It is a good kind of wood for beginners to try. The size of the woodblock needs to be equal to the size of the rough draft that I sketched. Designs may be transferred using transfer paper or carbon paper. I put the transfer paper face down between the surface of the woodblock and the drawing, then I used a pen or a

pencil to trace the drawing. The drawing to be traced should be reversed rather than correct orientation. If the artist intends to proof the image while carving, the line transfer should be re-traced with a marker (see Figure 6). I usually proof the image from the draft sketch. After that, I used gouges and carved away the lines on the surface of the woodblock (see Figure 7).

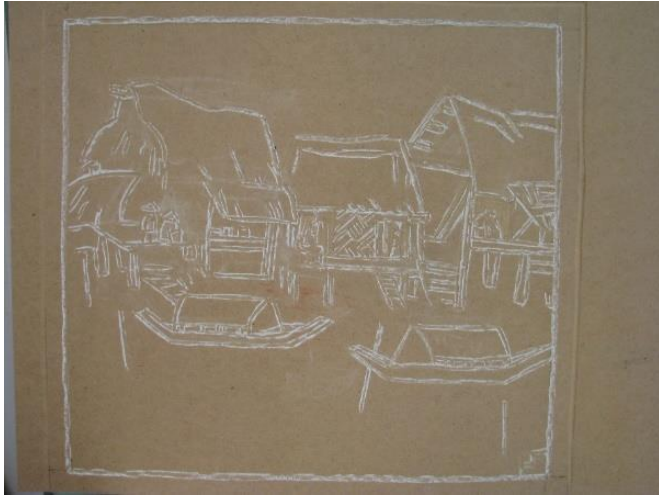


Figure 6: An example of a block after being traced.

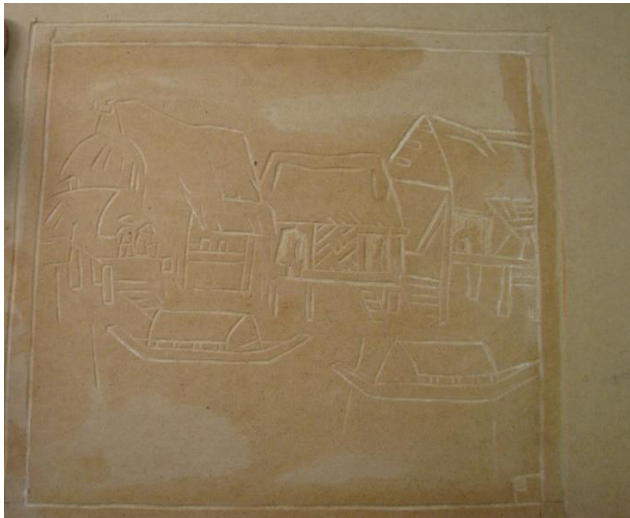


Figure 7: An example of a block after being carved.

3. CARVING TOOLS.

The tools that artists use to make woodblock prints are carving gouges of several shapes and sizes along with various knives and chisels. There is a wide variation in construction and quality of these gouges and knives. They are imported from many different countries such as Japan, China, and Germany. Japanese gouges are well-known for being made from high-quality steel and they last longer. The types of tools to use for woodblock printing are based on the personal preference and style of carving; however, it is important that the tools are kept sharp and of great quality. In my opinion, it is better to have fewer tools of high-quality than a large selection of inferior quality tools.

There are four main forms of carving tools: first, a bevel knife for outlining; second, a U gouge for creating U shape lines; third, a V gouge for creating V shape lines; and fourth, a wide gouge or chisel for clearing areas (see Figure 8). For someone with less experience with woodblock printing, I recommend getting a small and large U gouge, a small V gouge for carving details, a bevel knife, and a wide chisel gouge. During the carving process, an artist needs to pick the right size of the gouges that fits his or her artistic style to create different carving strokes such as soft, firm, big, or small. After I carved the woodblock, I usually used a big dry brush to clean the surface and get started printing.



Figure 8: U gouge, V gouge, and bevel knife.

4. PRINTING:

a. Paper:

I used Canson black paper for this series of multicolored woodblock printing because of the way I carved the block, and black paper created firm black lines to separate the colorful shapes in my prints. In addition, it is preferred if the artist uses the paper that has a rough texture surface because it is easier for the ink to penetrate the paper. If I print black/white prints, I usually use Vietnamese dó papers. I trimmed the paper slightly bigger than the woodblock, so it was easy for me to handle the paper when I printed.

b. Inks:

As I mentioned in chapter II, all of the materials for creating the colors in traditional Vietnamese woodblock printing came from nature. I did not use any of the nature-based ink from Vietnam in this series of Vietnamese woodblock printing because it is impossible to find that kind of ink here in the United States. I used powder pigments and “poster colors” ink to print (see Figure 9). These are water-based colors. It is necessary to mix the powder pigments with water and a sticky paste; I used gum Arabic as the sticky paste to mix with pigments. Artists can mix more than two powder pigments together to get a desirable color to print. The colors that I used in my prints were earth tone colors. They represented antiqueness and time.



Figure 9: Powder pigments that I used in my woodblock prints.

c. Printing:

All the colors in my prints are carefully chosen. When I printed, I always questioned myself: What color should be here? What color should be there? Should it be brighter or darker? Should I repeat that color there? First, I put a blank black paper faced down to the woodblock and used two clips to keep the paper from shifting. Then, I mixed the desirable color and brushed that color in a needed area, then I applied paper and printed that color. This process was repeated many times during the printing process (see Figure 10). Furthermore, I used my hand to apply the pressure instead of a printing press because I had more control over the value of the color when I did this. There were some areas I applied just a little pressure using the palm of my right hand to create the ink texture and emotion in my print; some other areas I would apply more pressure to create a darker tone.



Figure 10: A picture of how the paper is attached to the block and how ink is applied during the printing process.

Unintentional factors (happy accidents) make the prints unique, and it is very valuable. This is a unique attribute of woodblock printing and no other media in arts can duplicate.

5. COMPLETE THE PRINT:

I looked at the prints closely after I finished printing. I used pencil to sign, put a title, and number the prints on the bottom. If there was no space on the bottom, I signed, titled, and numbered the prints on the back of them. Picking the right frame for the print is very important because it is like picking the shirt that you wear. If the artist chooses the right frame and the right mat for the print, the print will look much better. However, if a wrong frame and mat are picked for the print, the beauty of the print will be reduced.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This was a good opportunity for me to sum up my knowledge about the process to create woodblock printing and it helped me to build up my career in the future. I have a desire to teach printmaking for an art department. If this aspiration becomes true, I will redesign this thesis to become a curriculum to teach woodblock printing for students at a university or college in the United States. I will apply my knowledge of both graphic design and woodblock printing to create more commercial products such as calendars, books, and T-shirt designs. These products will promote and present more about my woodblock prints.

In addition, my research helped me to understand more about the beauty and cultures in my country. In the future, I want to make new discoveries in my art practice to create a breakthrough and leave a strong impression to my audience. I wish to contribute my prints to my country and humanity.

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<http://thingsasian.com/story/woodblocks>.

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Trần, Quang Phòng, and Tuy Trần. *Mỹ Thuật Hiện Đại Việt Nam*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật, 1996.

APPENDIX 1

WOODBLOCK PRINTING 1: *HÀNG BÀI* STREET



Rough draft 1



Rough draft 2



Rough draft 3



Rough draft 4



Chosen final draft



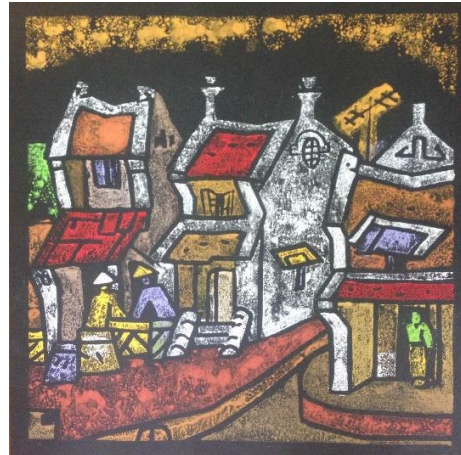
Design traced on the block



Woodblock after carved



During printing process



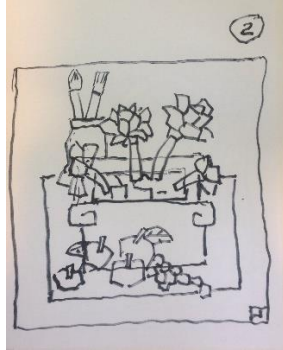
Final print

APPENDIX 2

WOODBLOCK PRINTING 2: NGŨ QUÁ



Rough draft 1



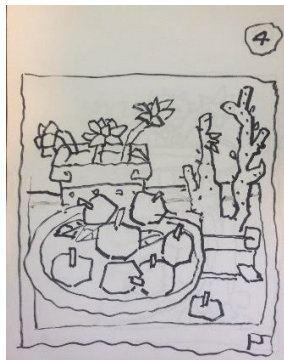
Rough draft 2



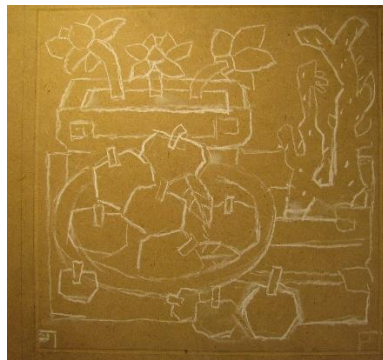
Rough draft 3



Rough draft 4



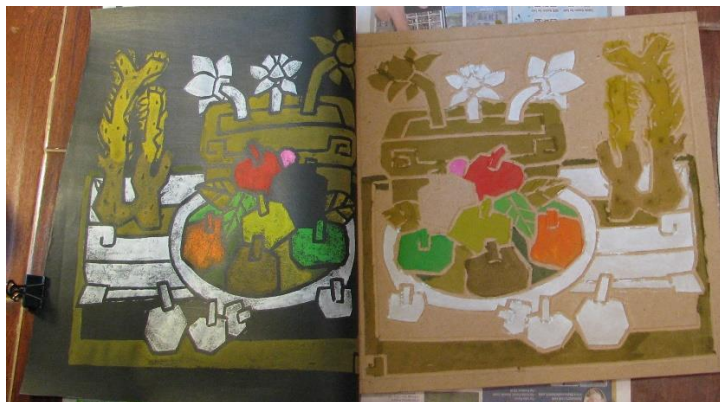
Chosen final draft



Design traced on the block



Woodblock after carved



During printing process



Final print

APPENDIX 3

WOODBLOCK PRINTING 3: *HIGHLANDER VILLAGE*



Rough draft 1



Rough draft 2



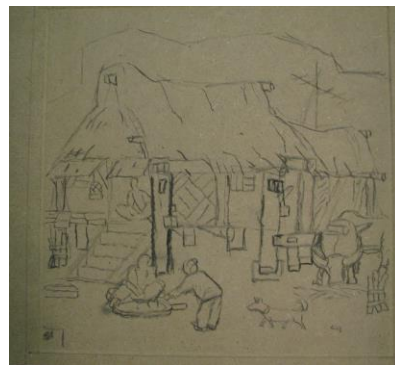
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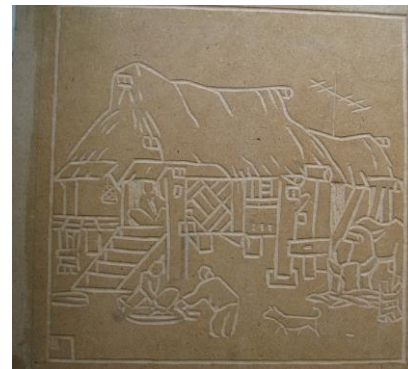
Rough draft 4



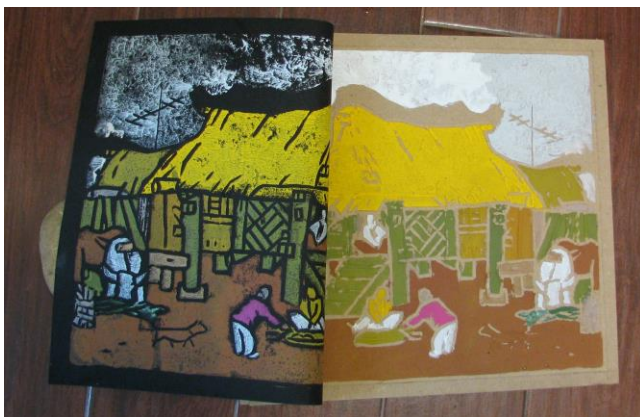
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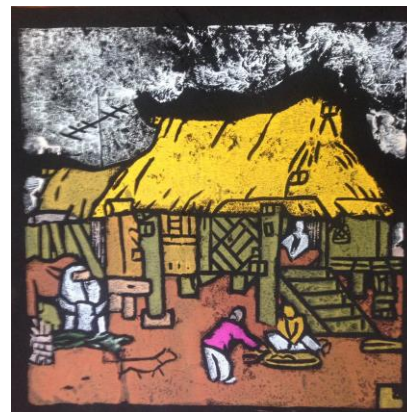
Design traced on the block



Woodblock after carved



During printing process



Final print

APPENDIX 4

WOODBLOCK PRINTING 4: *VILLAGE*



Rough draft 1



Rough draft 2



Rough draft 3



Rough draft 4



Chosen final draft



Design traced on the block



Woodblock after carved



During printing process



Final print

APPENDIX 5

WOODBLOCK PRINTING 5: *BUDDHIST TOMBS*



Rough draft 1



Rough draft 2



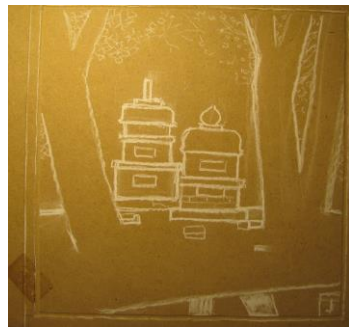
Rough draft 3



Rough draft 4



Chosen final draft



Design traced on the block



Woodblock after carved



Final print

APPENDIX 6

WOODBLOCK PRINTING 6: *FLOATING MARKET*



Rough draft 1



Rough draft 2



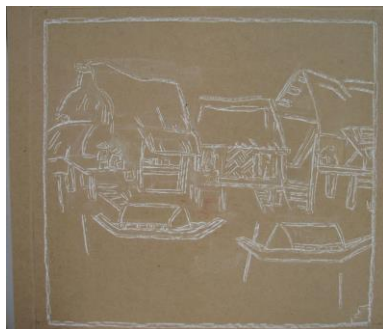
Rough draft 3



Rough draft 4



Chosen final draft



Design traced on the block




Woodblock after carved



Final print

APPENDIX 7

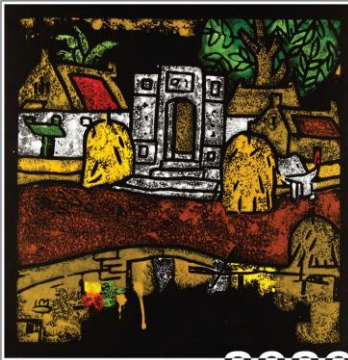
WOODBLOCK PRINTS ON 2020 CALENDAR



2020

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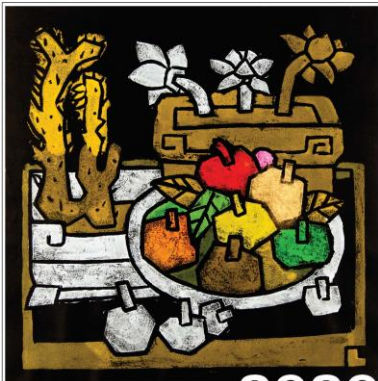
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2020

APRIL **MAY** **JUNE**

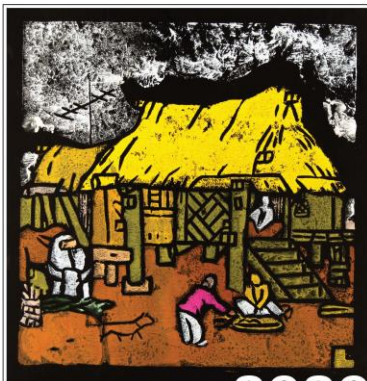
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2020

JULY **AUGUST** **SEPTEMBER**

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12	13	14	15	16	17	18	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
19	20	21	22	23	24	25	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
26	27	28	29	30	31		23	24	25	26	27	28	29	27	28	29	30			



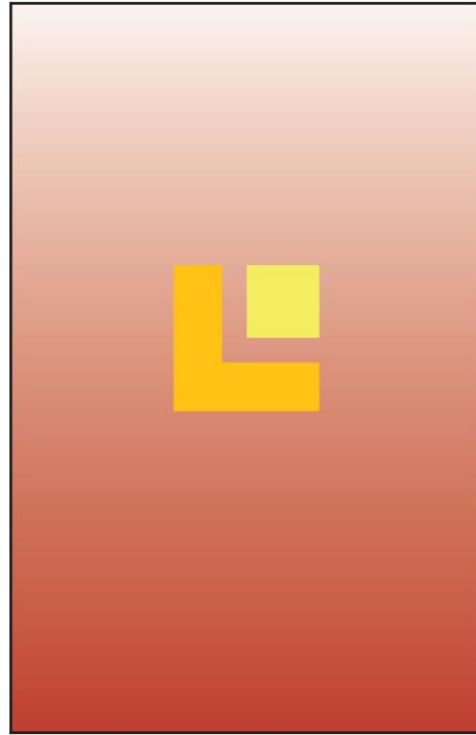
2020

OCTOBER **NOVEMBER** **DECEMBER**

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
			1	2	3					1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5		
4	5	6	7	8	9	10	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
18	19	20	21	22	23	24	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	29	30						27	28	29	30	31		



Front cover



Back cover