



OXFORD GUILD OF PRINTERS

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# NEWSLETTER

September 2011

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## Meeting recall

Weimin He is a very talented woodcut printmaker and historian of Chinese prints who has also worked and studied in England and is currently artist in residence at the Ashmolean Museum. On 5 September he gave an excellent talk to the Guild on the Chinese woodcut in the modern period. Illustrated with numerous slides, his presentation began with a brief history of the woodcut in China, showing something of its origins and the later influences of both Japanese and western art and printmaking techniques. From the 1940s the influence of British wood-engravers – notably Robert Gibbings, A. J. Gaskin and Eric Fitch Dalglish – was seen and He showed us examples of prints which were both Chinese in style and very much in this western tradition of pastoral wood-engraving. However, despite the patronage of writers and publishers like Lu Zun, the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 meant that many Chinese artists were 'sent to the country' to do work which would 'serve the people' (chiefly by training other workers to be artists) and the woodcuts made in the 1950s and 1960s had to be acceptable to the government. Nevertheless, many beautiful prints were made, and we saw work by Niu Wen, Liang Yongtai (who was tragically shot as a spy while making drawings in Ireland) and Yan Han, showing the fields and workers of the south, and the frozen landscape of the north (where many artists had gone as soldiers during the Sino-Japanese war). In 1966 the Cultural Revolution restricted the work of printmakers further, and very few woodcuts were produced until 1970; thereafter almost all the prints were pure propaganda, showing smiling children and workers, and the face of Mao. When the leader died in 1976 artistic freedom began to return to the country, and by the 1980s a wide variety of styles, influences and techniques could be seen in Chinese prints. He showed us many beautiful examples, some traditional, some modernistic or experimental, the huge *Book of the sky* by Xu Bing (printed between 1987 and 1991) being a particularly interesting example. Printed from an enormous number of blocks, it appears to show a text of elegant Chinese characters.

## Guild meetings

Unless otherwise noted, the meetings are held at The Bell in Charlbury, at 7:30 for 8:00 p.m.

**Monday 3 October,**  
Barry McKay will give an illustrated talk on "*Some Books in my Life*"

**Monday 7 November,**  
Filmnight: "*Making Faces*". The story of Jim Rimmer's new typeface Stern, the first designed for simultaneous release as a digital and a metal fount. More details will follow in a future Newsletter.

**Monday 5 December,**  
A pre-Christmas entertainment, Paul W. Nash will present his infamous *Impressions of Printers*. Nash will attempt to weave an imaginary narrative from the history of the private press movement, accompanied by some of his own 'hilarious' impressions of printers of the past and present.

P.T.O.

However, they are not pictograms but shapes only, and the text is unreadable. The talk concluded with (by popular demand) a showing of some of Weimin He's own work, which was most impressive and varied in its use of line and colour.

Being printers, many of the audience were interested in the techniques employed. Chinese woodcuts are traditionally made on date-wood, although this has become relatively hard to find and expensive so that many printmakers use plywood instead. The lines are cut with knives, the main tool being a 'fist-knife' with a curved tip to the blade, held rather like a dagger (very unlike the 'poker' grip used by western wood-engravers). Some prints are made with single blocks (which may be subtly inked with multiple colours), while others use multiple blocks or the reduction or 'waste' process. Printing is achieved not with a press, but with a printing table, which has two surfaces with a chasm between. A pile of damped paper is placed on one surface and nailed along one edge to the lip of the chasm, with the block or blocks attached (with adhesive paste) to the other surface. The block is then coloured using brushes and water-based inks, very like writing or drawing inks, and the first sheet of paper is folded across and placed onto the printing surface. Pressure is applied with a smooth or textured burnishing tool, or with the fingers or palm of the hand, and each impression may take many minutes (or hours in the case of very complex work) to print. When complete, the sheet is peeled from the block and fed down into the chasm, where it hangs to dry; then the block is re-inked and the next sheet is flapped across and placed on the block.

*Thanks to Paul W Nash for that excellent recall*



Ted holding court

In an effort to promote letterpress and the Oxford Guild of Printers, Ted (my son) and I took to the road, but not too far. Four gardeners accompanied by a trailer helped transport our 1870 Alexandra Press (a small Albion) next door to Upton House (National Trust). We have a studio on the Upton Park Estate near Banbury and agreed to spend the weekend in the kitchen of the house demonstrating the art of letterpress on their "weekend party" event in August. We printed an invitation to a fictitious garden party at the House, made up of various sizes of Perpetua lead type and ornaments. Both the press and the table of examples proved a popular attraction. Ted did a grand job of explaining the painstaking task of composing with lead type and the processes involved, this was coupled with various examples of how printers sayings had entered the language including "out of sorts" and "mind your p's and q's". A good time had by all. *Brian Clarke*

## Small ads

Two new titles about the Daniel Press from OGP member The Old School Press. *The Daniel Press in Frome* describes the work of the Daniel family press that was the forerunner of Henry Daniel's press in Oxford – 72pp of new research printed letterpress and 48pp of photographs. *Printing at the Daniel Press* describes 52 recently discovered proof sheets from the Daniel Press in Oxford – 32pp of text and 12pp of photographs. Full details at [www.theoldschoolpress.com](http://www.theoldschoolpress.com). Contact: [info@theoldschoolpress.com](mailto:info@theoldschoolpress.com), or Martyn Ould (see List of Members).

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Printmaking courses including Letterpress are available at the Granary Studio, Upton Park Estate see [www.artyonbonbon.com](http://www.artyonbonbon.com) for further details. Brian

## Other events