

Colour woodcut book illustrations with flat areas of colour (like modern stained-glass windows) had been issued in the 1480s and 1490s in Augsburg, and the conceptual innovation of matching hatching (shading lines) to highlights to create a three-dimensional effect was pioneered by the artists Hans Burgkmair in Augsburg in 1508 and Lucas Cranach in Wittenberg in 1509. These stunning title borders show that the new technique spread to Strasbourg almost immediately and that it was not used exclusively for fine art. In fact, the majority of early modern colour prints are book illustrations (often from the same black and red inks as the text). These title borders were the first of the many colour woodcuts issued by Schott, who should be celebrated as the first master colour printer. The relationship between their keyblocks and tone blocks is so complex and sophisticated that it is not clear who could have designed them; they have variously attributed to prominent artists, including Hans Baldung Grien and Hans Wechtlin, and multiple artists (eg, the tone block to Baldung and the keyblock to Hans Weiditz).

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*The boke of common prayer, and administration of the sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Churche of Englaund*. ...]. [London: in off. R. Graftoni, 1552].

*The boke of common prayer, and administration of the sacramentes*. Londini: in officina Edovardi Whychurche, 1552.

Histories of colour printmaking hold that all early colour prints involved a different woodblock for each colour of ink. However, a common technique, which has been briefly discussed in bibliographical but not art historical studies and which seems to have been used only for book illustrations, involved superimposing two impressions of one block on itself. A frisket sheet (a mask used to protect unprinted areas of a sheet in the printing press) was cut for each colour impression to determine which areas would be in red, black and both red and black. Because the creation of frisket sheets is part of the printing process, a key aspect of the visual effect of these prints was determined by the printer at the press, not the artist in his workshop. Tracking differences in the colour printing of the same woodcut, especially in books from the same edition, can help to reconstruct the chronology of the production of texts. This technique, called ‘masking with a frisket’, appeared c.1510 across Europe and flourished in countries where colour printmaking is thought to have been introduced up to 250 years later, after technological advances allowed for the (relatively) mass production of colour-printed images in the mid-1700s.
The German printmaker Ludolph Büninck has long been celebrated as creating the first colour woodcuts in France when he worked for the printer Melchior Tavernier in Paris in the 1620s, but Catherine Jenkins demonstrated in the current issue of the journal Print Quarterly that a small group of chiaroscuro woodcuts (collectible prints that imitate Italian chiaroscuro drawing, or wash drawing) must have been printed in France, not Italy, in the 1540s. However, if all categories of printed material, not just ‘fine art’, are considered, the history of colour printmaking in France extends back to the first years of the 1500s. The majority is on the first or last page of books, on title borders or vignettes or printers’ devices, and is thus printed in red and black. The colour is often used literally (for things that are actually red) and sparingly. In this woodcut of St George Slaying the Dragon, printed from two blocks, crucial iconographic information was supplied by colour printing in register: the St George’s Cross has accurate tinctures of argent, a cross gules (a white field with a red cross).

Early modern books with colour-printed illustrations were produced across the economic spectrum, from luxurious volumes with images from up to seven colours (including gold) to cheap, disposable items like almanacs. This sheet, which would have contributed to such an almanac if not for a printing error, includes three woodcuts printed in colour from two blocks. (It was reused in the binding of another book; the holes along one side indicate the stitching along the spine.) As was typical, colour printing is used to depict the glow of the sun, the rawness of the exposed viscera of the Zodiacal Man and the fire of the flames of Hell. These splashes of red presumably increased almanacs’ appeal and market value, and printing them must have been faster and cheaper than having them hand-painted. Studies of colour printmaking tend to omit book illustrations; this almanac was issued fifteen years before the famous ‘first’ colour woodcut of the Low Countries.

The Munby Fellowship in Bibliography

The annual Munby Fellowship in Bibliography was founded in memory of Alan Noel Latimer (‘Tim’) Munby, who was Librarian of King’s College, Cambridge, and a Syndic of Cambridge University Library. It continues his work by sponsoring bibliographical research on any subject related to printed or manuscript material in Cambridge collections, in any discipline and in any language. The Munby Fellow is given workspace in the University Library and enjoys access to the Library’s collections on the same terms as the members of its permanent staff. For details, see www.lib.cam.ac.uk/munby.

Dr. Elizabeth Upper is the 38th Munby Fellow. Her project is the first study of colour printmaking in Tudor England (1485-1603), of which all known examples are woodcut book illustrations printed in black and red. These prints have been described, but as ‘normal’ woodcuts; their colour printing is rarely recorded and thus effectively unknown. A unique feature of the Munby Fellowship, staff access to the Rare Book vaults, allows her to search for these vivid images in the thousands of sixteenth-century English books at the Library.

This case contains items related to Dr. Upper’s project and their international context of production. Early modern woodcuts generally consist of one matrix (printed surface), known as the keyblock (the ‘outline block’, usually in black). Excepting a few celebrated outliers, colour printmaking is thought to have developed in the early eighteenth century, after Isaac Newton’s Opticks revolutionized colour theory in 1704 and Jacques Christoph Le Blon invented the trichromatic approach we still use today c.1710. Le Blon’s red-yellow-blue (and eventually black) has become our CMYK. However, colour printmaking technologies had
been widespread across Europe for over two hundred years before this great ‘breakthrough’. The production of these early colour woodcuts challenges long-held assumptions in fields from the history of medicine to early modern visual culture.