The Development of Color Printmaking

1. The earliest appeared as book illustrations in ink monochrome. By 1695 publishers were selling monochromatic images printed on a single sheet of paper. To achieve these prints, the artist’s original ink design was transferred to the block. A carver carefully removed everything except outlines and patterns, left in relief. After applying ink, the printer placed a sheet of paper on the block and rubbed the back of the sheet with a round tool called a baren.

2. The first hand-colored Japanese prints were made in the early eighteenth century. Called “vermilion pictures” (beni-e), they featured pinkish red pigment made of safflower petals and light green grass sap.

3. “Lacquer pictures” (urushi-e) were popular in the mid-eighteenth century. For these, animal collagen glue was applied to black ink to impart a lustrous quality reminiscent of lacquer. This technique was used primarily for hairstyles and costume details.

4. Starting about 1744, registration guide marks were carved in blocks, allowing printers to align colors. Hand-colored prints were superseded by “crimson pictures” (benizuri-e), printed with a few colors, including pink, yellow, and green.

5. The adoption of consistent registration marks made full-color and multiblock printing possible in the mid-1760s. Multicolor prints, produced by taking impressions from a woodblock set, are called “brocade pictures” (nishiki-e) because they resemble colorful silk brocades.