

# multi-color woodblock prints

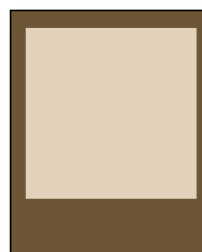
—Amy Guadagnoli



## Color-reduction method in a nutshell (single block)

In color-reduction woodblock printing, the printed image builds up as the block that creates it is reduced and destroyed. This method self-cancels the printmaking block.

1. Starting with your blank block (or block with image affixed), carve out only the areas that you want to be the color of the paper.
2. Print your first color. (Using the the lightest value (e.g. light-yellow) as your first color often works best, but is not required. Interesting effects can result from playing with the order of values and hues.)
3. Clean the block thoroughly and allow the color to dry.
4. Continue carving the block. This time carve out the areas you want to remain the first color.
5. Print the second color.
6. Repeat step #3.
7. Carve out the areas you want to be the second color.
8. Print a third color.
9. Repeat the carving and printing until you have achieved your desired image and number of colors (or until you have removed all of the wood from the block).
10. For editions, all of the prints will need to move together through each stage of the process.



woodblock  
light areas = carved

print  
printed in stages

## Color-reduction method (multiple-block)

With more than one block, you open up the possibility of overprinting on areas formerly carved out of one block. This method combines the advantages of multi-block printmaking with the economy and layering potential of color-reduction.

You can use one block as a key, or one as positive and another as negative areas and work them back and forth.

Use stencils or stop-outs to isolate areas you do not want the layer to impact. For editions, be sure to create enough copies of the stencil in case one tears or becomes damaged during the run.

You can reduce one block, both blocks, or neither. I've seen printmakers who carve out very little using this method. I tend to reduce at least one block almost completely.

## Tips and Considerations

- Remember to “think backwards” not just in terms of imagery but in color stacking. You are always carving what you’ve *already printed*.
- With single-block color reduction, be sure to carve everything you want to be the previous color (but no more). There is no going back once you pull the next color or remove the wood from the matrix. Color-reductions are sometimes called *suicide prints* in part because of the destruction of the matrix but perhaps also due to this inflexibility.
- Ink layers will build up texture on the paper quickly. This can become a problem if thick build-up is not desired. Keep ink layers roughly the same consistency in terms of tack (viscosity) and stiffness.
- Registration is vitally important since each layer stacks over and hides those below.

## Helpful Ink Modifiers

**Setswell Compound** reduces tack and allows layers to lay flat and stack over one another. Use very sparingly. Too much and your ink looks like an orange peel.

**Magnesium Carbonate** stiffens ink and reduces length. Try to maintain relative consistency in stiffness. Ink that is too goey can blur details, but too stiff can create difficult texture.

**Cobalt Drier** decreases drying time. A must for humid climates and deadlines. Use *extremely* sparingly. One tiny drop per half-dollar size ink is plenty. Too much and it can create scary ink that lifts off of the paper and gasps for air.

**Tint Base** (Handschy) or **Transparent Medium** (Daniel Smith) enable transparent ink. I’ve used Tint Base happily for many years. It is super sticky, and a bit long on length, so be sure to have Setswell Compound and Magnesium Carbonate on hand if needed. Daniel Smith’s Transparent Medium is less yellow on the palette, and works roughly the same. I find it takes a little more work to roll out evenly.

## Tools

It is worth investing in good carving tools. My favorite are PFEIL “Swiss Made” palm gouges. They are available at Woodcraft. You can get by with the following three tools:

- #11 1mm Veiner
- #11 3mm Veiner
- #9 5mm Gouge

The #9 10mm Gouge is also very helpful for clearing or making big marks.



## Contemporary Color Woodblock Printmakers

Check out the inspiring work of

**John Buck**

<http://www.sharksink.com/artists.asp?artists=4>

**Jean Gumper** (*Jean is one of my teachers*)

<http://www.davidsongalleries.com/artists/gumper/gumper.php>

**Karen Kunc**

<http://www.karenkunc.com/>