

## *The Chiaroscuro Woodcut in Renaissance Italy*

### **Introduction to the Chiaroscuro Woodcut Technique**

Taking its name from the Italian terms for light (*chiaro*) and dark (*scuro*), a chiaroscuro woodcut entailed printing an image from two or more woodblocks with inks in closely related hues, using tonal contrasts to create three-dimensional effects. Chiaroscuros thus differ from the linear, black-and-white designs of traditional woodcuts: some capture the qualities of heightened drawings on tinted paper, while others achieve more painterly effects akin to brushwork.

### **Technique**

A chiaroscuro woodcut involved the superimposed printing of multiple woodblocks. Each block, which was cut with a portion of the final image, was inked in a different color. In a two-block chiaroscuro, the line block typically delineated the complete compositional design and was cut like a conventional woodcut. The tone block printed an overall background color and also rendered the white highlights using reserves of paper. Intermediate tones could be introduced by using additional blocks. Such chiaroscuro woodcuts from more than two blocks could be less reliant on a dominant linear design and achieve more painterly qualities. The blocks were commonly inked in closely related hues, and palettes could vary from one impression to the next. Using a press similar to that used for printing books, the successively printed blocks were carefully registered so that their interdependent designs aligned.

### **Woodblock**

The woodblocks needed to be both sufficiently resilient to withstand the repeated pressure of printing and of a fine enough grain to accommodate detailed cutting. The preferred material for chiaroscuro blocks was pear or boxwood, according to early writers. To diminish the potential for warping or splitting, a wood plank was typically cut parallel to the grain and seasoned. For a single chiaroscuro woodcut, multiple blocks of identical measurements would need to be prepared.

### **Blockcutting**

A design was drawn onto a woodblock for the cutter to follow. The wood was cut away from the sides of the drawn lines with a knife and the unwanted areas of the block around the lines were then cleared away using a gouge or chisel. When complete, only the parts of the design that were intended to print remained raised (or in relief).

## **Ink**

The ink used to print woodcuts was composed of a colorant mixed into a binding medium. The binder's main ingredient was a vegetable oil (typically linseed or, less frequently, nut). The most commonly used colorants for chiaroscuro printing inks were carbon black, lead white, ochres, vermilion, indigo, copper-based pigments, and orpiment.

## **Ink dauber**

The ink was typically applied to the raised (uncut) surfaces of the woodblock using a mushroom-shaped tool made of a leather pad stuffed with wool or hair and attached to a wooden handle.

## **Paper**

The raw material for making paper through the Renaissance was linen. The linen fiber was broken down through humidification, and was washed and beaten into a pulp and stored in a vat. A papermaker dipped a mould (a frame stretched with a fine wire screen) into a linen fiber pulp, and distributed it in a uniform layer across the screen. The mould was turned over to deposit the congealed sheet onto a piece of absorbent felt. Once dry, each of the two sides of a sheet had a different surface texture: a ribbed texture from the screen and a smoother one from the felt.