



Blockprinting: Carving Your Block

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Barony of Flaming Gryphon
Kingdom of the Middle

“...take a block of either nut or pear, as long as it is good strong wood, and have it about the size of a tile or a brick; and have this block drawn upon and hollowed out a good line deep; and on it should be drawn whatever style of silk cloth you wish, either leaves or animals. And have it so divided in shape and so drawn that all four faces will come out in a repeat, and make a finished and unified job. And on the other side, which is not engraved, it should have a handle, so that you can lift it and apply it...”

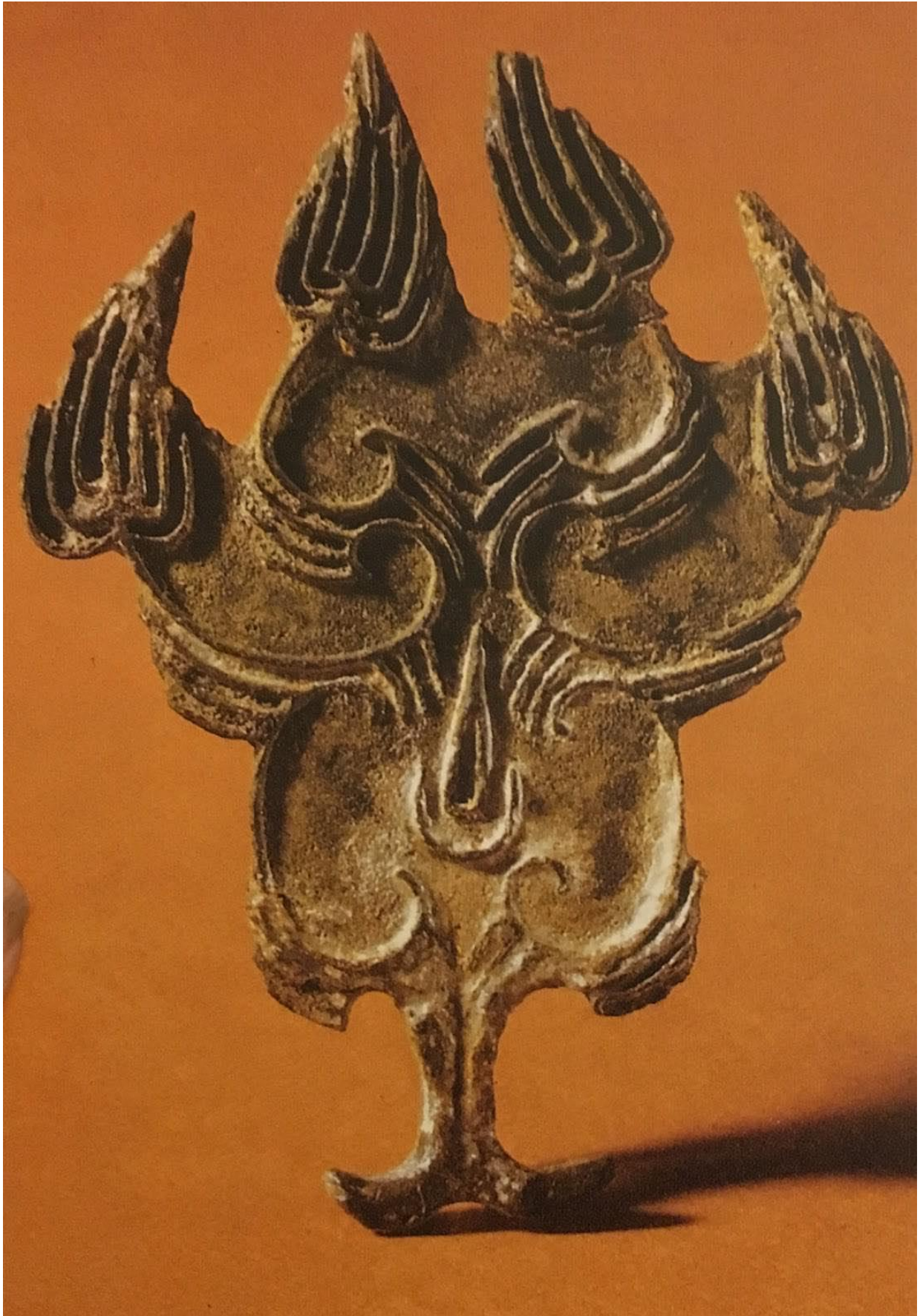
- Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, Italy, late 14th Century – early 15th Century



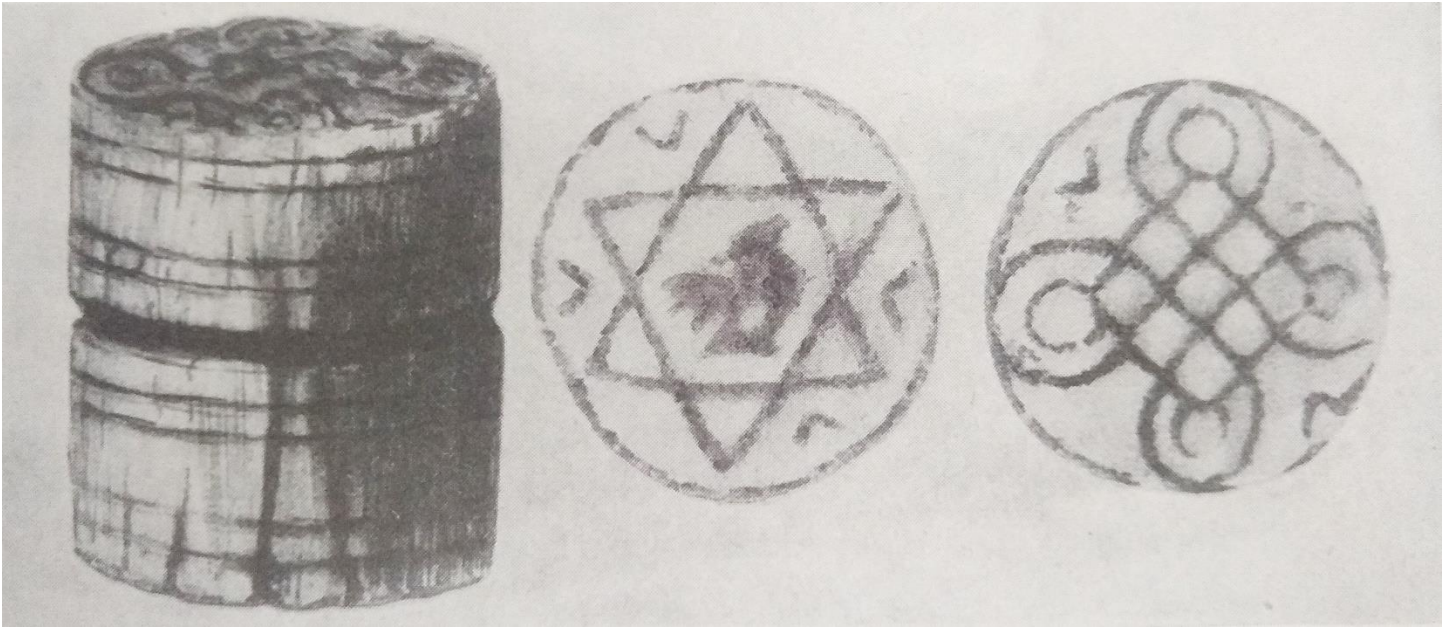
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Cylinder Seal with an image of its impression, 3200 – 2900 BCE, from Kish, Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq), held in the Sulaymaniyah Museum/Slemani Museum, Iraq.

Though this particular piece was not intended for textiles, this is a precursor that demonstrates technological innovation in mechanizing repeat patterns.

The remaining blocks shown in this handout are believed by archaeologists to have been intended for textiles or both textiles and paper.



© Shelagh J. Vainker in the book Chinese Silk: A Cultural History, 2004.
Bronze Printing Block found in the Tomb of the Nanyue King (6cm/2.3622" tall),
2nd Century BCE, Guangzhou, China.



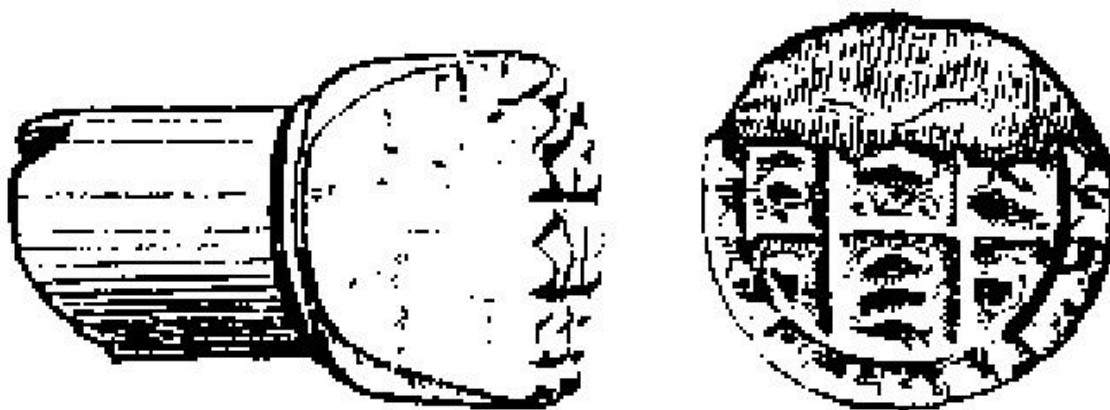
A double-sided cylindrical sycamore block, 4th Century, Akhmim, Egypt.



Illustration of the surface of a wooden printing block with stylized peacocks and Tree of Life found in the grave of a textile printer, 7th or 8th Century, Akhmim, Egypt



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (#1971.87)
Wood Textile Printing Block (7.6cm/3.0" tall by 6.4cm/2.5" wide), 10th Century, Egypt



Stone Stamp for Printing on Fabric, 11th – 13th Century, Raikovetsky Settlement, Kiev, Ukraine.



© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany (#I.4369)
Wood Textile Printing Block (4.1cm/” tall by 3.8cm/” wide), 11th – 13th Century, Egypt.

The stamp shows a seated figure with long hair playing a lute in a frontal view. In the upper gussets, arches are indicated, which indicate arcades under which the figure sits.



© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany (#I.6978)

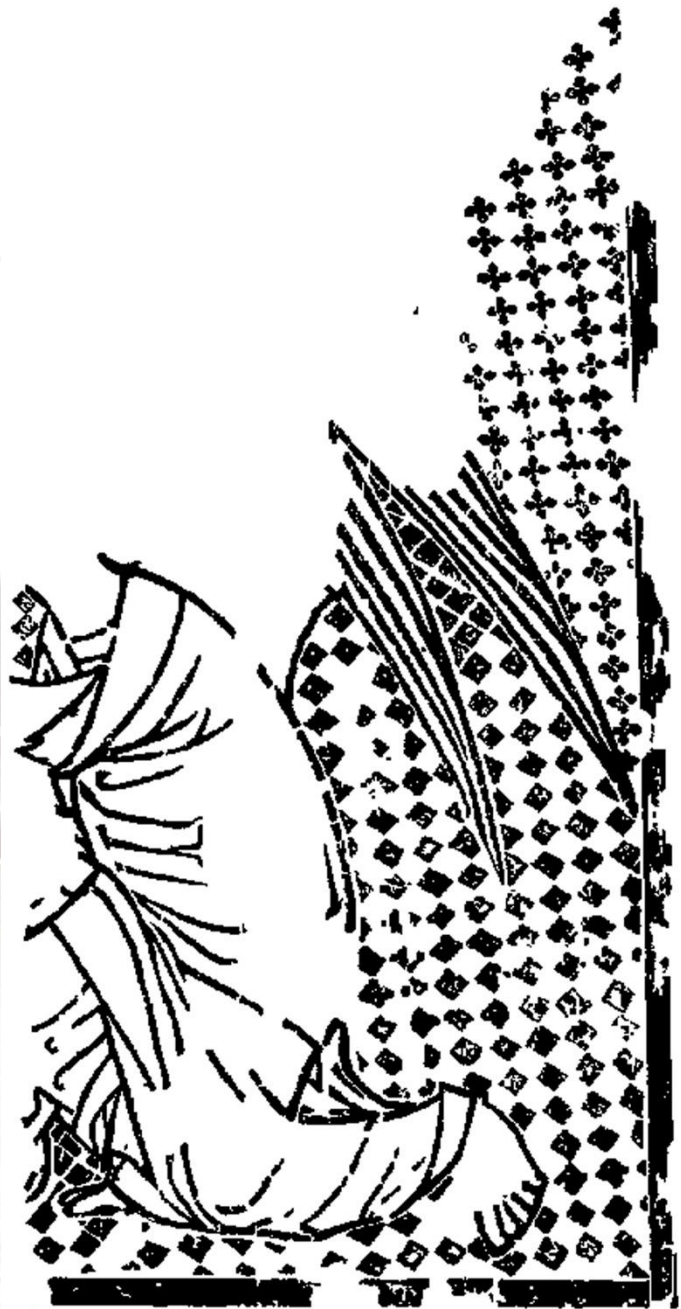
Copper Alloy Textile Printing Block (4.1cm/” tall by 3.8cm/” wide), 12th – 14th Century, Egypt.

Cast stamp from a copper alloy with engraved / chased decor. The stamp surface is an elongated rectangle and shows a geometric diamond and star pattern. The handle is rectangular and widened towards the top. The small stamp was probably used to print textile borders.



Bois Protat walnut wood block (60cm/24" tall by 230cm/9" wide), recto, found in Saône-et-Loire, France, circa 1370-1380, currently held in the National Library of France, Paris.

Oldest surviving woodcut from the Western world. It was carved on both sides, with a scene from Christ's crucifixion on one side and a kneeling angel from a presumed Annunciation scene on the other. This was likely one of three or more blocks in a set. There is some debate about whether this was intended for textiles, paper, or both, but does pre-date the printing press in Europe.



Bois Protat walnut wood block (60cm/24" tall by 230cm/9" wide), verso, found in Saône-et-Loire, France, circa 1370-1380, currently held in the National Library of France, Paris.

Oldest surviving woodcut from the Western world. It was carved on both sides, with a scene from Christ's crucifixion on one side and a kneeling angel from a presumed Annunciation scene on the other. This was likely one of three or more blocks in a set. There is some debate about whether this was intended for textiles, paper, or both, but does pre-date the printing press in Europe.

This particular side did not survive the test printing process after its discovery.



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (#30.112.17)
Wood Textile Printing Block (dimensions unavailable), 11th – 17th Century, Egypt.



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (#30.112.15)
Wood Textile Printing Block (dimensions unavailable), 15th – 19th Century, Egypt.



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (#30.112.13)
Wood Textile Printing Block (18.1cm/7.125" tall by 14.3cm/5.625" wide), 15th – 16th Century, India.



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (#30.112.16)
Wood Textile Printing Block for a Tiraz Band (3cm/1.875" tall by 8.7cm/3.4375" wide),
15th – 19th Century, Egypt.



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (#30.112.14)
Wood Textile Printing Block (dimensions unavailable), 15th – 19th Century, Egypt.

Tips for Carving Your Own Block

#1 MOST IMPORTANT SAFETY TIP: Carve in the direction away from yourself.

OTHER SAFETY TIPS: Wear protective gear, such as safety glasses, cut resistant gloves, masks and also consider wearing ear plugs, when working with power tools.

1. Once you select your design, print it out and transfer it to your block or draw it directly onto the block. Tips for transferring it include:
 - cut out the design and trace the silhouette, or
 - use transfer paper/carbon paper/receipt paper to trace design, or
 - use pencil lead on the back of your image then trace your image with a stylus.
2. After you have drawn your pattern out, darken the part(s) of your image with a permanent marker that you do NOT want to carve away. This will help you to not carve crucial parts of your design away. (Ask us how we know this!)
3. Begin by carving away the outermost edges of your design or any large area that you want to carve down, then work your way in. Try carving down at least 1/4" to 1/2" into the block whenever possible, especially if you expect to use the stamp pad method for printing.

Carving tips with manual tools include:

- carve away from yourself;
- take your time and allow yourself a learning curve;
- start small and carve in shorter strokes to begin with so that you don't get carried away;
- whenever possible to spin and orient your block, carve away from the elements that you do NOT want to carve down, so as to avoid accidentally carving (into) them;
- try all of your different tools to see which ones you prefer to achieve different results;
- carve close (but not all of the way up) to the outline of your design, leaving yourself at least 1/16" to "clean up" the edges with your straight blade;
- keep your tools sharp (separate tutorial) or replace the tools and straight blades as needed – if it doesn't cut with minimal effort, your tool is probably too dull!

Carving tips with electric rotary tools also include:

- use the medium speed to start, as you learn how each tip works with your medium;
 - utilize rotary tools primarily in larger areas and wide-open spaces;
 - when using power tools, leave at least 1/8" to "clean up" the edges with your straight blade.
4. Bevel down the corners of your block, so that you can "rock" your stamp to ensure maximum transfer of your image.
 5. Keep your industrial shop vacuum cleaner handy! Don't vacuum with your regular cleaner!

Block Carving Supplies List

Check out The Harpy & The Hag's Amazon Affiliate Store for all of these supplies in one list!
<https://www.amazon.com/shop/harpyandhag>

Required Supplies

- Wood OR (Wood-Mounted) Linoleum Block
- Wood Carving Tool Kit (at least: a #3 Gouge, a #9 Gouge, and a V-Parting Knife)
- X-ACTO X3000 Straight Blade (or a box of Disposable Scalpels)

Optional Supplies

- X-ACTO X3261 Knife Wood Carving Tool - Highly recommended - great for curves!
- Extra Blades – X-ACTO X104 Knife Blade (Refill for X-ACTO X3261)
- Cut-Resistant Gloves - Avoid stitches at the hospital!
- Variable Speed Rotary Tool Kit (e.g. Dremel 3000)
- Flex Shaft Attachment
- 3/32" Collet (Dremel #2615000481)
- 11-Piece Rotary Tool Carving and Engraving Kit (Dremel 689-01)
- Dremel 490 Dust Blower
- Reader Glasses/Stationary Magnifying Glass or Magnifying Lamp
- Wood Filler - To fix your boo-boos! Not all is lost!
- Mechanical Pencil
- Sharpie
- Rulers and Protractor