

# Colby



Colby Quarterly

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Volume 2  
Issue 5 *February*

Article 4

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February 1948

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 2, no.5, February 1948, p.71-74

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## EARLY BLOCK PRINTING

*By* JAMES HUMPHRY, III

THE Colby College Library has recently received from one of its loyal and generous alumni, Mr. Arthur G. Robinson, '06, two very interesting wood blocks. One is Chinese, cut for printing two pages of a book, with marks in the center to guide the folding of the double sheet commonly used in Chinese books. The other is a Japanese block used to make prints of the sort that have been so popular in America. It has carvings on two sides; on the one side a picture of an audience in front of a native theatre; on the other is a landscape presumably in Japan. These two examples of early printing prompt a brief review of the history of block printing.

Block printing flourished in China, and later in Japan, several hundred years before Gutenberg, in Europe, made his discovery of printing with movable type. During the period of the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), one of the most glorious periods in the history of China, printing was first begun, and great strides were made in developing the art. The emperors of the T'ang Dynasty were great patrons of literature and the arts, a fact which was most conducive to an early and successful development of block printing.

During this golden age of Chinese genius, a great variety of devices was being evolved in the Buddhist monasteries of China for the re-duplication of sacred books and texts—an activity that reached its climax in block printing some time before the end of the "golden age" [approximately 656-756].

This activity in devising methods of reduplication can best be studied from the finds of Tun-huang and those of Turfan, the two places where the manuscript records of early Buddhism on the borders of China have been preserved. Here are found not only rubbings from stone inscriptions, but also stencils and pounces, printed textiles, seals and seal impressions, and a great profusion of little stamped figures of Buddha, all of which led the way directly to the art of the block printer.

The rubbing from stone was in the main the Confucian preparation for printing. But discoveries at Tun-huang show that the Buddhists

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used the device too and by means of it printed one of their favorite scriptures, the Diamond Sutra.<sup>1</sup>

According to the late Professor Carter, the exact date at which block printing was first introduced is unknown. "The earliest well-defined block print extant dates from 770 and comes from Japan. The earliest printed book comes from China and is dated 868."<sup>2</sup> Block printing had, however, been developed gradually over a period of years and it is difficult, if not impossible, to track down the earliest example of the art. It is quite logical to assume, however, on the evidence presented by archeologists and other students in the field, that much activity had been carried on in China in the Buddhist monasteries prior to 770, and that printing in Japan benefited by this development. Professor Carter concludes that block printing in China was probably developed during the reign of Ming Huang (712-756), the last of the glorious reigns of the T'ang Dynasty. Revolution and religious strife followed with the edict of 845, which ordered the destruction of countless Buddhist temples. As a result, the art which at first had been so carefully fostered now lay dormant for a period of years. This is the reason why no Chinese printing earlier than the Diamond Sutra of 868 has survived.

Although the first block print which can be traced accurately came from Japan, it is without any question that the Chinese influence had been brought in by scholars and missionaries who had made a careful study of the Chinese customs and culture. As early as 540 Chinese literature was brought to Japan. Gradually it developed until, for example, a Chinese scholar was made head of a newly established university at Nara, the capital of Japan which was trying to pattern itself after the Chinese capital at Si-an-fu.

Kibi-no-mabi returned from China in 735 after studying for nineteen years, and to him is attributed the invention

<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread Westward*, New York, 1925, pp. 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

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of Japanese script. He entered the government service and, in addition, was the tutor of the empress Shotoku who ordered the first block printing, that is, the first recorded printing. The empress had one million charms printed in the Sanskrit language, using Chinese characters. These charms were placed in a million tiny wooden pagodas. About the year 770 work on this project was completed and the charms and pagodas were distributed throughout the country. A number of these pagodas are still extant, some in China and Japan and three in the British Museum. "The charms are about eighteen inches long by two wide. Each one contains about thirty columns of five characters each. They are not all alike, as six different charms were printed. Two different kinds of paper were used, one thick and of a woolly texture, the other thinner and harder, with a smooth surface, which did not absorb the ink quite so readily . . . . Whether the blocks used were of wood or of metal is still uncertain, but they were probably of wood."<sup>3</sup> In producing these charms, the empress of Japan introduced the first positively identified printing to the world, which from our point of view is much more important than the fact that the Buddhist doctrines had such a profound influence on the empress that she attempted to secure religious favor by her monumental printing project. Shortly after the empress' death, the power of the church faded, and we hear nothing of Japanese printing until 987, when again the Chinese influence established itself in Japan.

The famous Diamond Sutra, the earliest known printed book, produced in China, is dated May 11, 868. An interesting account of the way in which Dr. Auriel Stein discovered this well-preserved book and carried part of it back to the British Museum may be found in his *Serindia*, published in London in 1921. Each sheet of the Sutra is two and a half feet long and a foot wide, indicating the size of the block used. The printing itself is so well done that one naturally concludes that the work is the culmination of an

<sup>3</sup> Carter, op. cit., p. 36.

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art which had been in existence many years, certainly before the crude charms of the empress Shotoku were printed in Japan. It is considerably more developed than the block printing done in Europe centuries later. For an enlightening discussion of the significance of Dr. Stein's discovery, and a further history of Chinese block printing, Douglas C. McMurtrie's *The Golden Book* (Chicago, 1927) is recommended.

The invention of printing in China resulted in the first printing of the Classic Books. During the five dynasties, midst the troubled years of revolution which followed the T'ang Dynasty, the blocks were prepared and after a period of twenty-one years, in 953, the project was finished. Not only did literature become more prevalent, but the people became more literate, as well. Mr. C. P. Fitzgerald sums up the significance of the invention of printing in these words:

Although it is impossible to assign to any one cause the sudden revival of classical learning under the Sung, the invention of printing, and the publication of cheaper printed editions of the classics, which made the ancient literature accessible to a larger public, was an important contributory factor; similar in its effects to the influence of the printed Bible among the Protestant nations at the Reformation.<sup>4</sup>

To return to the two blocks now in the possession of the Colby College Library, the Chinese block measures  $10\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $6\frac{1}{4}$  inches, the size of a double page; the size of the Japanese block is  $15\frac{1}{4}$  inches by  $10\frac{1}{2}$  inches. The wood is probably cherry. The dating of both blocks will have to await their study by someone able to read Chinese and familiar with the history of Japanese art. In the meantime, however, they will serve as useful reminders of the too-little-known fact that these graphic arts were developed in the Orient long before they were known in Europe.

<sup>4</sup> C. P. Fitzgerald, *China, A Short Cultural History*, London, 1942, p. 405.

