# **Relief Block Printmaking**

This tutorial explains the steps involved to create a block print. It is a reference guide to take you through the processes that are used to create a single colour print and multiple colour print that originate from a carved relief surface. The main design will be created using Easy Cut softoleum material. Additional colour areas will be printed from surfaces made from high density styrofoam.

The first step is deciding on an image. You can draw an image directly from observation or from using your imagination. You can also use photo reference if needed. The important thing to remember is to keep your design fairly simple and try to establish a balance in the layout of positive and negative space (which are the black and white areas of the print image.) The white areas (negative) are those deeper areas left after cutting away the surface material and that do not retain ink when the block is printed.

One more important item to be aware of is that the image you draw and carve away on your block surface will **print in reverse**. You can take your original and trace the sketch through the paper onto the back of the paper by placing it against a window. Another option is to scan the drawing or photocopy it as a reverse image. Then it can be used as your guide for sketching once again onto the block. (fig. 1 & 2) The idea is to create a rough layout sketch on paper first using pencil. Then use pencil crayon, marker or tempera for mapping out the areas of colour in your design if you plan to incorporate more than one colour.(fig 3)





fig. 3

## Creating a Key or Master relief block print from Easy Cut softoleum

The "Key" or "Master block" is usually printed in the darkest colour (if you are printing a multiple colour print). It is the printed image that defines the overall main design around which all other colour areas will fit into.

Using your colour sketch as reference redraw the design onto a dark coated block surface using a light colour gel pen (fig. 4 & 5). This will determine the design as a black and white graphic (the light lines will also act as a cutting guide). Coat the white surface of the Easy Cut product with applications of a permanent black chisel tip marker until it is completely darkened. (fig.4) The advantage of this method is you can easily make changes to the layout before you cut, either by drawing black over the white line or the opposite of white line on top of the black. The uncut black surface remaining will be the relief surface to which ink is applied using a brayer (roller) and from which the transfer of ink is made onto the paper when pressure is applied.





#### Cutting/carving the softoleum block surface

You will be using a linoleum block cutting knife to to cut into and remove areas of the surface. (fig 6). Pictured is a #1 liner in the foreground and in the back is a #5 large U shape gouge blade.



When cutting into the surface of a block using linoleum block cutting tools place the block on a piece of nonslip material (shelf liner) or into a bench hook. For cutting various types of lines use different blade attachments. Fine details are best achieved using a #1, 2 & 3 for fine or normal width lines and wide areas can be achieved using #4, #5 & #6 cutting blades

**Remember:** Always cut away from you with free hand holding your block from behind and the other hand holding the knife and cutting the surface material away from you. Make sure cutting tools are sharp and cut the surface of the softoleum by holding the knife at a slight angle such as a 20 degree slant. (fig. 7) For cutting busy detail areas cut around the seciton first with a wider gouge to create an outline and then use a #1 liner (small v shape blade) to cut away pieces into the area from that larger cut line. (fig. 8)

Figure 9 shows a fully cut (or carved) keyblock ready to ink and print a test proof. The exposed white areas do not hold ink so will remain as white space on your paper when the block is printed.

## Registration of block and paper

The block can be printed by using a system designed to have your blocks centered and secured onto a baseboard. The paper is pinned at the top and rests over top of the block when printing. This system allows for exact placement of more than one block to create a full colour print. (fig. 10)

Fasten a strip of foamboard to the top edge of your board. Place your block in the center of the board and tape straight edged pieces of scrap matboard or popsicle sticks around three sides of the block in a "U" shape (fig 10) Match the top edge of the paper with the top of the board, then using a pencil mark the corner edges of the top and bottom of your paper corners onto your registration board. Secure your paper at the top of the board with push pins (fig 11). Fold paper back and set a weight on the top edge to hold it back, then place your inked block into the "U" shape registration brace (fig 12).





fig. 11

fig. 12

When you are ready to print then you will remove the weight and carefully fold the paper back over top of the inked block.

#### Printing the block

Spread a small amount of waterbase ink on a glass slab with a palette knife. Add a little retarder medium to your ink to slow down the drying time (about 20% additive to pure ink.) It might be wise to cover the ink and inking plate with a lid so that air is kept off of it when you are printing.

Coat the braver by rolling the cylinder and spreading the ink using a forward push motion (fig 13). There should be a thin & even shiny coating of ink coating the cylinder. (fig. 14)

When rolling on the glass inking plate listen for the ripping sound to diminish then carefully apply to block surface using a light rolling motion in forward direction. Place inking rails (strips of material that are an equal height to your block) along the outside edge of the block (fig 15). The strip helps to apply ink off the roller cylinder inwards from the edges and will also keep the roller level with the relief surface on the block while applying ink over large cut away areas that extend out to the edges. The entire surface of the block should appear shiny when you hold it under a light. Have your paper ready and secured to the foam strip at the top of the registration board. Fold the paper back and put a weight on the end to keep it held in place while you are putting the block on the board. Carefully set the block into the U shape brace and gently fold the paper back over top of the block. Rub gently with the palm of your hand to establish contact between the underside surface of the paper and the inked block.



Apply firm pressure and keep rubbing the back of the paper using a circular motion with your arm while gripping the baren. Make sure that pressure is applied over the entire block surface area below the paper (fig 16). You can carefully lift the paper to check and see if the ink is transferring to the paper underneath in a solid even application. If it is not carefully lay the paper down again and continue rubbing the back of the paper. Fig. 17 shows the transferred ink on the paper after rubbing with the smooth plastic top of a jar. Fig. 18 is the black and white proof on paper from the cut block relief.



fig. 17

The registration system will also be of benefit if you are doing a colour print that uses more than one block. Place each equal size block in the "U" brace and secure the sheet of paper in the exact place each time for near perfect positioning of each colour layer. Fig. 19 shows the keyblock with one additional colour (the lighter gray area in the sky and water, the white negative space defines the clouds and some of the water surface).



fig. 18



fig. 19

### Styrofoam as a relief surface for applying additional colours into the print

Styrofoam blocks can have an image drawn on the surface using a non-alcohol based fine point marker or you can trace a sketch onto the surface using old style blue black carbon paper underneath your the drawing. First place a piece of tracing paper over your keyblock proof and trace the area you are planning to make a block for printing a particular colour. Fig. 20 illustrates the block will print a colour where the foreground rock is located. Once the drawing is made on the foam surface retrace the line by pressing into the foam using a ball point pen (fig. 21). This depression in the foam surface will leave white areas on the paper when ink is rolled on the flat surface and the block is printed. You can also carefully cut into the thin foam sheet with an xacto blade and peel an unwanted area away from the base (fig. 22). This is especially recommended for large open areas that do not require ink.



fig. 20





In fig. 23 the bottomsection has been cut with an xacto blade and the surronding foam has been peeled away. A large piece has been left above as no ink will be rolled on this area so it will not affect the print image.





fig. 24

fig. 25

fig. 26

Fig. 24 shows the styrofoam block that printed the sky, clouds and water in a light blue (fig. 25) Fig. 26 is the combination of the sky block with the darker colour rock area printed over top. I then printed the keyblock in black over top of this to give me the final 3 colour print as shown in fig. 27. The prints are hung on a iline to dry (fig. 28). Different types of utensils used for rubbing the prints (fig. 29).

