

How to Use a *Baren*

Before using your *Baren*, spread a drop or two of oil using the palm of your hand over the *barengawa* (bamboo sheath that covers the *baren* and forms the handle), covering both the face and the edges of the *Baren*. You should do this each day that you print. This will keep the *barengawa* supple and help lengthen its printing life. However, if it is saturated with too much oil, the *barengawa* will stretch and become weak, so do not overdo it. Any kind of light weight oil will do. We recommend Camellia Oil, which is traditionally used by printmakers in Japan. Some Japanese printers use the oil from their hair or foreheads! Avoid vegetable oils because they can become rancid.

You may want to protect the back of the printing paper by placing a sheet of *ategami* (a thin, translucent Japanese protective paper that is strong and waterproof), tracing paper, or baking parchment between the *baren* and the print while you are printing. This will protect the printing paper from the vigorous rubbing, add life to the *barengawa*, and make it easier to move the *baren* over the area being printed.

Grip the *baren* with the tips of your fingers tucked beneath the handle. Apply pressure with the heel of your hand, not your fingers or knuckles, and use the motion of your shoulder to move the *baren*. The *baren* should always move in a circular motion across the area you are printing. Pressure depends on the look you want. Press hard to pick up as much ink as possible; press softly for a subtle look.

When you have finished printing each sheet, hold the *baren* in your hands with the handle up. Using your thumbs, give the *ategawa* (the stiff, black backing piece under the handle) a little turn. If you are in the habit of doing this every time you print, the coil will not wear through the *barengawa* so quickly and the *barengawa* will last much longer.

Most printmakers have several *baren*, since the shape and construction of the *shin* (the coil, which is sandwiched between the *barengawa* and *ategawa*) create different effects.

It is normal for the *barengawa* to split or develop holes from use. Since the *takenokawa* (bamboo sheath) is a natural material, there is no way to predict how soon this will happen. Some *barengawa* last a very long time while others break down and develop holes quickly. This is not a defect of the *baren*.

Most people in the west wait until there are signs of wear and then replace the *barengawa* but this may be too long to wait. The Hon ("Genuine" or professional quality) *Baren* craftsman recommends replacing the *takenokawa* (bamboo sheath) frequently, before any holes appear, because doing so protects the *shin* from wear and the *baren* will last much longer. Some traditional printers in Japan change the *takenokawa* at the end of a long day of printing; others wait a week or so before replacing it.

Happy printmaking!



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