



Turnabout is Fair Play!

I've had a good day down in my workshop; today was a printing day, and I spent many hours hunched over my woodblocks taking impressions for the print I am currently making. I'm sure that most people who read this will have a little bit of experience making a woodblock print, perhaps back in school, but I doubt that you have experience of making hundreds of copies of a print.

While doing this work I really become almost a living robot! I go around and around the cycle of steps: dab pigment onto the wood, use a brush to smooth it out, place the *washi* onto the block, rub it with the baren, pull the print off ... then again: dab pigment onto the wood ... and so on, and so on, again and again, for hundreds of copies. And then, when I get to the end of the paper stack, I change the block for a different colour, and start all over again!

Are you bored just reading this description of my work? I know that it must sound quite boring, but it's actually not. For one thing, it is easy to make errors, so I have to watch constantly to make sure there are no slip-ups. But perhaps more importantly, the work doesn't actually use one's brain very deeply - just the arms and body. If you don't believe this, just consider that one of the older printers in Tokyo has a small TV set placed on his printing bench, and he watches soap operas all day while he prints!

Now my own skills are nowhere near his level, and I wouldn't dare to try watching TV while I work, but audio is a different story! Because my mind is completely free during the printing, I frequently play music discs, or listen to the radio. I have an internet connection in my workshop, and thus have access to the incredible feast of material that the BBC broadcasts free for anybody in the world to access.

And what a feast it is! They have a wide variety of channels, each one offering 24 hours of interesting programming every day. No matter what my mood is at any particular moment, the BBC has something that will be just right for it! Music of every type, documentaries, travel programs, games and comedy programs, of course endless news programs ... it's all there, streaming out uninterruptedly from Broadcasting House, their London headquarters.

Sometimes I feel a bit guilty about this, as I pay them nothing for this wonderful service, but I suppose the British government considers that it is worthwhile spending the money to make British culture available to people around the world.

And you know, I understand that motivation completely; on my own web site there are thousands of pages of material about woodblock printmaking: rare books that I have scanned in, video clips of the work, detailed descriptions of the printmaking process ... all available free, no questions asked. And it is accessed by hundreds of people on a typical day; not the millions that must be using the BBC service, but plenty enough for me!

Why do I offer this service? I have no easy reply to that question, other than to say that such material should be accessible, and as it is I who is kind of a 'caretaker' of the knowledge, I have a responsibility to make it available. It takes some money to do this, but the expense certainly isn't crippling.

And I can't help but have the image of a BBC program producer, at home after a long day's work creating a music documentary, surfing the internet for information on his new hobby - making woodblock prints ...

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