

A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Colour Me Genki!

I am sure it is not news to anybody reading this that there are major changes underway in the makeup of Japanese society. It sometimes seems as though the newspaper and magazine editors can't find anything else to write about - we see so many stories about the 'greying' of Japan and the upcoming decline in population, due to the low birthrate.

I myself am not quite sure what to think about these changes. On the one hand, when we think about how crowded our big cities are, it would seem to be not a bad idea to reduce our population; we would be able to sit down on the train! But of course, if there were to be a drastic decline in population, there would be a corresponding decline in services too, and far from being able to sit down on the train, there would probably be far fewer trains to sit down on!

More than the reduction in population though, it is the greying of society that seems to be the major concern. Pensions are no longer guaranteed for many people, and we all wonder if there will be enough caregivers to look after all those old folks who will be around in a few decades.

It is partly because of this worry that there is such a huge boom these days in products and ideas to promote good health among the elderly. I have to confess that I haven't given such things much thought - after all, I'm only 54 years old, still a very long way from thinking of myself as being 'elderly'. But although I hadn't realized it, it turns out that my printmaking work does have connections with this topic! Can you guess what it might be?

A couple of months ago, I was contacted by a Tokyo book publisher; they wanted to discuss the use of my Hyakunin Isshu woodblock prints in one of their publications. This is not unusual at all, and over the years my prints have been used to illustrate quite a number of publications related to the old poetry. But this request was different - rather than act as illustrations to accompany a text written by somebody else, this time the prints were to be the main item. I was surprised though, when the editor told me that they wanted to produce a colouring book using my prints!

I must say that my first reaction to the publisher's request was not really positive; after all, most of us have the image of colouring books as being 'for kids', and I like to think that my woodblock prints are really not childish material, but he explained to me that there is a very large demand these days for all manner of items that can be used to keep the brain 'active', and it seems that colouring books are a good way to keep seniors busy. Instead of just sitting there watching TV, if they are given interesting colouring books, they are willing to spend many hours enjoying the activity. And I can well understand how this would be very good 'exercise' for the brain - choosing and mixing colours, and then filling in all the areas of the image. And of course, the very 'old-fashioned' theme of the Hyakunin Isshu is a perfect choice for these elderly people, because far more than younger people these days, many of them can remember all the poems, having learned them when they were very young.

So after some discussion, I agreed to his request, and the book has been in production for the past couple of months. It should be in the bookshops sometime later this month. This isn't exactly how I imagined making my publishing 'debut' in Japan; after all, I would like to see a beautifully illustrated collection of my prints be published, or perhaps a selection of essays - these I could really be proud of! But instead, it's to be a collection of my prints with the colour removed!

But I'm not complaining; I'm happy to be making my own small contribution to keeping Japan happy and healthy, and yes, I can guess what you are thinking - one day when I'm 99 or so, I suppose that my 'care-giver' will bring me a little book. "Mr. Bull, look what I found .. I'm sure you'll enjoy these pictures! Here are some colour pencils for you to use ... "

Just deserts!

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