

A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Paper Trail

To make my woodblock prints I use - as you would expect - nothing but the highest quality *washi*. There are many different types of washi made in Japan, and many places are famous for their hand-made paper; Kochi, Gifu, and Fukui are perhaps the most well-known.

When it comes to paper for woodblock printmaking though, one particular area has held the top spot for hundreds of years. This is the district formerly known as 'Echizen' (now the area around Fukui Prefecture). Echizen washi actually dates from long before the era of woodblock printmaking, and I have been told that the first paper money made in Japan was produced in this area.

Once printmaking got going strongly in the mid 18th century, it was paper from this area that became the main choice for good quality work. Cheap books were printed on anything at hand, but *ukiyo-e* prints - with their deep rich colouring and multi-layered printing - required something better, and 'Echizen Hosho' filled the bill.

The traditional heart of Echizen Hosho manufacture - and indeed, now the only place where it is made - is the village known as Imadate Machi. I buy paper from two families who live and work in the village. In one of these families there is a young man ready to take over leadership when his time comes, but in the other family, there is no one, and the workshop will close when the current craftsman is no longer able to continue.

The paper I receive from these workshops is a kind of 'treasure' for me. Most Japanese people of course understand something of the beauty and attraction of washi, but over and above that I have a very particular expert's feeling for the paper I use. At times in the past, some of my collectors have sent me samples of hand-made paper from their district, with the suggestion that I consider it for my work, but I have always had to decline. None of the other papers in Japan - beautiful though they may be - are suitable for the incredibly strict conditions of making a full-colour woodblock print.

The printing is done with the paper in a moist and softened state, the baren is used vigorously to drive the colour deep into the paper, and this happens again and again, as the layers of colour build up. No other paper is capable of standing up to such severe treatment.

Just how much do I treasure this paper? Let me give you an example. I buy Echizen Hosho in fairly large sheets, from which I cut pieces to suit each particular print. The selvage (known as *mimi* in Japanese) is usually not used, and sometimes it is just not possible to cut the large sheets completely efficiently, so there are nearly always some unusable pieces left.

Do I discard these left-over strips and pieces? Not at all. I carefully gather them up after each trimming session, no matter how small they may be, and push them into a closet for storage. Then once every few years, when the closet becomes stuffed, I call up an acquaintance of mine, an elderly gentleman who lives nearby, and who is somewhat crazy about his printmaking hobby. He eagerly comes over to pick up these offcuts, which become in turn, his treasure. He soaks the pieces, 'cooks' them until the mulberry fibers separate, and then spends many enjoyable days making small sheets of new hand-made paper for his own printmaking.

Between the two of us, we make sure that not the tiniest scrap of this paper is wasted. And do you know, I'll bet that's exactly how it was back in the 'good old days'!

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