



Brickbats and Bouquets

Let me tell you about one of the most difficult aspects of my printmaking work. Don't worry, I'm not going to bore you with an explanation of tying the cover on my baren, or how to mix certain shades of red; what I have in mind is something that everybody is familiar with - the difficulty of getting good criticism of one's work!

As we all know, it is very difficult to be objective about one's own work. Whether it is a new woodblock print we have just finished, a story we have just written, a speech we have given, or even something as straightforward as a dinner we have just cooked, it is nearly impossible for us to tell if we have done a good job or not. It is easy to see other people's work clearly - it is next to impossible to see our own work clearly.

For me working here in Japan, the situation is made far worse by the cultural 'rules' that restrict people from making negative comments on something they are experiencing. Maintaining overall social 'harmony' is the over-riding concern. Because of this, I almost never hear any constructive criticism of what I am doing. How can my prints (or stories!) be improved? I have to discover this for myself, because nobody will help me find any faults.

The situation is not much better in other cultures overseas. Social rules there do allow for a certain amount of negative comment to be offered, but polite people will generally mix this together with complimentary feedback to minimize conflicts. I have a comment form on my website, and people from all over the world have used it to send me their thoughts and observations on my work.

But do you know, even the comments I receive from overseas are mostly positive. Surely everybody can't be following the Japanese way of doing things! Why is it so difficult for me to find good solid criticism of my work?

I was talking with a friend about this a while back, and he mentioned one point - that because my own personality is fairly 'gentle' and polite, people respond in kind. If - for example - I were the kind of person who wrote stories that were full of cynicism and criticism of the things around me, then people would feel more free to respond negatively. But because I seem like such a 'nice guy', nobody wants to hurt me with any critical comments.

I sometime envy people in the sports field - they get instant feedback on the quality of their work. Throw that ball just a tiny bit too high, and bang - a home run flies over your head. Every tiny mistake is instantly punished, and you do better next time or ... there won't be a next time! I don't think I would like to perform under such intense pressure every day.

I don't really know what to do to solve this problem. As for seeing my own work more objectively, that does happen with the passage of time; when I look at the prints I made a few years ago, now I can more clearly see problems with them. So very slowly, bit by bit, I am able to improve on previous work. It takes a very long time though ...

But I just realized something - there is another possible explanation for the fact that I hear so little criticism of my work ... Maybe I'm pretty much perfect!

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