

A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Pipe Dreams

At last, I think they must be finished! This morning, for the first time in months, there are no workmen gathered outside my home, preparing to begin their day's work. Ever since shortly after the new year began, my street has been the site of a major new water main construction project. The men have assembled each morning at about nine o'clock, and have then dug, hammered, drilled, banged, and thumped their way through each day, with peace only coming once they have left in the evening.

The new water pipe they are installing is very large, and as our neighbourhood is located on a steep slope, they have had to dig quite deeply, right into the bedrock in many places, to find a secure location to lay it. It has been an extremely noisy process, and a couple of things have made it even worse. One is their habit of completely filling their excavation every evening. No matter how deeply they have dug, they always fill the hole completely and then resurface the road with fresh asphalt before leaving the site. The next morning, they bring in a large power shovel, and dig it all up again.

The other reason that this has been so annoying for me is that my workroom is located below ground in the lower level of my building, itself anchored in the bedrock, and the noise of their hammers and drills has thus reverberated directly into my work space. At times, it sounded as though they were about to burst through my rear wall in a shower of shattered rock.

But as I said, it seems as though they are finally finished - or at least have now completed this section and have moved on to another street in the neighbourhood. I can return to the usual peaceful mood of my print-making work - hammering and banging away at my woodblocks all day!

It's quite interesting how we react so differently to noises made by others compared to those made by ourselves. I am sure my own hammering seems far louder than those construction noises had been, but it doesn't bother me at all. I can even listen to music while hammering! I suppose it is because our brains have 'advance information' on the precise moment that the hammer is about to strike, and thus alerts our ears to the impending sound. I think it is perhaps a similar situation to when driving along a rough road. The driver himself is not particularly bothered by the bouncing of the vehicle, but the passengers usually find it intolerable being shaken this way and that.

I had a guest in my workshop a couple of years ago; a young Italian man stayed here for a couple of weeks to learn something about woodblock printmaking, and he found it very difficult on those days that I was using my hammer and chisels. In fact, he ended up just taking a break from his own work each time I had to do some noisy clearing work on a block, just going for a walk until he felt it was 'safe' to return.

I wonder how the workers in a traditional carving workshop managed this situation? It was common for a number of carvers to work together in a room, and when they were all busy banging on chisels it must have been incredibly noisy! I suppose though, just as with most things, they simply got used to it over time. In fact, they probably chatted away to each other while wielding their hammers so noisily. Perhaps I have become so sensitive to this because I have worked alone for so many years.

Anyway, for the foreseeable future it seems that I will be able to enjoy the 'peace and quiet' of my work without interruption from the outside world; at least until summer arrives and my neighbour across the stream gets out his gas-powered weed trimmer. But that will be another story ...

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>