



## Thumbs Up!

Although I do occasionally mention in these stories that I am a woodblock printmaker, I try and avoid discussing anything too technical, as most readers of course have no particular knowledge of that craft. There's no point in writing about the best way to sharpen a knife, or how to mix colours; this isn't the place for such things.

But there are aspects to my work that can be understood by anybody, whether they have any knowledge of printmaking or not, and one of these is something that actually affects us all. It is the incredible difficulty of being objective about one's own work: this thing I have just finished - is it any good?

You don't have to be working in the creative arts to be faced with this problem. For professionals like painters and composers this is of course a serious question, but all of us face this same situation time and again in our daily lives. The blouse and skirt combination you chose to wear this morning, the new recipe you tried for tonight's dinner with your family ... is it good?

People with special skills in any field - and thus more self-confidence - may not agonize over this as much as others do, but all of us, of whatever skill level, are familiar with the paradox that it is so much easier to see faults in the work of others, than in that produced by ourselves.

Show me a woodblock print produced by somebody else, and in a few minutes I can give you a ten-point dissertation on its features and faults. Pass me one of my own for comment, and I can do no such thing. After some time has passed, and the object is no longer new and fresh, I am able to find many faults with it, but at the time I am actually creating a print - just when I need this most! - I cannot easily do so.

So it is important for creators - at least those of us without the supreme skills of a Mozart or a Michelangelo - to have other people around who can advise us on where we might be heading astray. We may not always follow the advice of our advisors, as we have to make the decisions ourselves in the end, but it is far better to have errors pointed out early, before they become set in stone, and difficult to repair.

About a week ago, I 'finished up' a rough draft of the print design I was working on, a view of the Forest in Spring. It looked - I thought - not too bad. But as it was quite possible there were problems with the design that I had overlooked, I wanted to get Sadako's opinion on it. Because of our friendship though, she is usually quite polite in her comments; no matter what her actual initial reaction may be, she always tries to be positive in her commentary. So this time, I tried something a bit different. While the two of us were talking on the phone, I sent her the image in an email, and asked her to take a look at it.

I knew that at the moment she saw the image, she would no doubt make some kind of involuntary sound. Would it be an upbeat 'Oh!' I would hear, or a downbeat 'Umm ...'? This would tell me what I wanted to know!

I heard the clicking sound of her keyboard as she accessed her mail program, and then the short pause as the image was opening on her screen. And then - I listened carefully for the sound of her breath. I felt like a gladiator in the Forum in ancient Rome, looking up towards the box where the Emperor sat. Would it be 'thumbs up', or 'thumbs down'?

Well, printmaking is hardly the same 'life or death' situation that the gladiators faced, but I am happy to report that - this time anyway - it was 'thumbs up'.

"Oh!"

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