



Good Enough for Jazz

Today I'd like to tell you about my workbench ... my carving bench.

I am now coming up to my twentieth year of professional printmaking here in Japan, having shipped out my first print for sale in early 1989. I had been living in Japan for three years at that time, and only slowly had slipped into a situation where I was ready to sell my prints. There was no single moment when I 'hung out my shingle' to be a printmaker, and the transition from being 'a person studying printmaking' to being 'a printmaker' was gradual.

At the beginning of my printmaking adventures I had - of course - been using student level tools, but bit by bit, as I came to learn more about the benefit of better tools, had acquired a few of them here and there. Also, as I was learning through self-study, and not under any kind of master or teacher, a lot of my equipment was cobbled together, and didn't follow traditional patterns.

My earliest 'carving bench' for example, was nothing more than a cardboard box with a plywood board placed on top of it. I can still see images of this bench in some of the earliest TV programs on my work, and I wonder now what the people who saw it must have thought!

That cardboard box was replaced somewhere around the second year of my work on the long Hyakunin Isshu series, when it became necessary for me to build a 'travelling bench' for some demonstrations I had to do in America and Canada. This bench had to be lightweight for ease of carrying, and was not so strong, but after I returned from those demonstrations, I got into the habit of using it - temporarily - for my regular carving work.

That was 1990. And yes, as you might guess, that is the bench that I am still using to this day, nearly twenty years later, still 'temporarily'. It has been patched and repaired any number of times; the legs are now quite a bit shaky, and honestly speaking, it is so unstable that it is difficult to use.

Many years ago I visited the elderly carver Susumu Ito, and marvelled at the beauty of his carving bench. Made from thick and heavy keyaki wood, it was planted firmly on the tatami of his workshop, and stood firm and stable under the rain of blows from his mallet. The top had become polished to a wonderful burnish under many decades of use, and I felt very envious of him that he could enjoy the use of such a wonderful companion in his work.

Why then, am I still using my temporary light-weight bench?

Well, as easy as it is for most of us to look at other people and clearly see their 'faults', it is never quite so easy to see our own, or to understand our own motivations. As best as I can understand this, there seem to be a few things involved. One is that I am basically a pragmatic person, one who can 'make do' with what is at hand. When I worked in the music store many years ago, and people came in to purchase an instrument so that they could learn to play it, we usually recom-

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mended a student-level instrument. But for many people, this was not acceptable; they wanted instead, only the 'best' kind of instrument, with no regard for the cost. We knew from experience though, that it was those people that were the most likely to end up soon quitting.

Another reason for my hesitation about the workbench has to do with that old proverb "It's a poor workman who blames his tools." It's kind of a perverse pride for me, "Look at the beautiful prints I can make, even though I don't have expensive and fancy tools!"

But given that I am now - speaking honestly - one of the best traditional woodblock carvers on this planet; isn't it time that I made myself a real bench?

I suppose I should. And some time ago, Sadako and I happened to be in a builder's supply yard where there were some absolutely gorgeous large planks of wood, one of which I lovingly stroked. "This would make such a beautiful top for my carving bench ..."

But I came home empty handed.

And do you know, my father, who worked as a dance orchestra musician all his professional life, and who played in clubs and recording studios backing many of the most famous entertainers, did so with ... yes, a poor quality student level baritone saxophone. "I don't need expensive and fancy tools ..."

What an idiot!

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