



The Jig's Up!

I spoke in last week's story about being influenced by a meeting with a wonderfully skilled metalwork craftsman in England. While writing that story, I looked in my storeroom for the box containing the flute head joint that he made for me, and during the hunt, had to move some boxes containing books ... Speaking of influences!

There is no way that I can move some book boxes around without ... you know ... just peeking inside for a moment, and of course I got a bit sidetracked from my original purpose, and ended up sitting in the storeroom for a couple of hours, looking through the dusty boxes.

One of the boxes was full of books related to woodwork, crafts, and building things, and these were what really caught my eye. They had been packed into this box back in Canada before I moved to Japan, were shipped over here some years later, and have been sleeping in the storeroom ever since, perhaps despairing of ever being looked at again.

It was very interesting for me, while browsing through these, to discover many things that I had not specifically remembered, but which obviously have become part of my accumulated knowledge. For example, turning the pages of the textbook 'Modern Woodworking' (which now looks quite old-fashioned!), I came across a section on how to make one-off jigs and clamps to assist with the work on those times when you need to produce a number of identical parts.

And indeed, just last year when I started my current 'My Solitudes' printmaking project, I used many of these exact techniques to make the tools I needed for the sewing and binding of the book volumes for this project. Each book would perhaps take over an hour to make purely 'by hand', but with the simple jigs I made, the lady who is doing the binding can produce a number of them each hour. It's not exactly 'mass production', but it is certainly more efficient. We save a bit of money, and the books are very neatly made.

There was a section in this textbook on how to produce wooden molds for sandcasting to produce identical metal parts, and I used this too, when I made a set of decorative medallions for the members of a rock band I was in at the time. (Don't ask me about the awful music we played, but I can remember the medallions!)

It seems that there is some particular quirk to my character that finds such techniques interesting and irresistible, and it is certainly possible that this has had an effect on my choice of woodblock printmaking as a career. Because actually, that's what traditional woodblock printmaking is all about - using carefully prepared tools and jigs, to produce a large number of identical items in an efficient manner, yet in not such a highly 'mechanized' way that the skill of the craftsman is no longer needed. I get the best of both worlds - the pleasure of using interesting tools to make the work more efficient, and the pleasure of doing it 'all by hand'.

I think I'll bring this book upstairs, and give it a place on the bookshelves; it deserves a better fate than to be hidden away in a box. And perhaps there is much more I can still learn from it!

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