



One Size Fits All

I told you last week that I would soon be faced with the necessity of conducting some important 'experiments', and it's time for me to explain!

Everybody knows that my woodblock prints are made with handmade Japanese washi. Ever since such prints were first 'invented' many hundreds of years ago, the finest types of paper have been used for making them. It's partly a practical matter - making a woodblock print sometimes requires rubbing the paper very firmly, so only the strongest papers can be used - and it's partly a matter of aesthetics - we are making beautiful 'art', so of course only beautiful paper can be used.

But what is not so well known is that we printers do not use the paper in the 'raw' form in which it arrives from the papermakers. Although such fresh new paper is exceedingly beautiful, it is unfortunately too soft to stand up to the physical process of rubbing the pigments into it, and it must be treated with sizing before we can use it. I say 'unfortunately' because the paper is much more beautiful, not to mention pleasant to touch, before this treatment, and it is a matter of quite some sorrow to us that it cannot remain in this pristine condition through to the end of the printmaking process.

So when I place an order with a papermaker, I also give him instruction that when it is ready, it should be shipped - not to my own workshop - but to a specialist craftsman who will give it this treatment, and then forward it to me. In the old days, there were many such craftsmen, but they have retired one by one, and now there is only one left.

Unfortunately, it seems that age is taking its toll, as the work he has been doing for me in recent years has been gradually getting worse. And it's not just me, as all the other printers I have spoken to about this report the same thing, and ask the same question, "What are we going to *do*?"

We can't work with unsized paper, and we can't work with the paper that he is now sending us. The situation - which we have seen coming for quite some time - has now become a crisis. If this craftsman had an apprentice, we might possibly have hope, but the plain fact of the matter is that there is simply no longer enough of this work available to keep somebody in business.

There is only one solution - traditional printers such as myself are going to have to do our own sizing from now on.

And this is where the 'experiments' that I described last week come in. There are an infinite number of questions that I will have to wrestle with: what temperature should the sizing liquid be? How much gelatin? How much alum? How thickly should it be applied? Front side first or back side? How quickly/slowly should the sheets be dried? What about a rainy day - how should things be changed in conditions of varying humidity? And many many many more.

Being a competent sizing craftsman is obviously a career all to itself; for me to think that I will be able to become an 'expert' - and in very short order - is a pretty shaky assumption.

I have enough paper to last me until mid-summer, and the next batch is scheduled to arrive from the papermakers about that time. Between now and then, I have to assemble the requisite tools and materials, and begin the experiments. I do *not* want to do this. Although I have been frequently quoted as saying "I want to

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

do it all by myself!" I recognize that there are sensible limits to such a thought. At this point in my printmaking career, I want to concentrate on making good prints, not on trying to learn somebody else's craft. What's next, making my own paper?

Well ... you know it just might come to that too ...

Stay tuned!

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