



His Best Work

Now that I'm back at the workbenches - having finished the exhibition cleanup - I'm catching up with some of the BBC radio programs that I missed last week. Their iPlayer facility stores most programs for exactly seven days, so I've been able to hear most of the programs that I usually listen to.

When I am involved with some of the more repetitive work that I do - printing is the best example of this - I can pay full attention to the radio programs, but when the work on my desk demands more concentration - proof printing is a good example - the radio gets only half an ear; it just becomes background music. That's exactly what happened this morning. I was taking the first trial impressions from a newly carved set of blocks, and this kind of work is full of interruptions - getting up to wash the brush, or digging in the drawers for a packet of pigment - so I wasn't really listening seriously.

One of the programs was a broadcast of classical music, and at the end of one of the pieces the announcer spoke for a minute about the composer, a Polish name I didn't recognize, and happened to mention that "He is noted for doing his best work when he was young." I didn't pay much attention at the moment, but the phrase caught in my mind, and I found myself coming back to it as I continued with my work through the rest of the morning. You can of course easily imagine what I was thinking.

Thinking ahead to some point in the future - assuming for the sake of argument that people *will* still be discussing my work at that time - will they be saying something similar about me? "He did his best work when he was young". Or will the comment be something along the lines of "His best work was done in his later years ..."?

Now although I can't control what people will say about me in the future, I *do* have a lot of interest in the question. *Am* I already past my 'peak', or will I continue to improve in the coming years?

This is not something purely theoretical; it is a practical matter that faces me at this very moment. Five years ago I made my 'Beauties of Four Seasons' set of prints, reaching a very high technical standard. But over the past three years, while making the 'My Solitudes' series of original designs - which are carved in a much 'rougher' style - I very much lost the 'edge' of my carving ability. It was partly in recognition of this falling off in my carving skills that I decided to create my current 'Mystique' series of prints, which will - I hope! - help me regain the high level I had previously attained.

It may be though, that I will be unable to do that. After all, my work is at heart very physical. I am a kind of athlete in that sense, using trained muscles, and we all know what happens to athletes as they age. Indeed, it is a basic fact of life for any athlete that 'he did his best work when he was young.' Of course!

Opposing this though, we have the example of Munakata Shiko, who could barely see in later years, yet still produced work that most people praise very highly. What they are praising is of course not delicate technique, of which he had none, but raw energy, of which he had plenty!

This perhaps, is how I may find a path through this situation. While I still can, I should concentrate on the technically delicate work. Then, when those skills fail me, look 'inside' for energy and inspiration ...

I wonder what I might find?

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