



King of the Castle!

I had a couple of guests some time ago - a pair of schoolteachers from the USA. They were in the country for some kind of academic meeting, and - being in the neighbourhood as it were - these two took the opportunity to come and see my workshop. They were art teachers, so their main interest was in seeing how my style of printmaking might have applications in their work, but during the course of their visit here, our conversation ranged over quite a few other topics too, one of which was house prices.

We had got onto that topic when one of them asked me about this building of mine. They had been quite impressed with the scale of this place - all four stories of it! - and having heard that living in Tokyo was very expensive, they wondered how I had been able to purchase it. I told them the basic outline of the story, how a friend of a friend of a friend had found himself in financial trouble, and in order to get out of it, had been forced to sell his house (this place) very quickly, and thus at a drastically reduced price.

I had been 'in the right place at the right time', and was thus the beneficiary of his misfortune, buying it from him at exactly half of what he had paid for it some five years earlier. When one of the women asked (politely) how much my price had been, what happened next was very interesting. When I told them the figure (18,000,000 yen) they both exploded in incredulity, "What!!!?"

But one of them immediately added, "So expensive!" ... while the other one simultaneously blurted out, "So cheap!"

The three of us looked at each other in surprise for a moment, and then all laughed together.

We then talked further about this, and discovered what was behind their very different reactions: one of them lived in rural Kentucky, and the other in New York City. To the woman from Manhattan, my place was laughably inexpensive: to have paid 18 million yen for a four-story structure (two floors concrete, two wood) surrounded by greenery, yet still in Tokyo, was kind of a joke to her. 'Pocket money,' I think she said.

But to the 'country girl', the idea of paying that much money for a building that had *no accompanying land* (I have about one meter on each side) was beyond comprehension. Her comment was along the lines of, 'Insane.'

None of this was said with any hostility, and we were all laughing about the situation. And as it happens, I do understand - and *feel* - both of their viewpoints. As a woodblock printmaker, I never expected to be able to buy a house in Tokyo, so yes, I feel that this was indeed 'inexpensive'. At the same time, I do feel sadness that even while paying 'that much', there is still no free land attached, nowhere that I can stand with my arms spread out and feel that 'All this is mine!'

But I have to tell you why this topic came to mind today. This story is being published on October 31st. Tomorrow morning is the 1st of November, and will be the day that I make the final payment on the mortgage that I took out exactly ten years ago.

There have been some close calls along the way, but I have managed to make each and every payment in full and on time, along with all the accompanying property taxes. As soon as the final paperwork is completed sometime during this coming week, I will indeed be able to stand here and say, "Mine, all mine!"

Just a few days before my 59th birthday, I have finally become King of the Castle!

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