



By the Left ...

We are nearly at the end of the year, but even without looking at the calendar, peeking out my window, or checking my thermometer, I can tell. It's the pattern of orders coming into my mailbox that tells me.

Through most of the year, the orders for my woodblock prints follow a bit of a 'random' pattern: some people sign up for my current subscription series, some purchase one of the single prints from my Mokuhankan catalogue, and others ask for a copy of my woodblock printmaking instruction eBook. But come early November I see a different kind of order coming in more and more often - and these are for the prints I package specifically as gift items. This is of course due to the approach of the Xmas season, for which - although I am not a christian - I am grateful, as it does give a nice boost to my business, and more importantly, helps 'spread the word' about woodblock prints to many people who would not otherwise have any interest in them.

Each year though, when it comes time for me to begin preparing these gift prints, I am reminded yet again of a severe handicap that I was born with, which makes many aspects of this work much more difficult for me than to somebody 'normal'.

I am left-handed.

Now before all the other 'sinistrals' get angry at me for using the word handicap, I hasten to add that - in the rest of my life, away from the work benches - I of course do not consider left-handedness to be anything negative at all. And as it seems to be accepted in many circles that most geniuses are left-handed, it is a 'status' that I wear with pride, actually.

But when one begins working in a traditional field, with traditional tools and working patterns, you soon discover that everything is designed around right-handed patterns, due to the old custom of forcing left-handers to convert, something that seems to have been just as prevalent here in Japan as it was in the west.

Some of our tools - the baren for example - are ambidextrous, and can be used with either hand, while some others - the cutting knife - are nowadays available in either left or right versions. But one particular job I have to do - cutting the paper to size before printing - continues to frustrate this left-hander.

All traditional printers here have a specialized tool for this job, a *kami kiri bochou* (paper cutting chopper). It looks something like one of those large choppers we see a butcher using when he cuts up large pieces of meat, with a very deep blade and a short stubby handle. But the printmaker's paper cutter is a bit different in that it must have one face absolutely flat, with a bevel on the other side. This allows him to take a stack of paper - up to hundreds of sheets at a time - put a board on top as a guide, and then use a slicing motion side to side to trim off the unwanted portions in a wonderfully efficient way, leaving a perfectly smooth edge to the stack. An experienced printer can prepare a stack of literally thousands of sheets ready for printing in just a few minutes.

There are no left-handed choppers available of course. I tried to get one of the knife makers to make one for me some years ago, and they accepted the order, but - fifteen years on - they have yet to come through, despite repeated proddings. So I have to cut my paper in other ways, with other types of knives or cutters, but nothing I have found - and I have tried many things - works as effectively and efficiently as the traditional

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system. I have to cut the sheets a few at a time, because if I try and stack up too many, the cut edges have a burr that makes registration impossible.

And of course, for small prints such as the gift prints I am making in large quantities at this season, cutting the paper takes far more time than it should. I have made half-hearted attempts to do it right-handed, but it seems that at this point I am a bit too old for my brain to be able to 'switch'.

Well, it's a trade-off; I do lose a lot of time cutting paper, but at least I end up in good company ... da Vinci, Michelangelo, Beethoven, Newton, Einstein ... all good buddies of mine!

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