



Set 'em Up!

I found the topic for this week's story while reaching into my fridge for some food this morning. I happened to notice something as I opened the door, and had the thought, "Yes, I've been meaning to write about that for a long time; let's do it today!"

But this story isn't about food. It's about books. And stuff.

I have written before about the bookshelves all over my house; I have too many really, and they have gradually spread from room to room until they long ago covered all stretches of bare wall ... including the kitchen/dining room. The books are 'filed' in a basically logical system, with volumes on similar topics being grouped together. The shelves next to my fridge - and which caught my eye this morning - are mostly dedicated to essay collections, but also have a section at the bottom with some 'over-size' books. At the far left end of that shelf is a gap a couple of centimetres wide, next to which is 'The Book of Art - Volume 2', 'The Book of Art - Volume 3', and so on and so on, making up a set of ten books.

Or at least *should* be a set of ten; as I mentioned, there is a gap on the shelf in the place where Volume 1 would be, if I had it. I hasten to add that I am not the person responsible for losing this book; the set was given to our family many years ago by a Japanese neighbour who was cleaning out his own shelves, and who thought I would be interested in these. He was correct, as this is indeed an excellent set of books, but he had unfortunately misplaced the first volume some years earlier, thus the gap on my shelf now.

Why though, do I keep the books spaced on the shelf to leave a gap there? I will probably never find a copy of the missing volume, so why not just close up that space?

I leave it open to remind me of a very interesting fact: the gap on that shelf - or more properly the sense of 'being unfinished' that I feel whenever I see it - illustrates how I am able to make a living with my woodblock printmaking activities.

For some reason - and I myself cannot explain 'why' - people love having things in 'sets'. I have many memories of childhood activities such as collecting cigarette cards, then matchbook covers, then postage stamps, and keeping these things in well-organized albums. Anytime a particular set was incomplete - this was very common with the postage stamps - I would go to extraordinary lengths to find the missing items and add them to the album to fill those frustrating empty gaps. I am obviously not alone in feeling such impulses, and 'collecting' in this fashion is something very wide-spread in our culture.

So it was that more than twenty years ago, when I first began putting my prints on the market, I decided to sell them in sets. I wasn't actually thinking in psychological terms of 'catching' customers, but did so because I was faced with an insurmountable problem - *making* the prints was pretty much a full-time activity, leaving very little time for 'running around' trying to sell them. Putting them into sets was a way to get around this conundrum. I held an exhibition each January, took orders for the upcoming new set, and then spent the rest of the year peacefully getting the work done, free from the 'distraction' of marketing efforts.

But as the years went by, I gradually became aware of just how important it was to arrange my work like this, and since then I have spent a great deal of effort trying to create interesting and well-balanced sets of prints. All other printmakers and artists I know, produce their work in 'singles', putting the pictures on display and hoping to entice people to 'take one home'. Now and again, I toss around the idea of perhaps making some single prints and having such an exhibition, but such thoughts never get very far, because I always come

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back to that little gap on my bookshelf, and am reminded of something important - let human nature work *for* you. Don't go against it!

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