



Oops!

No, not me! The 'oops' moment this time was not my error ... but it *did* cause me quite some embarrassment ...

Even people who have no particular knowledge of a traditional woodblock printer's work can understand that our job requires a fair amount of concentration. For a print that requires (say) a dozen colours, each and every one of them must be impressed into the paper in exactly the correct place, and at exactly the correct tone and depth. Once you have most of the work done, even a slight mistake on the final impression can still spoil the finished print, so you have to keep 'on top of it' right to the end of the final sheet in the stack.

One day many years ago I made a visit to the home/workshop of one of the printers in the craftsmen's association. This man is a printer 'for hire' and works each day on blocks sent to him by one or another of the various publishers in the field. He works together with his son, with the two of them sometimes working on independent projects, and sometimes on the same image, moving the paper between their two benches as required. On the day of this particular visit, I had been surprised to see that a third workbench had been set up in their room, and his wife was sitting behind it, with a woodblock in front of her and a stack of paper at hand.

It turned out that they had more orders than the two of them could handle comfortably, so she was helping out by printing one of the colours - one that could be done by somebody without too much experience. I had arranged to make my visit just around lunch time, in order not to disturb their work, but as I was a few minutes early, he gestured me to sit and watch while they finished up the morning's batch. The only spot available was near her bench, so I sat there - not interrupting of course - and began to watch the work.

And perhaps not more than three or four sheets had gone by before I noticed a problem. When rubbing the colour onto the block with your brush, you have to be careful not to rub in areas beyond the carved 'zone' that carries the pattern being printed. If your brush wanders just a bit, pigment deposited in that area will sometimes end up transferring to the paper when the impression is being taken, causing an unsightly blotch and spoiling that sheet. If it happens that the blotch is in a particularly 'busy' area of the design, it can be very difficult to notice at the time, so one has to be constantly on guard against this.

From where I sat watching her I was able to see each sheet as it came off the blocks. I of course studied it to see what she was printing, but as I did I noticed one of these blotches. Looking back to the woodblock itself, I could see that there was some pigment building up in a place where it shouldn't be. Hesitant at first whether I should speak up or keep quiet, I realized that I *had* to say something. These prints were being spoiled.

So I quietly pointed it out to her, asking something like, "Have you noticed this ...?" She obviously hadn't, and responded with a start, "Oh, a blot!" Her husband sprang up from his work and came over to have a look. He saw the mistake and began to berate her, and as he did I instantly began preparations to leave. Obviously my presence had caused a disruption, and it was better to get out of the way of their work.

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

But as he began to flip back through the sheets on the stack to see how far back the problem went - how many she had spoiled - it became apparent that this was nothing to do with me. It had been going on for quite some time, and many many dozens of sheets were rendered unsaleable by the blots. Rather than being the *cause* of the problem, I had actually 'saved the day', by stopping any more from being spoiled.

She disappeared into the kitchen to begin lunch preparations, but it was a very strained atmosphere during the rest of my visit, and I certainly didn't stay long.

The episode has stayed in my mind though, and was an important part of my own training. For each and every impression, of each and every colour of a print, you *have* to give it a quick scan as you pull it off the block, looking for 'something' out of kilter. The price of failure to do so can be very high indeed!

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