



Legacy?

My current print series - the Mystique of the Japanese Print - sees a new print finished about once a month or so. Making a woodblock print in the Japanese tradition is quite an involved process, and there are plenty of 'opportunities' along the way to make mistakes.

Now I'm pretty good at this job by now - I should be, after more than thirty years! - and don't make too many outright 'mistakes'. But given the delicate nature of the printing process, it is inevitable (is it really inevitable?) that when I inspect the stack of most than 200 finished prints each month, I find some that don't quite 'measure up'.

It might be that I slightly mis-registered the paper for one of the colours, or perhaps overlooked a spot of pigment in the wrong place. I sometimes find that I have left a finger-print on the paper, having been a bit careless at wiping my hands after mixing pigments. Some of the defects I notice are not of my own making - there may be a bit of bark left in the paper which has turned out to be in a particularly inconvenient spot ... perhaps right in the middle of a face.

This is why I prepare more than 200 sheets of paper when I begin printing. I want to end up with 200 copies for the collectors, so add some 'extra' to account for these inevitable (should I stop using that word?) problems. This is all very fine, but once the 'good' 200 sheets have been signed, sealed, and set aside for shipping to the collectors, what should I do with the ones that don't pass muster?

Now there is a famous old joke about what to do with 'mistakes': doctors bury theirs, architects plant ivy, lawyers hang theirs, and teachers send theirs into politics ... (there are many more ...) But what should a printmaker do with *his* mistakes?

Well actually, you may be surprised to know that printmakers too, have their own 'joke' answer to this question, and it was articulated some years ago by the artist Hiroshi Yoshida - 'turn it into a night scene!'

And he wasn't joking! He apparently had his craftsmen do just this with one of his designs, one for which he had not been able to come up with a satisfactory arrangement of colours. By overlaying the entire image with layers of darker pigments, the 'problem' image had been transformed into a dramatic 'mood' piece.

Well, as you understand, that's not a solution that is available to me most months. The prints with small defects are simply placed into an envelope, and then filed away.

One day I suppose, perhaps after I have left the scene, these prints will find their way out into the open air. I am not too worried that people of the future will think that they represent my best work, because none of them carry my signature. But I can't bring myself to just throw them away. After all, when I look through my own collection of old prints from Meiji and Edo times, many of these show exactly this same type of problem - small mis-registrations, blots, or other similar defects. It seems that when it comes to old prints we are much more forgiving in this respect, and indeed, once an object has become 'very' old, such things are of absolutely no consequence at all.

So there we are, that will provide the perfect solution to the question of what to do with the prints in the envelopes in my 'bottom drawer'. Just wrap them up well, and mark the package "Do not open until 2099"

Do you think Sotheby's will still be in business then?

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