



Character Analysis

Yet another story about printmaking today! Can you stand it? But unlike last week's imaginary tale, this one is real.

This one is from the mid-90's, back during the decade during which I made the prints in the Hyakunin Isshu poetry series. Every year of that series I held an exhibition in January, at which I displayed the prints made to date, specifically highlighting the ones produced in the year just past.

Most years I also set up a 'jitsuen' corner - a demonstration corner - where I set up my printing bench and some tools, and did some 'show & tell' printing whenever enough people gathered around to watch. It was always a lot of fun. I sat on a mat on the floor, and people would surround me, the ones in front crouched down, the ones in the back standing up. On busy days, I could see nothing but this wall of people all the way around me.

As each demonstration began, everybody always fell silent, assuming that I needed to be able to concentrate on what I was doing. I always soon put a stop to that, by beginning to chat, telling jokes or tales, thus encouraging a free-for-all conversation to take place. It was much more fun that way.

So one day, this was under way and a number of people in the crowd turned out to have come to the show together - they were a printmaking hobby group, perhaps 'studying' at a local community centre. With this more knowledgeable group at hand, I felt free to talk in more detail about what I was doing, and at one point I started to spout off about my baren. "This tool - very expensive, and made by a specialized craftsman - is the heart and soul of our craft. Without a true 'hon-baren', I could not make good prints." Etc., and etc. I then went on to say, "The printer must tie the baren cover himself, and ..." Here I paused for dramatic effect, then added, " ... if you were to show me a printer's baren, I could tell you all about the man himself. Is it tied neatly, tightly, with nice well-shaped curves? A man's personality will show in his baren tying! A beautifully tied baren will tell me all I need to know about him, and I don't need to even look at his prints. I know they will be beautifully made!"

At this point, a number of these guests looked back and forth at each other. Something in what I had just said had obviously affected them. A moment later, one of them reached into his bag, brought out a baren, and handed it to me for inspection.

I was stunned into silence. It was magnificent, absolutely perfect in every way. It was tied far more beautifully than I myself was capable of, and perhaps even more well done than Goto-san the baren maker himself could do.

"Is this yours?" I asked the man, and he nodded in agreement. But by this point, the other members of the group could no longer contain themselves, and began to laugh and call out such things as, "Hey, Suzuki-san, show him some of your 'magnificent' prints!"

Amid general laughter, the story came out. These hobbyists were of course struggling with their baren tying, as indeed most amateur printmakers do. But one man, who had no particular skill at printmaking, *did* have a knack for baren tying. He practiced and practiced, became very good at it, and became the official 'baren-tyer' for the entire group. None of the rest of them did their own; they just passed it to him.

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

So everybody in the group, no matter how good or bad at printmaking they may be, always had a magnificently tied baren, and the man who could tie so well, no longer even bothered to do any printing himself. It was all exactly the reverse of what I had so eloquently described to them!

Well, it was all in fun, so no harm done. But I no longer make that claim, "Show me the baren, and I will tell you all about the man!"

And perhaps now that I think about it, looking at my own baren ... it's just as well!

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Tokyo Japan 198-0052
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