



I'm Innocent!

Earlier this spring I went to a 'hanami' party sponsored by the company where one of my collectors works. They hold the event every year, and each time I attend I meet a mix of new people and 'regulars'. This collector has a penchant for supporting traditional arts and crafts, so at these parties I frequently meet people who are involved in such fields. This year, among the familiar faces was Matsuzaki-san, one of the first woodblock printers I met here, and who was very helpful to me in those early years.

We sat and 'talked shop' for a bit, while other people around our table listened in. At one point somebody made a comment to the effect that nobody would have guessed that he and I were in the same profession.

This is true. I am tall and gangly, while Matsuzaki-san is short and heavy-set. He is much better 'built' for woodblock printing than I, and if the truth be told, my physique is actually not suited for this work at all. Following on with this conversation, the two of us ended up putting our hands out for comparison, and everybody marvelled at the striking difference between them. Matsuzaki-san's printing hand was a powerful 'fist', with very hard calluses here and there, at the places where the force from his arm passes down through the baren. My hands though, were completely different - they don't actually display any particular evidence that I am a manual labourer; they could be the hands of an office worker.

There are a couple of reasons for this above and beyond the obvious physiological difference between us. One is that I work in a generally more light and delicate style. The prints I choose to make are fairly small, with many fine lines, and don't actually require much physical pressure in their production. Matsuzaki-san, being a 'printer for hire', has to be ready to do any and all kinds of work, including very heavy jobs on modern thick papers. He *needs* to be a 'tough guy'.

Another reason though, is a bit interesting. He is a printer, and nothing but a printer. That's all he does, day after day, so of course his hands have developed strong calluses in particular areas. The skin never has a chance to 'recover' (nor of course, does he want it to). I though, am a 'sometime printer'. I might spend a couple of weeks on the printing work, but once any particular batch is done, I put on my 'office hat' and spend the next couple of days involved with invoicing and bookkeeping, etc. I then get busy with design work, and after that - once the next print is planned out - get busy carving it, a job which itself may take a couple of weeks.

During the time that I am doing these other jobs, the calluses which *began* to form while I worked on the printing simply fade away. And actually, new small calluses now begin to form in those places where I hold the *carving* tools. But these too in turn, fade to nothing once I have put those tools back in their box.

Everybody at the party laughed to hear me tell about this, but it's actually no laughing matter. Because my hands and skin remain perpetually at an early stage of callus formation, never actually getting there, every time I switch over to a new job, my hands hurt like a beginner! Then, just as the skin begins to toughen up a bit, the job is done, and I switch back to something else.

Well, it can't be helped. But do you remember our mystery story from a few weeks back? If I were ever in the position of being a suspect in such a crime, I could simply show my hands. "Look officer, would you think these are the hands of an experienced printer? Of course not. I can't possibly be your suspect!"

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