



Praise be!

Over the past few months, I have been sharing my workspace with two ladies who are training to be printers. They came to me with no knowledge of printmaking at all - the proverbial 'blank canvas'. Because they were completely inexperienced, their expectations at first were fairly low. Neither they nor I expected them to be able to produce 'good' work in short order; we all recognized that it was going to take time to develop the ability to make fine prints, ones suitable for sending out into the world.

Now as it has turned out, the two of them have quite different skills (and personalities). It's not my intention here to compare them against each other, but can say that they have indeed made pretty good progress, and over the coming weeks I will be expanding our online shop to include work that they have produced.

Along the way though (and this still continues) I myself have struggled with one particular aspect of their training - how to properly praise them (or not!).

When talking with older craftsmen in this field, I sometimes hear tales of their apprenticeship, and a common theme in such stories is how strict their masters were. It seems that in the 'old days', praise was never given (nor much money either!), no matter how well the work might have been done. "Good job!" was something that they simply never heard.

What they apparently did hear was plenty of the opposite, as their masters never held back on the verbal abuse when the work was deemed to be less than adequate. It seems that for these men, they were most relieved when their master made *no* comment; silence was 'praise'.

But that was then. Customs were different in those times. Here in our current society, a more 'polite' relationship is expected. On those occasions when these ladies are not able to do very well, I certainly don't scream abuse at them! I feel of course that it is my job to make sure that the work on their bench basically matches their current skill level. Shouting at them would be pointless and counter-productive.

But I am not at all sure about how to handle the opposite situation - when they turn in a good batch of prints. Perhaps I am a bit old-fashioned - and perhaps I even share some of the thinking of those old 'masters' - but I am not comfortable with praising them on a day-to-day basis. To do that makes the praise meaningless, I think.

So the pattern that seems to be developing is that we look over a completed batch together, and I point out problems as I see them, perhaps tossing in the occasional nod at something that seems particularly well done.

Part of the process of becoming a competent woodblock printer is the development of the ability to 'adjudicate' one's own work. The shop master cannot stand watch over the printing of an entire batch of prints - each person has to 'watch' his/her own work constantly, comparing each sheet to the model on hand to ensure an even quality through a batch. These ladies are learning this, and they *know* when they have done well, and when the work is lacking.

So the more skilled they become, the easier my part will become. I will take a look through the stack they present, and hand it silently back, perhaps - if I am feeling particularly benevolent that day - adding a nod and a short grunt of approval. "Unn ..."

They'll be happy with that, don't you think?

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