



## Collaboration

It has been a few weeks since I wrote about running an ad looking for new staff for my Mokuhankan venture. Perhaps there are among the A Story A Week readers some who are burning with eagerness to hear how it all worked out!

Well, I have not too much to report about the ad itself, I'm afraid. It was a complete bust - bringing no responses at all. But because I had blogged about the staff search, word spread bit by bit, and a recommendation from a fellow printer downtown led to an introduction with a young man who could fill one of the positions - the one for helping me with the woodwork job. This person was unfortunately not available full time, but I was getting a bit desperate to get started on that project, so signed him on anyway, and for the past three weeks he has been here for three days a week, working all day and sleeping down in the workroom.

On his first day here, the two of us spent an hour or so getting him introduced to the place, and to the job at hand: organizing the woodshop and building 200 beautifully hand-crafted wooden cases for the collectors of the upcoming 'Arts of Japan' print series. I say 'woodshop', but in reality, this is nothing more than an open space in the first basement level of the building where I keep a couple of cardboard boxes of old hand tools. In preparation for this job, I had ordered a few simple power tools, and these too were unboxed and waiting.

Lee-san's first job was to get the place organized and build some workbenches. I gave him the most sketchy of instructions, and then got back to my own carving work. As I and the ladies worked on our printmaking in the second basement, various hammering, sawing and clattering sounds came from over our heads. I had no idea exactly what he was up to, but he certainly seemed to be wasting no time on it!

A couple of hours later, when I could hold back my curiosity no longer, I put my work aside and went up to see how he was doing, and it didn't take more than a couple of seconds to see that in hiring this guy, I have chosen a real 'winner'. The place was transformed.

He had set up some temporary trestles on which to work, using various exhibition stands that were stored in the room, and all the tools - new and old - were organized and made ready for use. Looking at the stuff I discovered tools that I hadn't even known I had! He had a good strong workbench nearly finished, and was almost ready to begin work on the case construction itself.

But I have to confess that when I stepped into the room I had some very mixed emotions. This is *my* house; those are *my* tools; that had been *my* way of arranging things, and it was now all mixed up and changed. Part of me wanted to resist this, and scramble to 'put it all back like it was'. Of course I did no such thing. The whole idea of the new Mokuhankan venture is *not* to do it 'by myself', but to gather competent people, set them tasks, and then stand back out of the way, simply guiding them as necessary in the direction that I wish us to be going.

Over the ensuing couple of weeks, I have managed to suppress my silly 'control' impulses fairly well, and have pretty much settled in to this new 'cooperative' way of working. As construction has moved along, he has now and again surprised me with some new tool setup that I myself wouldn't particularly have thought of, and I am quite enjoying the process of working together with somebody so competent. And now, whenever I go in there, it is always with a feeling of expectation that I will see something new and interesting. Our Mokuhankan venture is far from being a 'sure thing', as the money is extremely tight, but even if we don't actually succeed in getting this thing to fly in a stable way, I don't think I'll have any regrets that I started it up. And although I'm only 60, and thus don't really qualify as an 'old dog', I'm happy to be learning some new tricks!

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