



By Mine Own Hand

During the past few days, I happened to read a couple of magazine articles that included some quite astonishing information, and which turned out to be related in an interesting way.

The first was an article about an author of best-selling novels, and listed a number of statistics to show just how incredibly popular his work is. He has published at least nine books a year in recent years, and has had over 50 of his works on the New York Times best-seller list, quite an impressive accomplishment indeed.

There were some estimates bandied about on the value of a contract he had recently signed, with the number \$150 million figuring prominently.

Well, we all know that an author of best-sellers can earn a lot of money, so I suppose there is nothing particularly surprising there. These numbers though, were topped - by far - by those quoted in the next story I read, this one about a man creating modern art. Simply put, there just aren't enough zeroes on my keyboard to total up the number of millions that this person has earned from his creations. To most of us not affiliated with the world of modern art, his creations seem laughably ridiculous, but there are obviously wealthy people out there who do take it all seriously, and to them his work has value.

But it's not the 'value' of the work of these two men that interests me here, nor even its quality, however that might be measured. The thing that I found astonishing while reading these stories was that neither of these men does their own work. They are both simply a 'front' for a factory that does the actual production, and neither of them makes any pretence about this. The books published by the 'best-selling author' are written for him by people he hires to do that work, and the 'art works' are all created in a gigantic factory space by a team of a few hundred employees who do the actual printing, cutting, painting, welding, etc. etc.

Why should I have been surprised to read about this? After all, we all understand that many of the 'old masters' - people such as Rubens, Da Vinci, etc. - did not create their works in isolation, but did so with the assistance of studio workers and apprentices. I think though, that in those instances we have the assurance that a man like Rubens was himself completely *capable* of doing the work, and used a studio system because the projects were simply too large for him to undertake alone.

But a book? A simple mystery or thriller? Can a man who hires others to write these, and then puts his own name on the cover for publication, really call himself a 'best-selling author'? Well, it seems so ... at least according to the New York Times, in which the article appeared.

All of this of course makes me wonder about my own work. For well over 20 years now, all of the woodblock prints I have issued in my subscription sets have been produced utterly and totally by me; I have carved every line of every block, and printed every colour of every sheet of every edition. This has been a point of very strong pride for me - I did it all my myself! My signature on each print - accompanied by my embossed baren seal - is the mark that tells the world that it was all done by my own hand.

But in addition to those publications, over the past year or so I have been issuing prints of a different type. Under the auspices of my Mokuhankan publishing venture, I am sending out prints made by craftsmen working under my direction. These prints I do not sign, as they are not my own work. I *produce* them, but I am not the only person involved in the actual making.

And you can thus understand my quite mixed feelings to find that these recent prints are turning out to be far more popular than my earlier 'solo' work. When it comes to the question of who actually prints these, myself or one of my assistants ... nobody seems to care.

And that, is really giving me something to think about!

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