



Need a Trimming?

Today's story is not about something that happened to me this week; it's about something that *didn't* happen, but before we hear about it, we have to go back about twenty-five years ...

When I first began holding exhibitions of my woodblock prints - when I was making the large '100 Poets' series - I always did so in early January, as I was trying to encourage media coverage because of the 'tie-in' between the poetry and the traditional *karuta* game, which is indelibly linked to the new year in this country. This did indeed work out well most years, but having the exhibitions at that season led to another tie-in with the new year - visitors would frequently bring me copies of their woodblock printed new year card.

One such visitor was an elderly gentleman - already well into his retirement years - who brought a very attractive card to present to me at one of my earliest shows. He was proud not only of the beautiful carving and printing work he had done, but of the fact that he had made the paper himself too. I complimented him on the excellent work, but did add a small regret that he had used a fairly poor material as a base for the paper-making (I think it was old milk cartons, or something like that.) He agreed with this criticism, adding that it couldn't be helped, because this was only a little hobby activity for him, and he couldn't afford proper paper making materials.

Well, I solved that problem for him right then and there, telling him that he would be welcome to visit my workshop later that week, where he would be free to help himself to a big bag of paper offcuts that were waiting to be tossed out. I use nothing but the finest *washi* for my printmaking, but even though I calculate the cutting as carefully as possible to minimize wastage, the pile of trimmings does grow inexorably. I hate to throw them out though, because this mulberry fibre is very expensive and difficult to come by.

The people who make my paper can't re-cycle it for me, because my trimmings are quite small, and the long mulberry fibres - their main attraction for us - have become shortened. Paper made with such offcuts would thus be somewhat weak for professional use.

The gentleman took me up on the offer, and for nigh on twenty years, made annual visits to my workroom to cart away the trimmings, which I carefully saved up for him. And of course, every January I received another of his beautiful new year cards, now much improved by the use of this wonderful mulberry.

Well, you can see where this story is going. Along with his card a few years back, he included a note to let me know that due to advancing age, he was calling an end to his woodblock print-making hobby and that I shouldn't expect any more cards. And shortly after that, I received in the mail a small package from him, containing what was perhaps his most prized possession - a wonderful (and extremely expensive) professional printer's baren.

I of course wrote and thanked him very much for this wonderful gift, and also sent back a packet of prints in return, knowing that he would appreciate and enjoy them.

And now, here in our workshop, the mulberry clippings pile up and up, and it's getting to the point where we have a real problem. We hate to think of throwing them away, but know of nobody who could make such wonderful use of this resource as my elderly friend did.

And every year as I look through the stack of new year's cards I receive on the 1st of January, I remember Azuma-san, and his baren gift, and I wonder what his print this year would have looked like ...

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