



Where's the Beef?

A couple of things happened to me this week, and the conjunction of the two seemingly unrelated events has given me plenty to mull over with respect to our print publishing work.

1) We had contact from one of our collectors complaining about the quality of the prints he had just received. 2) I had a hamburger.

As for the first of these events, when the email from the collector came in, I responded instantly with an apology for letting something slip through, and promised to send immediate replacements, which we did. I also asked though, if he would send us a picture of the problem, so that we could understand just where it was that we had slipped up.

When the images arrived, we inspected them carefully, and found the two 'spots' about which he had complained. One of these was a tiny shred of mulberry bark that had made it through the paper-making process, and the other was a tiny dot of sumi pigment along one border of the print. I myself had given this print the 'OK' before it was packed ready for shipment.

To me, both of those small 'defects' were not really defects, but simply artifacts of the print-making process. One has to be very careful with where to draw the line on this sort of thing. It is all too easy to fall into the 'these are handmade, so please accept some roughness and irregularity' argument. I wish to resist this at every stage. Our (theoretical) goal is 'perfection', and although real life does get in the way of that, we *do* want our products to be made as well as possible.

Which brings me to the hamburger. I had just five minutes left before grabbing a homeward-bound train from Tokyo the other evening, couldn't face the nearly two hour journey on an empty stomach, so slipped into a fast food joint and ordered a simple cheeseburger (no fries, no drink, just the little burger).

It was - in a word - glorious. Now yes, I was hungry, so that perhaps influences my judgment somewhat, and I'm well aware of the 'cheap thrills' tricks that such companies play with salt and MSG in their recipes, but this was different. This was downright tasty.

While I ate it, I tried to imagine that just around the block somewhere, this patty and its seasonings could have been presented as part of a beautiful multi-course meal, and I am sure that nobody would have been any the wiser as to its provenance. That burger was in effect created by teams of researchers working for the giant corporation, and then 'manufactured' no doubt just a few minutes before I ordered it by a very sophisticated and totally computer-controlled process. Nothing was left to chance, and the result was near perfection.

It seems to me that the collector who rejected our slightly 'defective' prints has perhaps become trained to expect nothing less than such perfection in the products he purchases. A new automobile - built mostly by robotic assembly lines - is a thing of beauty indeed, with not the slightest scratch or smudge, even though it is a product of a ferociously complex manufacturing process, incorporating many thousands of parts. Apple products are famous for the astonishing level of precision in their manufacture, with tolerances reputed to be on nano-level scales.

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With modern consumers trained to consider such perfection in manufacture as 'normal', what chance do we as woodblock printmakers stand of having them find our products attractive? As I mentioned above, I will *not* seek refuge in the 'It's only handmade, so anything goes ...' argument. I will not.

We simply have to raise our game. The best of the best of the woodblock prints of past eras were indeed made with an 'astonishing level of precision' - yes, even iPhone levels of precision. It *can* be done.

Whether or not we can avoid the bankruptcy court while doing so is another question!

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