



Best of Friends!

Some years back, my stories were regularly featured in one of Japan's English language weekly magazines, the Mainichi Weekly. For a period of a couple of years, they selected me to do their front page story about once a month. The stories were generally well-received by the readers, and the editors now and then asked me to prepare a longer feature for the publication.

On one occasion, the senior editor came up with an interesting idea - she suggested that the two of us make a visit to one of Japan's most well-known modern woodblock print artists, Kiyoshi Saito. We would spend a couple of days with him, and upon returning to Tokyo would prepare two stories. I would write a feature about Mr. Saito, and the editor would prepare a profile of me to accompany it. This sounded like a pretty good plan, so I accepted the proposal and we subsequently made the trip to his home in Aizu, in western Fukushima Prefecture, accompanied by his publisher, through whom the editor had made the arrangements.

One reason that the editor had thought this was an interesting idea was the apparent reversal in roles between the two printmakers, Mr. Saito and myself. I - the foreigner - was at that time working exclusively at making reproductions of traditional Japanese prints, while Saito-san - the Japanese - was working in a modern 'international' style (although using much imagery from his local surroundings). A couple of days of discussion and interaction between us would surely result in plenty of material for interesting stories for the magazine.

Well, it was indeed a good concept, but unfortunately, things didn't quite work out as planned. We hadn't been in the house more than ten minutes before I managed to insult him, and probably not more than ten minutes or so later, he had returned the favour.

It had begun when we arrived at the house and were shown into a room where he was busy doing something - wrapping up a package of woodblocks. He mentioned that these were blocks that he had just proofed, and which were now being sent out to a professional printer for pulling the edition. Now back then I was still pretty naive about this sort of thing, and was under the impression that modern printmakers - being philosophically opposed to the 'division of labour' type of printmaking that had been standard in the old days - always printed their own editions. I now know that this is not true at all, and that indeed it is very rare for them to do their own printing. The more famous they are, and the more demand their is for their work, the more likely it is that they use the 'hired guns' to make the actual prints. None of this is mentioned in the galleries where their work is sold of course, and the polite fiction is maintained that the work was done by the person who signed the finished copies, the artist himself.

Anyway, I was surprised to see this, and made some kind of comment that he took to be inappropriate, and we were off. Some minutes later, when we were seated in the sitting room to get introduced properly, and my work was passed to him for comment, he tossed the folder aside with barely a glance, "What a waste of time! Making reproductions of those old designs ..."

As you can imagine, the rest of the visit was not so comfortable. Neither he nor I made any further troublesome comments, and the visit passed by basically as planned, but none of us who were there will remember the time with any pleasure.

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In the car on the return journey to Tokyo the next day, the editor and I looked at each other. It was quite clear that I had no taste at all for writing a story on Saito-san, and she knew it. So she came up with an excellent suggestion on how to get out of the jam. We would switch jobs; she would write the story on Saito-san, and I would do one on myself, a project that would of course give me no trouble at all!

As it would turn out, only one of us actually managed to get their story handed in. You can read it online here:

http://astoryaweek.com/en/display_story.php5en?story_file=201304001401111

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