



Number One

My friend Jed Henry and I were chatting via Skype the other day, as we do a few times each week. Most of our conversations are of course on matters related to our Ukiyoe Heroes project; I report on how the carving or printing work is coming along, and he discusses the new designs that are always on his desk.

On this occasion, Jed and I had been talking about some of the most famous designers who worked in this field over the centuries, and at some point our conversation turned to the question of the popularity of various artists. Back in the old days there was no such thing as a New York Times bestseller list, so nobody really has any hard data on these things, but we can make pretty good guesses about which designer 'topped the charts' in any given year by selling more prints than anybody else.

For example, for 1793 the top designer was almost certainly Utamaro, whose work was being very heavily promoted by the publisher Tsutaya Juzaburo at the time; reports from the day speak of his work as being very popular. Back in 1780 the top man was probably Katsukawa Shunsho, whose actor prints were all the rage among kabuki fans. Now I myself don't have the time to try and work out this best-seller list over the years since the origin of Japanese printmaking (although I would be very interested in seeing such a thing if some researchers have worked it all out), but I do have a pretty good idea who topped the chart for the year 2012.

Jed Henry, of course! My workshop issued nearly 1,500 beautiful woodblock prints of Jed's designs last year. And I carved every one of them, and myself and my staff printed every copy. I don't have access to the sales records of the few remaining other printmaking businesses here in Tokyo, but I know for sure that none of them are putting out anywhere near that quantity (in *total*, let alone of one artist).

Jed, with his brush, is the inheritor to the long and rich artistic traditions of ukiyoe, and myself and my printing staff are the ones who have inherited the technical tradition, the knowledge of how to make the prints.

This is so astonishing to me that I still have trouble acknowledging it. When I first came to Japan over thirty years ago to poke around a bit and see if I could learn something about traditional printmaking, I really didn't have many aspirations. I was intensely *interested* in making prints of course, but at that time couldn't possibly see it as anything more than a hobby activity.

I could never have imagined today's reality: Jed and I are shipping our beautiful prints - prints which flow directly from the ukiyoe tradition - to young and enthusiastic collectors all over the world (nearly forty countries so far).

In the old days, it was the 'dead and finished' ukiyoe which were scooped up by overseas collectors, to now fill famous museums everywhere. Whether that will be the final resting place of our own work, we can't tell, and of course that should be none of our concern. Our job now, for as many years as we can keep it up, is to produce the best work we can and spread it around as widely as possible.

We're having a ton of fun with this, and we fully intend to hold our top spot on the 'chart' as long as possible!

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