



Et Viola!

Is that title mis-typed? Not at all! I'm going to talk about violas today!

Over the course of the year or so since our workshop took on the 'Ukiyoe Heroes' project - making prints based on designs from young American illustrator Jed Henry - our workload has dramatically increased. A year ago, we were on the verge of shutting down; now we have more work than we can handle.

During the course of the year, I have begun to use more people to help us with the printing side of our business - pulling the actual prints from our carved woodblocks. We now have five people working here as many hours a week as they can, and in addition to this 'in house' staff, we are sending a lot of work out to three professional freelance printers. (Honestly speaking, those three very skilled men are actually doing the lion's share of the work, as our own staff is still quite inexperienced.)

But although we have been able to call on outside printers to help us keep up, no such solution is available for the other side of the printmaking coin, the carving. At present I myself am carving every line of every block of every colour for every print we issue: the main Ukiyoe Heroes designs (one every two months), our subscription Chibi Heroes prints (two every month), and the prints to support Jed's new video game project (four new designs this month and next). And on top of all this I am supposed to be issuing a print for my own subscription series - The Arts of Japan - every six weeks or so. And on top of *that* we have any number of ideas for very interesting prints we would *like* to be making ...

Now if I had 'nothing else to do', this workload might actually be doable. I am pretty efficient at this craft by now, and I know how to get my head down and keep at it. But there is of course also a huge amount of other work always waiting for me, as I am also the manager of this place, as well as being the main 'trainer' of the staff. The net result is that I have fallen farther and farther behind in the only one of these jobs that is expendable - my own subscription series. I use the word 'expendable' in the sense that all my other jobs have people sitting there waiting for me to get the blocks done so that they can work, whereas my own series does not. So whenever I have to choose between two competing jobs waiting on my bench, it is my own work that gets neglected.

So why not do the same thing with the carving that we have done with the printing - pick up the phone and hire somebody to help?

Believe me, I have tried, but there is simply no 'somebody' out there. The business of collaborative woodblock printmaking has fallen into such a state of disrepair that there is now no longer a pool of craftsmen out there waiting for work. The sole freelance carver in Tokyo whose work I respect has enough of his own projects to keep him busy. There are a few young people spending time with him learning about the craft, but they are still far from ready to accept work, and as they are very much 'part time', it is not clear whether or not they will ever be ready.

A young man who apprenticed with him for a few years began to accept outside work, but as there was not enough of that to support him (and his young family), he has now become a house painter, and cannot accept my work (which would not be enough to sustain him on its own.)

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I was talking with a musician friend a while back, and he was telling me that there are still six or seven professional symphony orchestras based in the Tokyo area. Each of these must have at least 3 or 4 viola players - although there is almost certainly some overlap between them - so maybe there are around a dozen professional viola players in Tokyo. Good grief. A dozen *viola players* can support themselves in this town, and yet no wood-carvers can?

Well, to my mind this is simply a measure of how poorly the woodblock publishers have done their job over the past couple of generations. I'm optimistic that with our new approach - making images with relevance to young people - we could change things around. We could, that is, if we could actually *make* the prints that people are waiting for.

I wonder if perhaps it's time to start seriously looking at those new 3-D printers ...

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