



The Road not Taken

The stacks of carved woodblocks are growing ever taller here in our workshop; with a couple of new prints being published every month, each needing many colours, storage of the blocks is becoming a major problem.

At present, they are scattered here and there around the workshop, but early next year we are going to construct a new set of shelves for storing them. I was preparing for this by doing an inventory of the various block sizes, and while doing so, pulled out the block set for the very first print in the Hyakunin Isshu poetry series I produced many years ago, and which was carved back in late 1998.

I couldn't resist opening the package to have a closer look, knowing full well what I would find. How badly the key block was carved! I can't believe I had the nerve to sell prints made on a block with such clumsy and inexperienced line work!

But I also noticed something else, something that I had forgotten about many years ago. Along one edge of the key block were two holes, drilled and tapped, ready to receive some kind of attachment. Yes, I remember - I had 'invented' a device that would attach to carved blocks and enable a very accurate and easily adjustable registration of the printing paper.

Registration of the paper is an extremely sensitive part of the traditional printer's job. The paper expands when it is moistened in preparation for printing, and if the moisture level is allowed to vary during the process, it may shrink or distort, spoiling the registration of the colours. With some impressions needing more (wet) pigment than others, with the weather almost certainly varying during the long process, and the block also expanding and contracting as the moisture sinks into it, the printer has his hands full making sure that everything is lined up accurately.

The traditional registration method involves cutting notches in the wood at a couple of locations, into which the paper is fitted, and then - as things start to move out of alignment during the process - adjusting these notches with shims or trimming as required. The notches become altered and damaged during this process, and registration becomes progressively more difficult as the blocks get older.

So I created an external jig on which such notches were prepared, fitting it with threaded parts enabling instant and extremely fine-grained adjustment at the touch of a screw. I tested it out on a small batch of prints, and it worked wonderfully!

And I then threw it away.

I did that because it became clear to me that by building that jig, I was headed down the wrong path. Over the course of many hundreds of years, a great many very smart and inventive men worked on the question of how to improve printing technology. And look at what they accomplished! Picture Mr. Gutenberg and his assistants laboriously putting together each page of his books, and then think of the staggeringly complex printing presses that are in common use today, which basically take trees in at one end, and spit out incredibly detailed and beautiful colour printed work at the other.

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I realized that by taking a 'tech' approach to my study of woodblock printmaking, I was simply setting out on that same road. I am nothing if not inventive and curious, and that jig would soon have been followed by another, and another, each one more 'efficient' than the last. Without doubt, I could have created a 'system' for the very efficient production of the prints - for producing stacks and stacks of wonderful prints!

But as I said, I decided not to go that route. I'm not making woodblock prints just for the purpose of ending up with stacks of prints. I love making them *because* it is difficult; it has kept me enraptured for decades on end *because* the process requires my full attention and concentration.

We have a half-dozen younger people here in the workshop, learning how to be printers. They are of course following in my footsteps, doing it the same traditional way. Because of their inexperience, they frequently get into trouble, and call me for assistance. I ask them to step aside, slip into their seat, and take an impression from their block. While doing so I sense many of the factors involved: how much moisture is in the brush, how tightly the baren skin is tied, how 'hard' the paper is, and dozens and dozens of other factors, some of which I would have trouble even verbalizing.

After I lift the paper off the block - with the impression perfectly made - they look at it, and me, and then ask, "How did you do that? What did you do differently?"

I can sometimes explain some of it - "You didn't have enough pigment in the brush," etc. etc. - but many times there is nothing to say. It is simply the experience gained from 30+ years of doing this. Of doing it *without* mechanical aids or tech assists.

I'm of course not advocating for a world without technology and tools; the laptop on which I am writing this little story is an astonishing achievement of human inventiveness. But I would very much like to think that we as a species will not totally reject our own abilities in favour of 'efficient' machines.

The other printers in our workshop are all far younger than I; healthy, vigorous and strong. But this old guy can do things that leaves them shaking their heads, and he will be able to do so for many years yet to come.

And all because he came to his senses in time, and threw away that jig!

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