

'Human Drama' - A Canadian woodblock printmaker's 10 year journey

Part One

In January 1999, a Hyakunin Isshu wood block printing exhibit was held at Tokyo Shinjuku Gallery. The wood block print artist featured was a Canadian named David Bull (47 years old) who spent ten years to complete the Edo period Shunsho Katsukawa's ukiyo-e art collection Nishiki Hyakunin Isshu Azumaori (stored at the Toyo Bunko Depository). Normally woodblock prints are completed by three artisans; the artist, the carver (horishi), and the printer (surishi). David did the work of the carver and the printer by himself. David's first print was completed in January of 1989 (the first year of Heisei). From this date on for ten years this Canadian's challenge to conquer the art of woodblock printing commenced.

David's first encounter with Japanese woodblock printing was at a Canadian gallery. This visit changed the course of his life.

David: "That image...even now I remember it!" He was so impressed with wood block printing that he used an available plywood board and wood chisel and improvised his own wood block print.

David: "Wow! It came out well!" In return for his efforts, he acquired the craft of woodblock carving.

He was first introduced to Hyakunin Isshu when he was invited to a Japanese home on New Year's day to play the Hyakunin Isshu Karuta (card game). He was very impressed with the Hyakunin Isshu. Even the young children knew and memorized the waka (poetry) of the Hyakunin Isshu to be able to play the New Year's game. He studied the Karuta book list and was introduced to Katsukawa Shunsho's Hyakunin Isshu at the Hamura City Library by the Librarian Ms. Egami Emiko.

Ms. Egami: "Now we can speak in Japanese, but in the beginning he didn't understand anything."

David: "Ms. Egami wrote an introduction for me to the Toyo Book Depository Foundation in Bunkyo Ward. It was really a big deal for me. I was thinking "Is it really all right for me to sit down with this wonderful book?" This is old washi, so it's very soft. These drawings show the individuality of the people. The drawings were drawn by Shunsho and carved by Inoue Shinshichiro."

(Katsukawa Shunsho's grave, Died 4th year of Kansei(1793))

David had chosen as his inspiration the great Edo period artist Katsukawa Shunsho who had created Ukiyo-e. The famous Katsushika Hokusai was one of Katsukawa Shunsho's followers.

"I had come to Japan to study the original block printing process, so I approached Asakusa, where I could experience the real atmosphere of Edo. I felt that somewhere in Asakusa was an area where block printers resided and worked and were waiting for my arrival. However, Asakusa was a modern town and was completely different than I had imagined. I couldn't even find shop signs of block printers anywhere. Where are the artists, and where should I look?"

Part Two

Twelve years ago in July 1986, David arrived in Japan together with his wife Michiyo and two daughters. He rented a room in Hamura City in Tokyo, and struggled to maintain a livelihood by teaching English while practicing blockprinting. However, even after two years he was unable to find a block printing artist.

David: "Then one day a student I had been teaching English to showed me an English news article which stated that you could meet a Japanese block printing artist."

This article enabled him to meet a block printing artist. He went to Arakawa in Arakawa-ku and found the door to meeting the block printing artist. David was able to meet with Ukiyo-e artist and block printer Ito Susumu at his work place, something he had been looking for since his arrival in Japan. Mr. Ito was working on a Ukiyo-e Utamaro beauty print, something which only an experienced and talented print carver can do.

David: "In carving the fine lines do you use a magnifying glass?"

Mr. Ito: "No, only this desk lamp."

David: "Are your eyes good enough to see the fine lines?"

Ito: "Yes. For 63 years I've been doing it this way, and I hope to be able to continue."

David: "Do you use the same tools for the fine lines and the broader lines?"

Ito: "No, the tools are different. The difference is brought about by the sharpening, like so."
(demonstrates for David)

This sharpening method is learned for years by apprentices.

There, for the first time, David learned the art of sharpening the tools, and was told the difference between fine and delicate lines, and broader lines. David showed Mr. Ito some of his own tools and Mr. Ito told David that his tools were inadequate because the blades were loose. Mr. Ito indicated that the blades have to be tightened with a piece of shamisen string.

Mr. Ito: "The shamisen string has to be tightened with each winding."

Narrator states David says: "I have a dream that the print of Katsukawa Shunsho is alive. I want to sculpt the lines that are moving. Please teach me! I will keep your teachings alive."

David says in English: "I think soon ukiyo-e is finished in Japan but in Canada, France, and Europe maybe we can keep going."

David arrived in Japan to learn block printing but this art was on the wane. There are more secrets that David would like to learn from the block printing artists in Japan; all about the art of surishi or wood block printing.

Mr. Matsuzaki Keizaburo is the individual who introduced David into the world of block printing art through his English news article. Mr. Matsuzaki showed David the coloring technique of red color in various shades in the print that he was printing. The different shades in the print are all derived from the same red pigment. Mr. Matsuzaki introduced David to an art supply shop in Kanda Tokyo. Here David found out that the inks of various different shades of colors can be combined from a few basic colors. To bring out the proper color in the design is the job of the surishi.

Due mainly to the teachings of various artists, David's skill in wood block printing improved.

About this time he received a letter which pointed out that his carving of a particular

Japanese character (ninben) was wrong. He therefore asked Mr. Ito for advice. Mr. Ito advised him on some of the fine differences of carving out brush (fude) written characters on wood. Mr. Ito said as an apprentice he learned that the carving tool had to be used like a brush so when you carve the front edge of the brush stroke you carve it exactly to the outline but when you are carving the backside of the brush stroke you carve the outline with slight jerkiness or else the character does not come alive.

Mr. Ito: "This was pounded into me so even now I have this in my mind."

David: "I did not know much about carving on wood block but as I kept at it I realized carving is brush (fude) writing and it requires strength and it demands strength."

In order to sell his prints David made some flyers and this was a manifestation of his decision to make his livelihood on wood block prints. Among his first customers were the owners of a neighborhood bakery, Mr. & Mrs. Fumio Cho of Kotobukiya bakery.

Mr. Cho: "David approached me and showed me a print and said that he would like to set up 10 block prints and asked whether the prints were marketable. I knew he had been working meticulously on the prints so I told him that I would not mind being his customer."

David thought: "Among 120 million Japanese if only 50 or 60 individuals purchased my prints I would be able to make a living. I should be able to find this number of people."

Part Three

David had met and married Michiyo who had travelled to Canada to study, and had 2 daughters. But even after arriving in Japan, Michiyo did not abandon her dream to study in Canada. So in 1991 Michiyo departed to study in Canada, leaving her 2 daughters for David to look after. David looked after their daughters during the day, and worked on his woodblock prints after the children went to bed.

David: The children were my source of strength and my will to keep on living. The prints were not yet a source of income. The money that I had inherited for my children from Michiyo's father who died was a sum of 1,500,00 yen, which I spent to subsist. But finally when I was ready to have a print exhibit the funds were almost depleted. I used the final yen to pay for the exhibition cost. Then, on the day of the opening, a snow storm beset the area. The first day of the exhibit only a few people appeared. I was completely devastated. I didn't know what to do if this exhibit failed. But then by the weekend (the exhibit opened on a Thursday) the snow had melted and more people showed up and I had orders from 30 people. I was elated and told my daughters everything is now o.k."

David's block printing skills increased with each passing year. He was able to master the sophisticated dimensional printing technique called "niku zuri".

About the same time a great change came about in his personal life. His wife Michiyo, who had returned from Canada, raised talks of divorce. They discussed their problems for 2 weeks but she finally decided to return to Canada to pursue her goals. David tried to concentrate on his printing despite his sadness but it was difficult to meet the demands of his clients at the same time as looking after his daughters. The drive to satisfy his customers kept him going

despite his sadness. Then his eldest daughter, who was about to enter middle school, said that she wanted to go to school in Canada, so both daughters departed for Canada to live with their mother, Michiyo.

David went to the mountains to live a solitary life and wrote letters to his daughters, but to this day he has not mailed the letters. The parting with his children was the most traumatic experience for David. In his quiet apartment David worked on his prints and watched his daughters' homework on the internet. The letters from Canada were his most sought after joy.

Part Four

David, while working on prints tried to learn all things related to block prints. On this occasion he travelled to Otaki village in Fukui prefecture where Echizen washi (Japanese paper) is produced.

(Washi produced by Mr. Iwano Ichibei)

David: "This is the home of my printing paper. The production of the paper requires patience and skill. Echizen washi's beauty is not appreciated until one actually engages in making the paper. Block printing cannot be done by one person alone. Many individuals are involved in the final product."

When 80 of the Hyakunin Isshu prints were completed (9th year of Heisei January) David received a name card from a gentleman with a comment "Japan's beauty was taught to me by a foreigner." David said, "My work is being appreciated by Japanese."

Summertime, David's daughters visited him from Canada.

The wood David uses for his print blocks are made by only one person in Tokyo (Daito-ku, Moto Asakusa). There are no other people. The hangi (wood blocks) are planed from mountain cherrywood. The hangi craftsman's name is Mr. Shintaro Shimano. The hangi is planed until it is completely smooth like a mirror. When asked whether anyone is taking after him as a craftsman, Mr. Shimano stated he feels sorry for anyone taking after him because a person can't make a living doing what he's doing. There are probably only about 10 block print artists in Japan presently so the demand for wood blocks is scarce.

David attended a gathering of the Tokyo wood print technological association at the Sumiyoshi hall. He was invited because he was being recognized and accepted as a wood print artist. This was a gathering of known wood block print artists with names dating back to the Edo period. At this gathering David stated that when he came to Japan he had the fear that he would have difficulty because he felt that this old historical group would be reluctant to accept an outsider. David showed his prints at the gathering and received praise from all of them.

David went to see Mr. Keizaburo Matsuzaki who was instrumental in introducing him into the world of wood block printers. According to Mr. Matsuzaki, he believes that David can make it as a wood block printer because unlike he, who has a very narrow view of the art, David was initially an outsider. Looking from the outside, David could see the various areas of wood block

printing from a broader perspective, including ways to promote his works. Thus he could be successful.

Finally, when David had reached the 100th print of his Hyakunin Isshu, he approached the carver Mr. Susumu Ito to learn more carving techniques.

David: "You've been carving only about 10 minutes. I would have taken about 1 hour. You use your wrist so cleverly without turning the board but using your wrist with strength. So beautiful and full of power. I bow to your skill."

Part Five

(Heisei 10 Nov. 1998)

David starts his 100 print of the Hyakunin Isshu. Learning from the carver Mr. Ito, he changes the length and shape of his carving equipment. In so doing he found that he could maneuver his wrists and hand more readily and easily. David says that if he had been someone's apprentice, he would have learned this 20 years ago.

David: "I waited 20 years to learn this."

Dec. 15 was a day of sumizuri or black ink print day. To do this, no matter how many years it's been done, the task must be done in earnest. In block print, the black ink is the important outline, so even the slightest misalignment cannot be tolerated. After the black ink outline, the colors are printed each time with different color ink.

David: "The repetition with the same paper is like the work of a robot, but I live it like a child."

Dec. 22 the 100 print completion date had arrived. David's daughters, wanting to be present upon the completion of the 100th print, arrived from Canada. The children made lunch for David. The eldest daughter, Himi, was 15 years old and the second daughter, Fumi, was 13 years old. David ate chocolate chip muffins that they made. Since they were little, David's daughters watched his block printing and they were David's severest critics. The final scene is bokashi, or shading off. One more to go. David's daughters play 'jan ken pon' to decide who gets to print first. And with this final one print the Hyakunin Isshu series will be complete.

David: "I have no more to say."

David had completed the Hyakunin Isshu but in doing so he had lost something valuable also.

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