

摺物

Surimono Album #1

Reproductions of a set of woodblock
prints carved and printed by
David Bull

1. Katsushika Hokusai
Horses in Snow
2. Nishikawa Sukenobu
Girl under Cherry Blossoms
3. Onishi Chinnen
Two Women Sewing
4. Ando Hiroshige
Gathering Shellfish
5. Tani Bun'ichi
Summer Bamboo
6. Shibata Zeshin
Room with a View
7. Kitagawa Utamaro
Aka Tombo
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Horses in Snow

What a perfect choice for a first print in this new series of 'Surimono Albums'! Hokusai's vast collection of drawings known as the 'Manga' would by itself be enough to supply me with interesting material for prints for the rest of my life. I certainly don't intend to try reproducing the whole thing - even the fifty years or so that I have left wouldn't be enough time for *that* - but I will be dipping into it with great relish every once in a while, whenever I am looking for a bit of a 'special' image. Japanese traditional woodblock prints of bygone eras are not really noted for their emotive feeling; beautiful though they are, they can be quite 'cool' and lacking in expressive warmth. Hokusai's images though, especially the ones that fill the pages of the Manga, are a tapestry of the human experience. The people in this print are undeniably *real* people, even though they are each delineated with the merest flick of the brush. That was his genius, and we can certainly feel the immense frustration he must have felt at the end of his life when he is said to have cried on his deathbed: "If heaven could only grant me ten more years! Only *five* more, and I would have become a real painter."

So is this what I am planning for these Surimono Albums - a Manga-type 'grab bag' of jumbled imagery? Well, yes and no. Although this series, unlike my previous *Hyakunin Isshu* series, will not have a single unified theme, it *will* have a logical basis to its construction. Each set of ten prints will be made up of what I hope will be a balanced selection of images; balanced in subject matter - landscapes, nature, still life, human figures, etc.; balanced in era - from early Edo right up through Showa (and if I can arrange copyright permissions, perhaps even more modern designs as well); balanced in overall visual appearance - including sparse designs like this month's print, as well as more dense designs like the one you will see next month; and, in what is of *most* interest to me, balanced in technical requirements - some prints using straightforward carving and printing methods, and some using complex techniques that will tax my abilities. Some of the prints you receive this year will indeed be reproductions of 'real' surimono, while others (like this month's Hokusai design) will be designs that were originally published with some other intention, but which completely match the context of this series.

Maybe the result will turn out to be a jumble after all, but I think not. There are hundreds of thousands of Japanese prints in museums and private collections around the world, and given this immense storehouse of riches from which to choose, I rather suspect that I will have no problem at all in selecting ten images each year that will satisfy all those requirements, and yet will form a coherent set when they are finally seen together ... come next December.

The *surimono* that were produced in their heyday, in the late 1700's and early 1800's, achieved astonishing levels of beauty and technical achievement. The men who commissioned them were connoisseurs indeed, and demanded 'the best' in every aspect of their production - top rank artists, the finest papers, the most skilled craftsmen ... It is thus with some trepidation that I step forward and call these new prints of mine 'surimono' - do they indeed match those qualifications? *Top artists* - no question about it. *Finest paper* - no question about that either; Mr. Iwano's paper is the best 'hoshō' being made anywhere. *The most skilled craftsmen* - well, compared to those men of two hundred years ago, I do still have quite some way to go. But my skills are nothing to be ashamed of ... And that ties in with the final criterion - *connoisseurs indeed*. This one will be up to you. The sharper your eyes are, and the more critical you can be, the higher we will be able to climb together. It *has* to come from both of us - you must demand the best work, and I will try to produce it.

There are now no men alive on this planet who can work to the level of the carvers of the 'old days'; and speaking realistically, I know that I will never reach that level; the times have simply changed too much. But with your support, both overall and critical, we'll see just what I can manage ... Thank you very much for joining this project.

March 1999

Girl under Cherry Blossoms

For the second print in this year's Surimono Album, we step back a couple of generations - to **Nishikawa Sukenobu**, who died in 1750, ten years before Hokusai was born. We also move to a different place - most of the ukiyo-e that we know and love were created in Edo, the main capital of Japan - but Sukenobu lived and worked in Kyoto. In this early period there was a thriving book publishing industry in that part of Japan; the book from which this picture is taken ('Ehon Chiyomigusa'), was published in Osaka in 1740.

I wonder if there are any 'purists' among the collectors of these new Surimono Albums? If so, then I may be in a bit of trouble this month; for you see, this print was designed about two decades before the full-colour 'nishiki-e' technique was developed - the original book was printed with black only. All the colours you see in this print are not the work of Sukenobu, but are my creations. This actually is not such a 'terrible' thing to do as it might sound; if a modern western printmaker made a new edition of a Rembrandt etching with new colours added, I don't think that it would be accepted too well by the art community, but the Japanese traditional way of printmaking delegated a tremendous amount of responsibility to the carver and printer, and we know that quite often the designer's only input was the original brush sketch - the rest of the work, even such creative jobs such as devising attractive colour schemes, was done by the 'shokunin'. The printer's job is not just to move the baren back and forth ...

Why did I choose this picture? There are a few reasons ... The first and foremost of course is simply that I enjoy Sukenobu's designs very much - the women (or in this case, a young girl) are portrayed in a most pleasing and graceful manner. This is what he was famous for, and he produced thousands of such illustrations during his working life - every one of them suffused with this grace and elegance. But another reason is the direct link with my previous work on the Hyakunin Isshu series. When one first starts becoming familiar with Japanese prints, the work of Suzuki Harunobu soon comes to one's attention - his idealized and poetic women are among the most fascinating and beautiful of all ukiyo-e images. But as one learns more about the history of the art, one sees these images by Sukenobu and comes to realize that Harunobu did not create his style in a vacuum - his women are drawn very much in the 'manner' of the older artist. And the link to Shunsho, the man who created the Hyakunin Isshu series that I reproduced? Well, he was the 'next in line' as it were - his early work is almost indistinguishable from Harunobu's. Each man first assimilated a style from his predecessor, and then gradually transformed it into something of his own.

And should you need even a bit more of a link - some scholars are of the opinion that Shunsho was actually the 'love child' of Sukenobu himself ... (but I shouldn't be passing on centuries-old rumours, should I!)

Carving the print this month was a kind of 'coming home' for me - as my knife cut along the smooth curves of the kimono, I felt that I was in very familiar 'territory'. You see, last month was quite a shock; for ten years, I had been carving nothing but the Sukenobu/Harunobu/Shunsho kind of lines - elegantly brushed slender curves, tapering off beautifully at the ends. But when I started to carve that Hokusai design, I found out that everything I had learned during that ten years had to be tossed out the window. Did *you* feel that the print was peaceful and calm? Perhaps so, but I have to say that *I* felt no such peacefulness when faced with Hokusai's lines. Go back and look at them ... ragged lines, torn in places, full of energy. The man must have been a bundle of energy! In order to reproduce those lines properly I found myself digging away at the wood in a way that I never had to do before. It taught me a very important lesson - that when carving a Hokusai print, one carves 'Hokusai's way', almost becoming a Hokusai; when carving a Sukenobu print, one becomes a Sukenobu.

Eight more prints to go this year - all by different artists - it is going to be quite an education ...

April 1999

Two Women Sewing

Here is our third print of the year, a design by Chinnen, dating from the 1830's. We seem to be going back and forth in time during this year's set of surimono; I hope you are enjoying the ride!

During the ten years that I made my Hyakunin Isshu series of prints, it would occasionally happen that after sending out a print I would receive a phone call from one of the collectors. "Ummm, I'm sorry to have to say this, but I think that there is a problem with this month's print ... I would like to return it in exchange for another ..." Whenever this happened I asked them to send the print back to me, and when it arrived I would anxiously look it over to find the problem. Sometimes I would find that yes indeed, I had sent out a print with a blob of ink or some other problem, and in that case I quickly exchanged it and promised that I would be more careful when checking in the future. Sometimes though, it was the case that my eyes and their eyes saw the print in different ways - what they thought was a 'slip-up', leaving the rough natural edges on the paper for example, I thought was normal.

Now what about this month's print? When you opened the package and saw it, perhaps you were ready to phone me right away! Look at those carved lines down in the lower right hand corner; many of them are rough, ragged and torn. Is my woodblock worn out already? Look at the outlines in the face of the older woman; they are extremely light. Did I forget to put enough 'sumi' on my brush? Look how the dark black of the water container has spread out onto some of the nearby kimono lines ... This print is a crazy mess - there are mistakes everywhere!

Well, I hope you understand when I tell you that I worked very hard indeed to make those 'mistakes' just as they are! Unlike the previous two prints that I have made this year, in which I added colour blocks to an original design, this print is an almost exact reproduction of the original (I have slightly reduced it in size). Those torn lines, weak sumi, and 'careless' printing are all just as they were in the original.

You see, this print is not 'ukiyo-e'. The design has nothing in common with the standard ukiyo themes of actors, courtesans, and Edo famous places. The original of this print was made with the intention of reproducing a quick brush-drawn sketch as closely as possible. Back in the Edo era, albums full of designs such as this were commonly made, sometimes to serve as 'te-hon' (sample books for aspiring artists), and of course also to be attractive images in their own right.

To make all those ragged lines, I used the 'kasure' (scratch) technique to try and catch the flavour of a partially dry brush dragging across the paper. After the basic shape of the line is carved, one then takes the knife and digs, cuts and scrapes away at the wood. It's hard on knife blades, and takes a long time, but when it's done, the finished print looks very much like it was actually drawn with a brush.

And as for the 'weak' sumi, I printed the key block of this print twice - once with an extremely dilute 'ao-zumi', and then again (but only partially) with a stronger 'bokuju'.

Some of my western printmaker friends see me doing this kind of work, and think that I am doing it all 'wrong'. In their eyes, a woodblock print should look like a woodblock print - not like a copy of a painting. They think that the wood grain should be visible, that the shape of the gouges that did the cutting should be discernible, that the texture of the wood should dictate what kind of image comes out on it. But in the traditional Japanese technique, woodblock printing is a *reproductive medium*, not an 'art' in itself.

As I progress through this year's album, there may perhaps be other times when you open the package and think "Eh! What is *this*?". Well, if you're not sure - then please phone me and check. Perhaps it will be a mistake, I can't promise perfection! - but perhaps it will be another 'special' way to carve or print; there are many woodblock printing techniques which I have not yet tried.

Last month, I used my tools to create a 'reproduction' of a Sukenobu design; this month, with the same tools, but used in a very different way, I have created a Chinnen print. This is one of the great strengths of the Japanese woodblock technique - that it can speak in so many different voices.

May, 1999

Gathering Shellfish

Most people had probably not heard of the artist who drew last month's print, Onishi Chinnen, but this month's artist certainly doesn't need much of an introduction - one quick glance at the print will tell you that it was designed by **Ando Hiroshige**. During the final phase of work on my Hyakunin Isshu series, many people gave me suggestions on what I should do next, and far and away the most common suggestion I received was that of creating a reproduction of Hiroshige's famous '53 Stations of the Tokaido' series. I'm sure that they said this with good intentions, but my reaction was always the same ... 'No, no no!'. It's not that I don't like Hiroshige, or that I'm afraid of doing another long series, it's just that the Tokaido prints have been studied and reproduced so many times already ... everybody is very familiar with them, and there simply isn't any valid reason for me to spend so much time and effort going over the same ground. For me, it is much more interesting to dig up designs that are relatively unknown; a great deal of my pleasure comes from showing 'buried treasures' to everybody, just as I did with Shunsho's beautiful Hyakunin Isshu designs.

The 'buried treasure' you are looking at now is from his series 'Edo Meisho Harimaze Zue', which was originally published in 1857. The series includes ten sheets, each sheet made up of a group of small designs; it seems that they were designed to be trimmed apart after printing. I have chosen one of the designs, a scene showing two women digging for shellfish at Shinagawa.

There is an interesting story associated with this series of prints ... A few years ago, researchers were working in America in the archives of Frank Lloyd Wright (the architect of the original Imperial Hotel here in Tokyo). Wright was well-known as a collector of Japanese prints, and spent huge amounts of money on them each time he came to Japan, back in the early part of the century. (He also included many fine surimono in his collection, and if the custodians of those archives will cooperate with my plans, we will be seeing some of those in these Surimono Albums later ...). The researchers came across a number of stored bundles, and when they were opened, they were found to contain carved woodblocks from the Edo period - the blocks for this very same series. It seems that Wright, out of curiosity perhaps, bought them from a dealer, and the blocks were thus saved from destruction in the great Kanto earthquake a few years later.

The researchers found that they were in quite good condition, and of course somebody came up with the idea of re-printing them to make a new edition of Hiroshige's prints. After many discussions, the blocks were sent back to Tokyo, where one of the modern print publishers made 200 copies of each of the prints. It is interesting to think about what to call these new prints. They can't really be called reproductions, because they were printed from the original blocks, but they aren't really originals, because Hiroshige has been dead for well over a hundred years ...

Anyway, my print is definitely a reproduction. It was quite interesting for me to work on this design, because it is the first time that I have used 'Hiroshige' colours. Normally, an apprentice learning to be a printer would make this sort of print very early on in his training, but in my case, because I was involved with my Shunsho series for so long, I had no opportunity at all to use these colours. The dark blue gradation that you see near the bottom of this print for example, is the pigment known as 'Prussian Blue', which was unknown in Japan during Shunsho's era. I have waited nearly twenty years for a chance to use it! The 'kusa iro' (deep green) is also very common in prints of this era, but I am using it for the first time

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I think I have learned more about printmaking in these first few months of work on the Surimono Album, than in many of the previous years. Although my 'method' of learning this craft certainly does seem quite mixed up and confused, there is one definite advantage for me - my work is always interesting! In a couple of days I will start work on the next print, and at the moment, I have no idea at all how I am going to do it. Both the carving and printing are going to be something I have never tried before. I hope that doesn't make you too nervous ...

July 1999

Summer Bamboo

I'm planning ten prints for this year's album, but it seems that my schedule has slipped a bit - this is the fifth print, and it's already August! Counting on my fingers I see that it's going to be a tight 'fit' at the end of the year. But I guess it won't matter if that final print of the set doesn't arrive by December - maybe it'll be a nice New Year image for January ...

This month's artist will perhaps not be so familiar; his name is **Tani Bun'ichi**, and he was the son of the more famous Tani Buncho, an Edo period painter. Buncho was very popular in his day, and well-known for being very versatile, working in many different styles. Bun'ichi was adopted into the family, and seems to have worked mostly in the Maruyama painting style. Unfortunately, he died young in 1818 (at only 32), and thus not much of his work is known to us. How did I come across this design? That's a little story ...

Although my work schedule doesn't allow too much 'free' time for travelling, I do get away occasionally for a day or two, and this past spring I went on an overnight trip to Oshino, near Lake Yamanaka. One of my 'Hyakunin Isshu' collectors lives there, and had recommended that I visit to see the fabulous view of Mount Fuji from her town. The view in the early morning was indeed wonderful, the spring snowcap against a clear blue sky, but the clouds rolled in soon, and we turned our attention to some of the local sights. One place that we visited was particularly interesting - a very old house in the neighbouring town of Fuji Yoshida belonging to a friend of a friend of hers. Parts of the house date from the Muromachi era, a very long time ago indeed; as we walked around the rooms, I felt that we were likely to fall through the floor at any time, the structure seemed so fragile. There were paintings, scrolls and other artworks scattered all through the building, but one that caught my attention immediately was a five-panel screen that Mr. Makita, the owner of the house, brought out to show us.

Four of the paintings were made in the summer of 1840 by Tani Buncho and three other painters during the course of a memorial get-together for Bun'ichi, one of whose own bamboo paintings, done 22 years earlier, was the fifth screen. I knew none of these details then, but was struck instantly by the Bun'ichi painting. As the others moved on through the house to look at other pictures, I sat and studied this one. And as I looked at it, I realized that here was a design that would make an interesting addition to my Surimono Album. I asked Makita-san if he would permit me to photograph the screen and then use the design for making a woodblock print. He agreed, and this print is the result ...

But getting permission was the easy part; transforming the sumi painting - with its infinite levels of gradation from thick black down to nearly invisible grey - into a woodblock print, has been quite an education for me. When I sit down at my workbench to start carving, it is usually quite clear where to start; with a design like last month's Hiroshige print for example, one always starts with the outlines. But here we have no outlines ... so where to start? How to divide the parts of the image between different blocks? How to mix the sumi for printing each block? Where to add gradations? There were so many questions ...

Whether I 'answered' them all satisfactorily or not I am not sure, but the finished print seems quite attractive, and I am happy with the way it turned out. I should mention as well that the original screen was of course quite large, and what you see here is just one small portion of it; making it into a fan print was my own idea ... Fan-shaped woodblock prints such as this were very common back in the old days, and people would buy them, cut them out, and paste them onto fans for summer use. I wonder how many of my Surimono collectors will do that with this print!

I hope you enjoy this 'Summer Bamboo', brought to you after being 'buried' for a century and a half ...

August 1999

Room with a View

Something a bit more colourful this time! Our print this month was designed in 1867 by **Shibata Zeshin**, and formed the frontispiece to the book *Kumanaki-kage*, which was a volume privately published by the Koga-ren group of *kyōka* poets in dedication to Kagetsu, the man who founded their group, on the occasion of the third anniversary of his death. What we are looking at in this print is, I assume, the second-floor room of one such poet (a rich man, obviously), with some of his books scattered on the tatami mats, and with the windows flung wide open to allow enjoyment of the sea view. A small pot for burning *o-ko* (fragrant incense) sits on a small table, and up on a high shelf resting on a sheaf of paper is a lacquered box containing his inkstone and writing brush, ready for the creation of more poems ... The scroll hanging in the tokonoma is a silhouette of Kagetsu himself, and is by Baigake Komei.

It is very interesting to think about the contrast between the wonderfully peaceful scene we see here, and the reality that must have surrounded it back in 1867 ... the year that the Edo government collapsed and the Meiji Emperor took power.

Although the men who printed the original version of this print nearly 150 years ago wouldn't have thought it was so difficult to make, my viewpoint is somewhat different! This is one of the most challenging prints I have ever made. In many ukiyo-e prints, the lines that delineate each colour area are in most cases around a millimetre or so in thickness, and this allows some leeway in registration when printing, as the colours overlap into those black lines. In this print though, many of the carved 'boundary' lines are as thin as a hair; the original consists of a double-page spread in the *e-hon* size, but I have reduced it to half-size, in order to fit in this album. This means that when printing, the registration must quite simply be perfect; there is no leeway at all - nowhere to 'hide'. And it must be perfect for **every** one of the printing impressions, 19 in all on this print ...

Making 200+ copies of a print with 19 impressions takes quite some time of course, and with the weather as hot and muggy as it has been this September, stopping the paper from becoming moldy is quite a challenge. I have written before about how I keep the paper on a shelf in my refrigerator those times when I am not actually working on it, and indeed this print has spent every night of the past couple of weeks in the fridge. But this month I had to take that process a step farther. Just a couple of days after the printing had started, a sudden chance came up to take a hiking trip to Mt. Hodaka. The weather was perfect, there was space available in a lodge up on the mountain, the hiking season would be over soon ... it was perhaps the last chance I would have for a long time. I very much wanted to go ... but the printing was already under way; even the refrigerator wouldn't stop the paper from becoming moldy over an extended period of time. The solution? I stacked the *washi* between sheets of damp newspaper, wrapped it all carefully in strong plastic bags, and put it in the freezer! I then headed for the mountains, and had a most enjoyable time up in the Alps.

When I got back late one evening a few days later, the first thing to do, even before unpacking my pack or looking in my mailbox, was to pull the package out of the freezer. It was a solid icy block, just like a stone. I set it aside to defrost slowly during the night, and then in the morning when it was time to work, I carefully unwrapped it to see what the paper condition was like. It was perfect - absolutely perfect. The paper was moist and soft, just right for printing. I got busy right away, my baren pressing the colours into the soft and pliant paper, and after another week or so of work, it was done.

When you look at this print now, I doubt very much that it will seem 'cold' to you, but I find it interesting to think back and remember the paper all wrapped up in the freezer - patiently waiting while I tramped up and down the mountains. I am quite sure that such an opportunity never came to the printers in the old days!

September 1999

Aka Tombo

Although you wouldn't have guessed it from looking at last month's print, which included a flower that blooms in early summer, I **am** generally trying to keep a seasonal structure to this year's Surimono Album. The 'autumn' image this month should get us back on track! The designer was the famous **Kitagawa Utamaro**, and the print is from the first of three illustrated volumes combining *kyōka* poetry and scenes from nature that he produced in the period from 1788 to 1790. Insects are the theme of the first book, sea-shells are featured in the second, and bird life in the third. These books are exceedingly rare, and of course a small and delicate book is a difficult thing to exhibit properly, so some of his finest work thus remains hidden from view and unknown to the general public.

You may think I exaggerate when I tell you that I think these books are probably the most beautiful objects ever created by the hand of man anywhere in the world, and anytime in history. If though, you yourself have had the experience of holding an early edition of one of them in your hand, to experience its incredible lightness and delicacy and the astonishingly fine carving and printing, then you will understand what I am talking about. These books are not the product of a single man's efforts, but encompass the accumulated expertise of many people - the designer, the carver, the printers, the papermaker, the block planer ... the list goes on and on. And because the publisher, the famous Tsutaya Juzaburo, had a special vision and told these men to 'pull out all the stops', the resulting books are a wonderful thing to behold.

The print you hold now, one single image cropped from one page of one book, is certainly not enough to transmit to you very much of the feeling of the original volumes, but at present it is all I am able to bring you. Perhaps one day - after another decade or so of training and practice - I will have the skill to attempt an entire reproduction of one of these amazing books ...

I particularly enjoyed making this print, as it gave me an opportunity to try a couple of printing techniques that were new to me. The background is embellished with scattered '*sunago*', and I am indebted to my friend Mr. Hisashi Komuro for teaching me how to make and apply this form of gold decoration, commonly found on papers for calligraphy, but not often seen on woodblock prints. The other 'special' technique is the use of '*ummo*', powdered mica, on the wings of the dragonfly. It really makes a beautiful effect; when I saw the first proof print I almost expected him to fly off the page, he looked so realistic!

I have mixed feelings about using too much of this sort of 'glittery' stuff; it can tend to make the print look 'cheap' I think. But many of the old surimono prints used powdered metals such as gold, silver, brass, or copper, and it seems that it is simply a matter of discretion - not too much, but just the right touch in the right place ...

Each insect in the original book is paired with a poem, and the one on this print is by Akera Kanko, a poet with a strong connection with Utamaro; his poems are also included in the two other nature books. Entitled 'Red Dragonfly' ('*Aka Tombo*') it is a love poem that seems to be drawing a comparison between the 'lovesick' writer, who, like the dragonfly without a voice, is unable to express his love. The original purchasers of the books in this series back in the mid-Edo era were of course connoisseurs of such poetry, and would see the words and images as being of equal importance. For us though, living in a different culture, one in which most of the subtle nuances and references in the poetry have faded away with the passing of time, the poem becomes simply a visual object, part of the overall image itself. So although Mr. Kanko would not perhaps see any purpose in my reproducing this print, I think that Utamaro might be happy to know that his design was being brought to life once more ...

October, 1999

Monkey and Crab

The gracious print that we have this month is thought to come to us from the brush of **Utagawa Toyohiro**. Although the illustrations of this print that I have seen do not have a signature, some copies are known to carry one of his seals, and the gentle mood is characteristic of his work. Toyohiro is not a name that immediately springs to mind when discussing the history of ukiyo-e, but he is one of those artists whose influence has spread far beyond the direct reach of his own brush; in 1811 he took into his studio - and became the mentor of - the 14-year old boy Tokutaro Ando, whom we now know by the name of Hiroshige ...

It had not originally been my intention to make this print immediately after the one of the dragonfly; I had wanted it to appear earlier in this year's set. But I had a bit of difficulty getting access to a clear copy for reproduction and had to rearrange things a bit, so we ended up with two 'animal' prints side by side. But that gives us a good excuse for comparing them, because they are quite different in an important way. The image of the dragonfly was drawn in quite a realistic manner. Indeed, looking through Utamaro's nature books, one sees all the creatures drawn with a degree of realism quite unknown in most ukiyo-e work. There is no question in my mind at all that he must have studied the real animals quite closely.

But look at this one! Where have you ever seen a monkey with a face like that? *Is it a monkey?* It almost looks like some kind of tree-sloth ... And the crab is just a bunch of quick brush strokes that basically only suggest that we are looking at a crab. And that of course, is the idea - Toyohiro is not 'drawing' a crab and monkey for us, he is simply using his brush to 'suggest' the idea of these two animals. We take the hint, and fill in the rest mentally by ourselves. The same technique is used all over this print: the tree, the reeds, the water ... nothing is shown directly, all is simply suggested.

I wonder how long it took him to do the original design? Almost certainly no more than a couple of minutes ... something I thought about a lot during the hours that I was chipping away at the wood trying to reproduce his 'simple' brush strokes!

I learned something interesting about this year's Surimono Album a couple of weeks ago when I had a visit from one of my ex-English students. This person and I know each other quite well and can speak between ourselves quite freely without fear of seeming too rude; she looked at the seven prints finished so far and said "These prints are all too quiet! Look at them all - *nothing* is happening! I'll fall asleep looking at them ..."

Looking through the set, I had to admit that she was right; these prints are indeed very quiet - you can't 'hear' anything at all when you look at any of them. This I guess, is due to a couple of things - my work reflects my very simple and quiet life here, and of course my character in general is on the quiet side; I have been living here in Hamura for nearly 14 years now, and how many times have I been out to a noisy '*izakaya*' for an evening's drinking? Only once ...

When I was planning the Surimono Albums, I decided right back at the beginning that I would be choosing prints that *I* liked. Hopefully I would choose wisely enough that others would appreciate the work too. It seems that in the case of this lady, I have failed. I am now at the stage of doing the preliminary selection of designs for next year's album (yes, I'm going to do it again next year - this is too much fun to stop now!), and I'll keep her comments in mind while looking over potential print subjects.

But don't expect to see a lot of dramatic changes - I don't think I'll be including violent Kuniyoshi ghost stories, for example. I can't change my character (I don't *want* to!). Future Surimono Albums will continue to be made up of basically quiet, refined images, ones that offer me interesting technical challenges, and ones that I hope will bring to both of us - you the collector, and I the craftsman - a sense of satisfaction and pleasure.

If you're still awake, that is!

November 1999

Two Women in a Boat

Well as you can see already, I have broken my 'rule' that all ten of the prints in this Surimono Album would be made by different artists - this one, just like the first print in the album, was designed by **Katsushika Hokusai**. Most of the western collectors of my work will be quite happy with this, as Hokusai is extremely popular with them, but I'm not so sure that all the Japanese collectors will feel the same way!

Why did I choose to include another Hokusai print? It's because of the design - it matches this season perfectly. I've got a notebook here *filled* with ideas and suggestions for designs to include in these albums, but have run into a bit of a problem with balancing the *seasonal* aspect of the images. Most of the surimono type prints that were made during the Edo era were issued at the New Year, so the imagery to a large extent is based on themes traditional at that time of year. I can't send you *those* designs in the summer or autumn! For this print that will reach you near the end of the year, I needed an image that would reflect this chilly season, and when I saw this one in my notebook, realized that it would 'fill the bill' just fine.

Once I started doing the carving though, I had second thoughts; I noticed that the tree in the background was an *ume*, a Japanese plum, which of course is yet another of those ubiquitous new year symbols. But looking more carefully at it, it seems that there aren't any buds on the branches, so perhaps this is a suitable scene for mid-winter after all.

Something else important to mention about this print, is that what you are looking at is a true reproduction of Hokusai's original design. As you must realize by now, many of the prints I am including in these albums are adaptations, not perfect reproductions. For example, the Sukenobu print was originally black and white, but I added colours; the fan print I made in the summer was an adaptation of a brush painting, and so on. But this print was originally issued in just the same form as you see here. Because it carries no poetry, no title, and no other indications of why it might have been made, I am not able to tell you much about its history. It's not even signed by Hokusai, and to be more accurate, I should be labelling it 'Hokusai school', because it is quite possible that it was designed by one of his pupils. That is quite unlikely I think though, because we have many examples of prints from other workers in his 'studio', but very few of them, if any, are as well executed as this design.

I have learned that there is a very big difference between working on a reproduction of a print and an adaptation. In the case of the adaptation I of course have much more freedom to use different colours, etc., so when I am preparing the pigments, if a tone or shade turns up in my pigment bowl that I hadn't planned, but which seems attractive, then I am free to use it. But when making a reproduction, I have no such freedom. The colours and tones were decided two hundred years ago, and it is my job as a printer to use my basic pigment collection to re-create that same colour. This is not an easy job, in part because the materials I have available to me today are so different from those of the Edo era, but also because it is simply difficult under the best of circumstances. But no man can call himself a *suri-shi* unless he has that ability - to look at the sample that is set before him, and then to use his tools and materials to match it.

I do have to admit though, that this isn't an absolutely authentic reproduction. The original that I used for a guide to make this print is a print in the possession of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, England (who were extremely cooperative, and provided for me a large scale photographic enlargement of the print). Unfortunately though, their print is not in perfect condition; at one place the paper has become abraded, and the lines of the design have been destroyed. When I drew my *hanshita* it was necessary for me to fill in those missing lines, and I had to guess where Hokusai's brush may have moved across the paper.

I'm not going to tell you which particular part of the print this was. Maybe you can have fun looking at it, and trying to decide which parts were drawn by Hokusai and which little piece was drawn by David!

Mandarin Ducks

Here we are at last with the final print in this first Surimono Album. This design, created just over two hundred years ago by **Isoda Koryusai**, is one that I selected for this album a long time ago - nearly two years ago in fact - and I have been looking forward to making it all during that time. The poem on the print can perhaps be paraphrased as something like: *'Our warm love will be all the blanket that we need ...'* Mandarin ducks are an old Japanese symbol for a happy marriage, as they were thought to mate for life. Modern research though, has taught us that the real facts of duck 'togetherness' are somewhat different, so it seems that we may have to find a new symbol to replace them! At the moment, I can't quite think of anything suitable ...

Those of you who can read Japanese may notice something a little bit strange about the signature on the print - it reads 'Koryu'. Is this a mistake? Did the carver 'forget' one character of the designer's name, or did Koryusai sometimes sign his name this way? I have no idea. Perhaps though ... he did it on purpose! Perhaps he knew what I was going to do with this print two hundred years later, and didn't want his name associated with it!

I should explain what I mean ... The print you see here is not the print that was originally published from his design. Just as I did with many of the Hyakunin Isshu prints I made, I have added a number of colours that were not in the original. The key block - the block containing the lines drawn by Koryusai's brush - is identical to the original, but while the original has only three additional colour impressions, I have used twenty. In fact, the overall style of this print has been transformed into something similar to those prints designed in the first half of the 20th century which we know as 'shin-hanga'. Whether or not Koryusai would approve of this sort of thing is of course a matter of complete speculation, but I'm not overly concerned with that. I simply wanted to bring this design to life, in a way that the printers of his day were yet unable to do ...

The question of how many colours to use for any particular print is something that touches on two fields: art and economics. In the case of a print like this, there seems to be no question that the design is improved by the addition of these extra colours - mandarin ducks are not 'two tone', but are multi-coloured creatures. Koryusai of course knew this when he created his design. Why then, was the original print not made with 20 impressions? The answer is simply - 'money'. Each additional colour impression means extra money for a woodblock, extra money for the carver, and of course payment for the extra time it takes the printer to print all those colours. And it certainly does take time! I made 200+ copies of this print; 20 colours times 200 sheets means that I made 4000 impressions - each and every one of which had to be perfectly registered and smoothly printed. I can certainly understand the feelings of the original publisher two hundred years ago, who might perhaps have said "Twenty colours? You must be joking!"

If I too, had to hire carvers and printers to do the work for me, there is no way that these Surimono Albums could come into existence. The price for each print would be so high that nobody would ever subscribe to the series, and the project would thus never have been feasible. But of course, I'm quite happy doing those three jobs myself - publisher, carver and printer. It's that *other* job - designer - that I can't handle. Luckily for us though, the Japanese printmaking traditions allow this sort of collaboration.

So there you have it - ten prints for the album. Coming up - ten more, as the second of these Surimono Albums will get under way next month. I hope you will join me!!

January, 2000

Afterword ...

A short while ago, I received an interesting letter from one of the collectors of this year's album - somebody living in America. He read my previous notes about how I feel that these prints are most attractive when seen in a Japanese room, on a low table in front of a shoji screen, but he felt of course a bit frustrated. In his American home, there is no Japanese room ... no shoji screens. He wasn't about to give up though; in his letter he told me how he had been looking at the prints by candlelight, setting a candle at the far side of the table and looking through the album in this soft light. He reported to me how beautiful the prints looked when viewed this way.

Of course I was happy to hear that he was enjoying the prints, but from my point of view I have mixed feelings about this. A beautiful woman when seen by candlelight can seem ravishingly beautiful, but as many less 'blessed' women discovered a long time ago, candlelight can indeed make many things look more attractive ... For me as a printmaker this is a dangerous situation! If I were to take one of my test prints and study it by candlelight it would without question look beautiful - even though I may have balanced some of the colours poorly, even though I may have printed with weak pressure on the baren, even though I may have been careless in other ways. Seen by candlelight it will still look beautiful. So although you as a collector can indeed enjoy your prints in such a way, I as the printer have to avoid it. During those times when I am *working* on the prints, I have to look at them as coldly and clinically as possible - in a harsh light which will show as many defects as possible, not hide them.

So when I am checking, sealing and signing the prints in preparation for sending them out to you, I do it under such an unforgiving light. And each and every month I have pretty much the same feeling ... I have failed again. Places on the print where my knife moved roughly, places where my baren failed to press the pigment deeply enough into the washi - those places jump out to my eye. I don't see the beauty ... I see only where I have failed.

I'm not trying to tell you a sad story here; for me to see the prints this way is essential, as it is only by inspecting the problems that I will be able to move forward and improve. But this David is not only a print maker, he is a print collector too! I send out most of the surimono prints, but I do keep a set for myself, and sometimes I too, just like all of you, take the album off the shelf, open it up, and *enjoy* looking at the prints. I try to turn off the 'critical eye' and just enjoy them, and sometimes I am successful ... sometimes ...

And in those moments, when I am peacefully looking over the print collection, I feel a great sense of satisfaction in what I have accomplished. I know that here in Japan it is considered not so 'polite' to speak well of one's own work, but I have to say that I think this little album is a wonderful treasure. I love looking in old bookshops for interesting books and prints, and cannot help but think of a time in the far off future when some young man is digging through a box of dusty books and finds one of these albums. How intense his pleasure will be when he looks through it and sees what he has found! How I myself would love to find such a thing!

Thank you very much for supporting my work during this past year - for subscribing 'sight-unseen' to this album, not having any idea what sort of prints I would be sending you. I hope you have enjoyed the experience as much as I have.

David Bull
January 2000