

摺物

Surimono Album #2

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

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Spring Fuji

A woodblock print purist who looked through last year's first Surimono Album might have questioned my use of the term 'surimono' for those prints. Out of the ten prints, only *two* of them were originally of the surimono genre; the others were taken from book illustrations or single sheet commercial prints. But remember, I am making my own definition of 'surimono' ... 'beautiful, small-scale, privately published woodblock prints'. This year though, I do intend to include more reproductions of original surimono, and I'm starting right away - this one, a view of Fuji-san in early spring, is a surimono designed in the early 1830's by **Totoya Hokkei**.

Japanese viewers will probably be able to guess - when they see the kanji characters that make up his name - that Hokkei was one of the pupils of Katsushika Hokusai. Because he designed mostly surimono and illustrated books, rather than more famous actor and courtesan prints, his name is almost completely unknown to most people today. A reference book that I have here though, describes him as '*an artist contributing to more than a hundred publications and designing almost a thousand surimono.*' A thousand surimono! I think you will be seeing more of Hokkei in future Surimono Albums ...

I do not own a copy of the original version of this print, but do have a Meiji-era version of it, and it is that print that I used as a guide to make this reproduction. The poem, which is by a gentleman called Ryueko Itonaga, plays on the auspicious feelings felt when seeing the snow covered mountain top rising above the clouds.

As you have noticed already I'm sure, there are some special 'colours' used on this print; in two places I have used powdered metals instead of 'normal' pigments. Most of the surimono made back in the Edo era were commissioned privately, for non-commercial distribution. The people who commissioned the prints were not in the slightest bit interested in 'balancing the books' and were willing to spend quite a bit of money in order to have the prints look as beautiful as possible. It was thus quite common for prints to be made with special, and more expensive, materials like the ones you see here. For quite some time I have been interested in learning how to use powdered metals on the prints, and this one gave me the chance to work out how it was done. The 'river of clouds' that curls around the base of Fuji-san is printed with powdered bronze, and the silvery 'snow' on the mountain top is printed with '*suzu no fun*'.

I should mention that although this is a reproduction, there is one very large difference between the Meiji print and the one you are now looking at. Temple bells are made of a similar bronze to the one I used here, but have you ever seen a temple bell bright and shiny like this? I think not ... As the years go by, the bronze powder on this print will slowly oxidize and develop a darker greenish-tinged patina. Is this something you should worry about? From my point of view - not at all. That Meiji print is quite a beautiful object - not only has the bronze oxidized almost completely, but the paper too has developed a warmer tone from the natural aging process. It is much more pleasant to look at than my print. But when it was new, it must have looked something pretty much like mine, bright and very 'clean'.

This is always a quandary for those of us who make reproductions of older prints - whether to make our prints look like the original when it was new, or like the original *after* many years of aging. But I don't think that you collectors would be so happy if I artificially oxidized the metals, and dipped the print in tea to darken the paper. And besides, if I artificially aged the print now, then what would it look like after a hundred years had *really* gone by? Not so beautiful I think ... So perhaps it's better just to make the prints in the same way that the craftsmen did in the old days, and then to sit back and let time take its course. You yourself can enjoy the new and clean print, and your grandchildren can enjoy the 'aged' version ...

I am looking forward to a very interesting year of printmaking, and will do my best to make prints that you will find both interesting and attractive. Thank you very much for joining this project!

March 2000

Yoshiwara Courtesan

It has been more than eleven years now since I started making prints in sets of ten each year, and every one of those sets has a *bijin-ga* ('beautiful woman picture') as the second print. This seems to have become a tradition for me, and as most of the collectors seem to enjoy this kind of design very much, I suppose it's one that I will continue! The image you see here is one leaf taken from the book *Seiro Bijin Awase Sugata Kagami* (Collected Beauties of the Green Houses). This famous book was published in 1776, and was a joint production of two Edo publishers and two well-known artists: Katsukawa Shunsho and **Kitao Shigemasa** (the page I have reproduced is one of those designed by Shigemasa). The book is a kind of guide to the Yoshiwara district, with each double page layout depicting a scene at one particular 'house', and featuring some of the women who worked there.

I have rather mixed feelings about including such a print in my Surimono Album series. It is of course, just a piece of paper with an attractive image on it, so perhaps nothing more needs to be said, but I can't help thinking about just what it is that we are looking at here - basically an advertisement for a house of prostitution and one of the women there (in the original book, the names of the houses and the names of the women are featured prominently). Whether or not the brothels paid the publisher to be included in the book I have no idea, but one suspects their business certainly wouldn't have been hurt by such exposure!

Are you upset because I am sending you such an 'advertisement' this month? If I made a print of one of the girls currently working in a red-light district near my home, you would probably not feel particularly comfortable with it, but does the age of this design (from more than two hundred years ago) make it acceptable? Perhaps this is a question I shouldn't ask - because if I were to disqualify myself from making prints related to life in the Yoshiwara, there wouldn't be much remaining for me in the world of ukiyo-e!

I was discussing this with one of the collectors who visited my workroom recently, and she explained that the Yoshiwara was one of the main places in Edo society where men of culture could meet and enjoy their discussions - that to think of the Yoshiwara wasn't simply to think of sex. In other words, she pointed out that it wasn't such a 'bad' place, and it was no matter of shame for a man to be going there. It is never a good idea to judge behaviour of one era by the standards of another; and I am certainly not going to do so now ... not after more than two hundred years have passed. And it would certainly be meaningless to think of the young woman depicted in this print as a 'bad woman' - she probably had very little control over her situation; it seems that most of those women were sold into that kind of life by their family.

Speaking of Yoshiwara ukiyo-e ... the image I have presented here for you is certainly not problematic, but a great many other images dealing with Yoshiwara 'activities' are rather more 'dangerous' ... I have read estimates in research books indicating that somewhat more than 50% of all ukiyo-e books and prints produced in the Edo-era were pornographic. Most of these are raw and ugly, and bring no pleasure in the viewing, but a small percentage of them are indeed images of astonishing beauty and excitement. But I think I can guess the reaction of many of you collectors if I started to include such prints in these Surimono Albums, so don't worry ... you don't have to be afraid of opening your package every month - I promise only to choose designs in which everybody keeps their clothes on!

April 2000

Peony and Sparrow

For our third print of the year, we have another nature print from the prolific **Isoda Koryusai**. I say 'another', because it was just a few months ago, at the end of my first Surimono Album, that I reproduced one of his designs ... The original of this one was made somewhere around the end of the Meiwa period (about 1770). It is part of a set of eight prints, and for those of you who aren't too familiar with ancient Chinese poetry, there are some things to explain about it ...

The main inscription reads '*mitate somoku hakkei*' (Parody of Eight Famous Views with Flowers and Trees), and the viewers back in the Edo era would thus instantly have recognized that this print was based on a literary allusion. '*Mitate*' means 'parody', and what is being parodied here is a set of eight classical Chinese poems. The poems, which were very familiar to educated people of that era, referred to eight famous places in China - each place associated with a poetic image: rain by night, an autumn moon, the sound of a temple bell in the evening, etc. etc. One of the eight poems described evening snow on a famous mountain, and it is that one that provided the inspiration for this particular design. I'm certain that Koryusai didn't intend the image to be taken literally, and didn't try to depict an actual mountain in his design - but the broad white expanse of the peony blossoms is the 'key' to the literary puzzle. And just in case the viewer doesn't 'get it' at first glance, the sub-title reads '*shiro botan bosetsu*' (White Peony as Evening Snow).

At the time that I was gathering together the designs for this year's Surimono Album, this one attracted my attention for a couple of reasons. Of course, I'm a pushover for this sort of '*karazuri*' (empty printing), and was immediately attracted by that aspect of the print, but there was something else here that drew my attention. This is a very early use of the technique we now know as the '*nezumi-ban*' (grey block). Somebody involved with the production of this print, perhaps the artist, perhaps a carver or printer, had the idea of using an extra colour block to vary the tone of some of the colours. Some of the green areas appear in a deeper tone, and these are areas that are over-printed with a light grey, as is part of the stone in the foreground.

This idea of using a 'tone block' to add colour to a print was very common in western printing at the time. There, it went under the name of '*chiaroscuro*' (light-shade). Such prints pre-date the introduction of colour printing in Japan by many years, and it is highly probable that Japanese designers were exposed to these European colour prints, and from them (and other Chinese examples) got the idea for making prints in colour.

But the Edo-era printmakers, even though the initial inspiration for printing with colours may have come from the foreign prints they saw, chose to use colour in a different way. The Japanese designers rejected the idea of modulating colour with tone blocks as we see here, and chose to stay with 'flat' tones. Even with long searching through many of my reference books, I can find very few other examples of Edo period *nezumi-ban*. This technique of using such blocks to vary the tone of multiple colours in the print was not to become widely used until the twentieth century, when many of the prints known as *shin-hanga*, by such designers as Kawase Hasui and Hiroshi Yoshida, used multiple grey-blocks to create wonderful illusions of depth.

The story of how Japanese ukiyo-e prints heavily influenced western art is widely known, but what is not so widely understood is just how much those ukiyo-e works were themselves influenced by the west ... The influences went 'round and 'round, back and forth from country to country, with each culture learning from the others and adding their own original features.

So perhaps it's really not so strange after all, for an Englishman to be sitting here in a workroom in Tokyo in the year 2000, printing a *nezumi-ban* on a print by Koryusai ...

May, 2000

Soshi the Philosopher

I went 'back to the books' again for this month's print - what you are seeing is a double-page spread taken from the book '*Hokusai Shashin Gafu*' by **Katsushika Hokusai**. This book, first published in 1814, is an interesting puzzle for me - it is a collection of 15 images which appear with no accompanying text, and there seems to be no theme to the book; the illustrations cover a range of landscape, religious icon, flora and fauna, and 'snapshot' scenes of people caught in some activity. I have no idea at all how such a book was received back when it was published, or to whom it was aimed. There is nothing in our modern bookshops even remotely similar to this sort of thing - a selection of diverse images with no common thread, and no accompanying explanation. It doesn't seem to have been intended as a painting manual, and one can only assume that it was purchased by people who simply wanted to enjoy the prints ... maybe actually not so different from this Surimono Album!

At first glance, I wasn't quite sure what this particular image was supposed to represent, but a bit of reflection leads one to think of the Chinese philosopher Sôshi. Dreaming of butterflies one day, he awoke to wonder if he was a butterfly dreaming about being a man dreaming about butterflies ... but you know the story, I'm sure! What is *not* so easy for me to understand though, is just what that object in the background is ... a small container of some kind with a feather resting on the top of it. If anybody can solve this mystery for me, I would appreciate hearing from you!

There is something else a bit interesting about this print that I should tell you; it was 'Made in Canada' - or at least mostly so. I carved the key block here in Japan in early June, and then left for a three-week trip to Canada, taking with me the block, a stack of blank printing paper, and a collection of tools. The trip was a 'working vacation', with the first half spent relaxing and sightseeing, and the rest of the time as 'printer in residence' at a woodblock printmaking workshop. I carved the colour blocks first and then did the printing during the course of the workshop. The students were quite busy with their own printmaking projects, but of course they came over to my corner now and then to watch the progress of my work. For most of them this was their first opportunity to see a professional printer at work, reminding me of that time nearly twenty years ago when it had been *I* who had been desperate for a chance to see 'how it was done'.

For the students at this workshop, having the chance to actually see a print coming to life in front of them was a wonderful opportunity - one worth years of trial and error experimentation. I have any number of chances here in Japan to see experienced workers, but those students overseas can't possibly come here, so this time, Japan went to them! They watched, talked, and made notes, and I am sure that there will be an improvement in their prints - not copies of old prints like I am making, but their own new and interesting designs.

By the end of the week my own printing was finished, and I carefully dried the sheets and wrapped them for the return trip to Japan. So this new print has already had quite a travelling experience - started here in Japan, finished up in Canada, and then returned to Japan for packing before being shipped out to the collectors (including many back overseas!).

And now I sit here at my computer writing this little story and wondering if I am really here in Japan again, or am still asleep over in Canada dreaming about being back in Japan!

June 2000

Evening Rain at Eitai Bridge

Will it become a custom for me to put a fan print into every year's Surimono Album? I'm not sure what to say about future albums, but when I was planning this current set and came across this image, I knew instantly it had to be included! It is a design by **Ando Hiroshige**, and represents a famous place in old Edo - the Eitai-bashi, one of the large bridges spanning the Sumida River.

We know the exact date that Hiroshige sketched this scene - February 25, 1852. Some of his travel diaries have been preserved, and in one of them we can read about a boat journey he took to Kisarazu. He had left Edo-bashi in the early evening of that day, but as they neared the mouth of the river, ready to head out across Tokyo Bay, their boat was becalmed at Eitai-bashi, and they spent a rainy night there waiting for wind, which picked up in the morning allowing them to continue their journey (they arrived in Kisarazu in the late afternoon.) Presumably Hiroshige used the delay that evening to make some sketches, one of which he used to create this print some time later, when the publisher Dansendo requested a scene for a fan

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We can see a number of boats moored on the seaward side of the bridge. As boats with tall masts were not able to pass under the bridge, it was at Eitai-bashi that their merchandise had to be transferred to small boats of the type we see being poled down the river on the right hand side of the scene. These 'true-to-life' touches make me wonder if the rest of the picture is also quite realistic. Did Hiroshige sketch these three small boats just as they passed in front of him as he sat looking out over the river, or are they imaginary, made up of images he knew from his familiarity with Edo scenery? We have no way to tell, but I for one would like to believe that the 'camera' of his eye recorded a real scene he saw on the river that night; that those people we see are real men, looking forward to finishing their day's work and getting home out of the rain and into a hot bath. They of course must have had no idea that as they passed in front of the becalmed boat, they had been 'captured' by Hiroshige's brush, and 150 years in the future their picture would be reproduced and sent around the world - travelling far greater distances than they could ever dream of ...

I have looked forward for a long time to making a Hiroshige 'rain' print; his most attractive prints are those in which there is an atmosphere - mist, rain, or snow. The introduction of mood into a woodblock print was something that had been inconceivable to the designers who came before him, and images like the one we have here must have made a revolutionary impact on the viewers at the time. Purists consider this sort of print the 'beginning of the end' of ukiyo-e, the start of a gradual slide towards a realism inherently unsuitable to the essentially flat woodblock print medium. But I'll leave such considerations to the scholars; for me there is still plenty of pleasure to be found in these prints, both in the looking and in the making.

This is the fifth print in this year's album, and I see that when I sent out the corresponding print last year I wrote "*... this is the fifth print, and it's already August! ... it's going to be a tight 'fit' at the end of the year.*" And indeed it was; the tenth print wasn't finished until January. As the five prints I am planning for the rest of this year's set are in no way less complex and involved than the first five, it looks as though the same thing may happen this year!

August 2000

Young Sparrows

Although the woodblock prints of the Edo and Meiji eras all had their origins in brush drawings, the prints can be divided into two categories. Most common were those in which the original drawing was done with the intention of serving as a *hanshita* (block-cutter's copy) for the print-making process. The designer knew as he was creating the image that his strokes would be 'translated' into carved lines, and he presumably kept this in mind as he worked. The great bulk of ukiyo-e prints were made this way.

The second category of prints were reproductions of pre-existing paintings. The designers of these had not been thinking of a print when they worked, and so were not concerned with how well their strokes would translate into printed form. When such designs were later used to make prints, the carvers were faced with much greater challenges.

An analogy with classical music will perhaps serve to illustrate the difference between the two styles. It is common for pieces of music that were originally written for the piano to later be arranged for orchestra. The basic music remains the same, but the different form of expression, with a more varied range of 'tone colours', gives the composition a whole new life. And indeed, in many famous cases in the world of music, such arrangements have become more well-known than the original versions.

The print you are looking at this month is one such 'arrangement'. The original brush painting was done by **Shibata Zeshin**, and the design was later published in this print form in the collection known as *Shibata Zeshin Gafu*, probably sometime in the 1880's. (I have of course reproduced the print version - I have never seen the original painting.) Whether or not the print version is 'better' than the original painting is I think a meaningless question. Although during the carving and printing I worked to try and capture the immediacy and haphazard nature of the brush strokes, it is not a slavish imitation. I think it stands on its own very well ... and besides, of a painting, there can be only *one* copy, but once it becomes a print, *many* people can enjoy the design ...

Zeshin is famous for arranging his designs on the paper in novel ways; he may bunch the design all into one corner and leave the rest of the paper blank, he may omit important design elements completely, or he may distort or 'lop off' parts of the image, as he has done here, leaving us somewhat confused at first as to just what it is we are looking at. But after a moment or two, our eyes manage to sort it out, and we recognize the pattern of traditional roof tiles, with a bamboo rain gutter hanging underneath, and a sparrows' nest tucked in between the two ...

I was able to make this reproduction through the courtesy of the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii, who very kindly supplied me with a colour transparency of the print in their collection. Over the past couple of years I have not been finding it easy to obtain such cooperation from various institutions with print collections, and am thus particularly grateful for their support. I hope in future albums to be able to make more prints from originals in the Academy; I feel a bit of a 'connection' to the collection there. The great bulk of their print collection was presented to them by the late American author James Michener, and he was a sort of 'intellectual patron' of my Hyakunin Isshu print series, encouraging me and offering assistance in the early days of the work. Although the Zeshin prints in the Honolulu collection are not part of his bequest, I have no doubt that he would agree with their decision to allow my use of the designs. I hope that as time goes by I will be able to convince more museum curators to grant me similar access to their collections, as I think that my work provides a wonderful way for such preserved material to be brought out 'into the light' once more ...

September 2000

Warrior and Tiger

Those of you who were collectors of my first Surimono Album last year may remember that I wrote in one of these little stories about the prints being mostly very 'quiet'. At that time I mentioned that I might look for some designs that were a bit more lively and exciting. Well, how about this one? When I first saw this print, a design by **Yashima Gakutei**, I assumed that it was a scene from a kabuki drama, but I was incorrect; this story is older than that - it is an episode from the old set of tales known as the *Uji Shui Monogatari* - the Tales of Uji. The particular story concerns a warrior of old who is involved in a violent incident with his master and flees to Korea to escape punishment. While there, he distinguishes himself by killing a tiger that has been ravaging local villages, and this act of bravery serves to exonerate him for his previous misdeed when he later returns to Japan.

I doubt that Gakutei ever saw a tiger in the flesh. When I first saw this print I thought that there might actually be two of them here, one in front, and another one behind the tree. But the exaggeration of the animal's shape is just artistic licence I suppose.

Gakutei made a series of prints from the Tales of Uji, and in future Surimono Albums I will be including more of them; I very much like how they imitate the appearance of mounting a print and a poem 'card' side by side on an album sheet with an embossed design (blossoms and the Bunbunsha poetry group circular 'mark' made up of the character for 'bun' repeated).

Last month I explained to you that the design for the print came from a collection over in America, and this month too I have a similar story. The original print that I have reproduced is in the collection of the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas. The curators there kindly allowed me permission to make this reproduction, and provided me with a color slide of the print for my work. I also had access to a published book illustration of that same copy of the print, and interestingly enough, the colours on the two photographs were quite different in tone, as they had apparently been taken under differing lighting conditions. Working like this from small photographs is far from the best situation for making a reproduction; details of fine Edo-era surimono simply cannot be 'captured' in a photograph, and I am very much handicapped by not being able to have the originals beside me as I work. But this seems unavoidable, as it simply isn't possible to travel every month and do my work sitting in museum rooms and studying the original at every stage. Perhaps one day, if I can improve my skills enough, it will be the other way around - instead of me having to 'beg' the museums and collectors of the original prints to let me have a 'peek' at them, it will be *they* who bring their prints to me to have them included in my Albums ... Dream on ...

This is without question the most technically advanced print I have yet made. I inlaid boxwood inserts at two places in the keyblock, so that the warrior's face and the calligraphy of the poetry would be on this hard wood, far denser than cherrywood and thus allowing finer lines to be carved. There are more blocks than I have ever used before, the registration is critical in absolutely every area of the design, and the metal powder that you see on the clothing and other places on the print is far more difficult and time-consuming to print than 'normal' colour. But of course I think that the end result is well worth it ...

I hope you enjoy it too, although I have to ask that you please don't expect to find this sort of thing *every* month when you open your package! (And in fact next month's print will be much more restrained ... we will be back to the 'quiet life' for a while ...)

October, 2000

The Taoist Immortal, Wa-Sen

As I hinted last month, this print is a 'quiet' one. We have moved back to a point in time at least half a century before multi-colour printmaking became established in Japan. The print is a page from a book published in 1689, with illustrations by the famous **Hishikawa Moronobu**. It is a collection about the lives of 'Taoist Immortals', so I presume that we are looking at a scene from China or perhaps Korea.

Each story is complete on one page; this one can be translated: *"The woman known as Wa-sen, when younger put off marriage and studied to follow the path of Tao. Even when immersed in water she was able to stay dry; when in a very cold place she needed no more than the thinnest of clothing and her face did not change colour; and when she struck the rocks with her stick, a door opened wide and she entered to find gold and silver treasure."* There is also a comment to the effect that 'finally, she could ascend to heaven', but it is not clear if this was something that happened after she died, or was just the last stage of her training ...

Carving the calligraphy on this page was a most pleasant few day's work for me. I perhaps shouldn't admit that it took that long, because I am sure that the carvers of old would have finished it much more quickly. When I see some of the old books, especially ones without illustrations - containing just page after page of tiny squiggly calligraphy, I marvel at their endurance. How could they maintain their interest in carving so much repetitive uninteresting material? But of course, 'interest' was not a factor - it was simply their job. For me, although I would rebel at the idea of carving hundreds of pages of text, to do a single page is certainly no burden, and I quite enjoyed it. Unlike the calligraphy on last month's print by Gakutei, which was quite angular, this brushwork is beautifully cursive and was a pleasure to carve.

I learned something quite important during the process of working on this print, and have had to change some of the conceptions I held about the old craftsmen. I had always thought of this early pre-colour work as being quite unsophisticated, and had felt that much of this came from a lack of skill on the part of the carvers, who as a group had not yet developed the refinements of their craft to the level that we see in later prints. Overall that is true, and over the span from early Edo up to late Meiji we do see a progression in carving skills, but what I learned was that this work of Moronobu's time - a period we consider to be the 'roots' of ukiyo-e - is in no way as clumsy or rough as I had thought.

I had looked at things like the roughly shaped small dishes and pots on the table in this print, and had thought "That is so ungraceful - couldn't they do better than that?" But when I came to the calligraphy, with its incredibly small twists and turns, I realized that the craftsmen of this early period were completely capable of carving whatever they wanted to carve. It is beautifully done. Any lack of sophistication in the image itself will have to be laid at the feet of the artist, I think!

These things are all part of my ongoing 'lessons' ... which will continue next month in quite a different vein, as we jump ahead more than 250 years to the middle of the 20th century, and yet *another* type of print that I have never made before ...

December, 2000

Traditional Sailboat

This is the first time in these Surimono Albums that I have included a print from the 20th century. This image was created by **Hiroshi Yoshida**, and the print is from his book *Japanese Woodblock Printmaking*, published in Tokyo - in English - in 1939. I am able to include it here because Mr. Yoshida's copyright has now expired; he passed away in the spring of 1950, so his life work fell into the public domain just a couple of weeks ago, on the last day of 2000.

When I make reproductions of Edo-era prints, I never have any feeling that I am 'stealing' another man's work. After hundreds of years have passed, nobody 'owns' an image; it becomes part of our common cultural heritage. But with an image from the recent past like this one, even though I am *legally* permitted to make this reproduction, I must confess to a certain feeling that I am trespassing in a place where I shouldn't be. So I have made one change to the design - I have omitted his carved signature and seal; to reproduce those would have felt improper to me. (I should also mention that in order to avoid any possible charge of forgery, I have made my print at a slightly increased size from the original. There can thus be no doubt that it is not an 'original' Yoshida.)

I owe quite a debt to Mr. Yoshida and his family. He had a very strong desire to see that the Japanese printmaking technique would be not only preserved, but spread around the world. In his book he says "... *to realize my long-cherished desire to let this peculiarly Japanese art become better known in the West.*" and "... *through the medium of this book, make (my) experience and knowledge available to all who may care to profit by it.*" And he certainly did; the book is an absolute treasure-house of information on printmaking. He kept no 'secrets', and one turns the pages in wonder at the amount of information that is crammed into the book. But who did he write it for? Did he expect people around the world to pick up tools and start to make woodblock prints? His book did not actually make much of an impact on printmaking in other countries; his timing was most unfortunate ... 1939 and the years following it were not the best of times for Japan/Western relations. But after the war Mr. Yoshida's son Toshi took up the same mission - spreading knowledge of Japanese printmaking around the world. He opened the 'Yoshida Studio' - a facility to which anybody could come and learn about printmaking. I myself was a beneficiary of their teachings, spending a few months in the fall of 1986 working in the studio. I *should* have stayed much longer, as I could have learned a great deal from Komatsu-san, the senior printer working there, but I rather stupidly felt that I wanted to 'go it alone'.

So given this background, I am in no way worried that the late Mr. Yoshida would feel that I am 'stealing' his design. I think that even though he passed away before I was born, I am perhaps one of his 'star' students, for I too am carrying on the same work that he pursued so intensely - spreading knowledge of this craft around the world. I have sponsored the publication of his book on the internet, where it is freely available for anyone to read, and it has been 'downloaded' by many hundreds of people who are studying the information in it.

And there is one more thing that I must add to this tale ... although this print is very different in construction from the ukiyo-e work with which I am most familiar, I had a very good guide to 'hold my hand' through the work. Mr. Yoshida went to the great trouble and enormous expense of including in his book hand-printed progressive proofs of every stage in the process of making this print. 'All' I had to do was follow the step-by-step instructions!

Thank you very much to Mr. Yoshida, his son Toshi, and to his grandson Tsukasa, who now carries on the family printmaking tradition. To their openness and willingness to share their knowledge, many people around the world owe a great deal. I am pleased to be able to play a small part in helping their work reach a wider audience.

January, 2001

Woman with Umbrella

Our year of back-and-forth 'time travel' ends in the mid-Meiji period, with this print from **Tomioka Eisen**. It is of the type known as 'kuchi-e' (literally: 'mouth picture') - prints which were produced to be inserts in magazines. This was the period when presses were taking over the commercial printing business in Japan, replacing the labour-intensive traditional methods, and making it possible for periodicals to enjoy wide circulation. One such magazine was the 'Bungei Kurabu', and our print was an insert to one of the monthly issues. I do not know whether it was intended to represent a particular scene from one of the stories in the magazine, or was just a 'generic' design, but I found it quite attractive when I first saw it some years ago, and have been waiting since then for a chance to make my reproduction.

But what an incredible thing that was - for a publisher to include a print like this as a 'freebie' with each copy of a monthly magazine! And this is no 'knock-off' job; although the print seems quite simple in appearance, there are nearly 20 printing impressions! Many printers must have worked together in teams in order to produce the tens of thousands of copies that were needed each month. Whenever I speak to some of the older printers about the production of Meiji-era kuchi-e, they always shake their heads ... "Those guys could print! If you had a chance to watch one of them, you wouldn't believe what you were seeing - just a blur of motion ... and all day long, hundreds of sheets at a time ..."

Well, that they must have been fast I certainly can believe, but what is more surprising to me is the level of quality they maintained even when working at such high production speeds. The registration is usually perfect, and the impressions are smooth and even. I don't know if they were well paid for their work or not, but the fact that the prints were tossed aside so easily would tend to make us suspect that they were produced very cheaply. And tossed aside they were ... and are. I'm not quite sure if I should tell you this next part ... because I know a 'secret', and the fewer people I tell, the better it is for me!

We have to go back in time a bit further, to the end of Edo and the opening up of Japan to the world - to the days of the Black Ships. Foreigners coming into 'exotic' Japan found many things of interest here of course, and among them were the ukiyo-e prints. They bought up as many as they could carry home, and the Japanese of the day were quite happy to sell them, as they were considered to be of little value. As a consequence of this, museums around the world are now stuffed with vast collections of those old prints, and very little good material remains here in its country of origin. Now we've all heard about this, and perhaps we now say to ourselves, "Oh, if only I could go back in time, and pick up some of those Sharaku or Utamaro masterpieces for just a couple of dollars!"

But you *can*! That's the secret I mentioned! You don't need to go 'back in time' ... you are already there! We are now going through *exactly the same situation* with these kuchi-e prints that we did with ukiyo-e all those years ago. There are stacks of them in the bookshops here in Tokyo, but who wants them? Only the 'silly' foreigners - the foreigners who don't understand that they are 'low-class' woodblock prints, and not 'high-class' art. Each time I buy a few of these prints down in Kanda, as the shop door closes behind me as I leave, two people break out laughing ... the shop owner laughs and thinks, "What a fool he is, to pay me money for those things!" ... and outside the shop I too am laughing, "What a fool he is, to let me take these things for some mere money!"

We're both happy, so of course there is no problem. But I'd like to make you a little bet, that come a hundred years into the future, I know who will *still* be laughing, and who will be crying ...

Now if you will please excuse me, I think I'd better go and jump on a train for Kanda ... I've got a bit of shopping to do!

February, 2001

Afterword ...

When I first started planning these Surimono Albums, nearly three years ago now, it was difficult for me to imagine just what the 'finished product' would look like. I wanted collecting the prints to be as inexpensive as possible, so worked hard to devise a format that could be prepared efficiently even in small quantities, and yet which still had a professional feel and appearance. I drew sketches of possible album types, made mockups of sample albums, and went through many revisions of layouts and packaging ideas.

Once the series actually got under way, things had to be tied down firmly, so I made the necessary decisions, and settled on the format you now see. I don't know if you realize it, but absolutely everything about this album is handmade (or should I say 'homemade'!)

I of course make the prints themselves in the traditional manner. As I get near the end of the printing process I write the little story that will accompany the print; Sadako then puts this into Japanese, and the two of us together go through both versions line by line, working to make them as readable as possible. Once this is done, I print the sheets out on my desktop laser printer, ready for making up into the folders that will hold the prints. At the same time I also print out the ancillary material - a list of 'who gets which print' this month (many collectors are working on 'back issues') and the address labels for the packages. I then call Mrs. Ichikawa; she comes over, picks everything up, and takes it back to her home.

Using jigs and tools that I made for her, she glues together the parts of the folders and inserts the prints. She then wraps all the packages for shipping and delivers them to the Post Office. We don't make the album covers ourselves, but order them from a small firm in Tokyo, who handmake them to my specifications. You may not have noticed it, but even the label on the front of the album is carved and hand-printed ...

So although we have some high-tech assistance - I couldn't do this kind of 'self-publishing' without my Macintosh computer! - your album is about as hand-made as it could possibly be.

What about the content though? Is this working out in the way that I planned a couple of years ago? To a large extent, it is. Both of the albums I have made so far contain a good variety of prints; themes have included landscapes, nature pictures, people, still life, old 'tales' ... One point of which I am particularly proud is that the albums are not full of prints by the 'same old' names that we hear all the time. You will find *some* prints by the Hokusais and Hiroshiges, but at least half of each album is made up of prints designed by people of whom you have never heard (I hope!). I consider this part of my 'mission', to introduce as much of the 'unknown ukiyo-e' as I possibly can.

And using that word 'ukiyo-e' reminds me that this is another important feature of these albums - I am including prints that are *not* strictly ukiyo-e. The print by Mr. Yoshida I sent you a couple of months ago is a good example of this. It may not be what you expected to see when you 'signed up' to receive this album, but my guess is that you weren't *too* disappointed when you opened the package and saw it ...

For this second album I pushed out the boundaries of what images to include, and ranged from 1689 to 1939, a span of 250 years. I don't think I'll be able to stretch the time span much wider than that in upcoming albums, but this won't be too much of a handicap - the museums of the world are packed full of wonderful and interesting prints for me to choose from!

And in answer to the question that many of you have asked me "What will you do next year ... ?", I have to reply "Keep going, of course!" I've had tremendous fun making these first two Surimono Albums, and am already buried in the planning for the third. Will this become a ten-year series like my Hyakunin Isshu work? I can't say anything about that, as I have no plans at all to fix such a firm outline for this series; I will simply play it year-by-year I think.

I will continue for as long as I myself remain interested; for as long as I am challenged by the work; and of course, for as long as the collectors remain with me!

Thank you very much for your sponsorship of this album. I hope you will treasure it, and will enjoy viewing it as much as I have enjoyed making it.

David Bull
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