

摺物

Surimono Album #4

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

1. Harunobu Gakutei
Spring Sunrise
2. Suzuki Harunobu
Dharma Crossing the Yangtze
3. Shibata Zeshin
Carp Climbing a Waterfall
4. Kiyonobu
Ichikawa Danjuro
5. Takahashi Shotai
Pair of Fans
6. Unknown
Morning Glories
7. Totoya Hokkei
Ebisu and Daikoku
8. Nakabayashi Chikuto
Nanga Landscape
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Milton
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Spring Sunrise

This image, created by **Gakutei Harunobu**, is one that I have been waiting to make ever since I first saw it. I very much like the 'abstraction'; it has the appearance of modern art, yet was designed all the way back in 1820. The print must have been a commission from a poetry group, and we can safely assume that Gakutei himself was a member of the group, because one of the three poems is signed 'Shinkado', one of his poetry names.

One thing giving this print its modern appearance is the fact that no 'outline' block is used. In most traditional Japanese prints, outlines of each part of the design are drawn with a brush then cut onto a woodblock. At printing time, this 'key' block with the outlines is printed first, and it is then relatively 'easy' for the colours to be fitted properly within those lines. But in a design like this, with no black lines to form boundaries between areas of different colours, both carving and printing are much more difficult. The presence of the black outlines on the traditional type of print allows a certain amount of leeway when printing the colours, as slight variations in register are covered up by the black lines; here though, there is nowhere to hide.

The ninth print in last year's album - the scene of the Hawaiian sea - was also done mostly without outlines, and because of this I learned something interesting about the technique during the recent annual exhibition. I am a member of the association of traditional carvers and printers here in Tokyo, and some of the other members visited the exhibition. When one of them looked at the Hawaiian print, he pointed at the joint between sea and sky where there is no black line to 'hide' any errors, and said something like "*ke nuki awase ... jozu ni dekita ne!*"

I tried to understand the meaning of what he had said; on the face of it, the phrase seemed to mean 'the hair-pulling joining place; not bad!' And yes, to make such a joint so seamlessly *is* indeed a task to make the most patient printer pull his hair out in frustration! But when he went on to explain further, I realized that I was misinterpreting his words; he was referring to the fact that the joint must be so tightly fitted together that not even a hair could be 'pulled' between the two adjoining sections.

I encounter this sort of situation - not understanding the terminology - very frequently when talking to these workmen. I can *do* a wide variety of techniques, but I haven't any idea what they are called. These men grew up working together and have a full vocabulary to describe every aspect of traditional printmaking; I, who have always worked alone, have had no access to such knowledge. Perhaps one day I can convince one of them to sit down and run through a comprehensive list of terminology for me. Then I won't need to pull my hair out unnecessarily when faced with a tough job!

I hadn't particularly planned it this way, but it seems that I have started off each of the past three Surimono Albums with prints that feature metallic pigments. I guess partly this is because I would like each set to start off with a 'deluxe' image, but it is perhaps also because these 'New Year' type of prints *do* deserve special treatment! I should add though, that I produce such prints at this time of year not without considerable hardship to myself. The first print of each album is carved and printed in early spring, and here where I live, in early spring the air is full of cedar pollen, so the pleasure at the return of warm days soon becomes offset by the endless sneezing and itching around the eyes. Metal powders like the ones I used on this print are very light, and as I work the air becomes full of a mix of metal powder and pollen! Of course I wear a mask, but it doesn't seem to help much, and sometimes I have trouble guiding the paper into the proper place in the midst of all the sneezing. Perhaps though, it's best to wrap all these difficulties up in one 'package', and then look forward to working on the remaining prints of the set in 'clear' air!

Thank you for being with me for this year's work, and I look forward to making a wonderful set of prints for you!

March 2002

Dharma Crossing the Yangtze

No signature on this print, nor is there a seal ... but for anybody with much familiarity with Japanese prints, such things are unnecessary in order to identify this designer - can there be any doubt that this is by **Suzuki Harunobu**?

I have never attempted the reproduction of a Harunobu print before; although I like them quite a lot, especially their colour harmonies, I had never felt 'ready' to take on the challenge of carving and printing such delicate facial features. But I came to feel that if I postponed much longer, it would be from a lack of courage more than a lack of experience, so I decided to include one in the current album. Whether I *should* have waited longer I cannot say ... viewers will have to make up their own minds about that!

Harunobu's designs are of course all quite 'pretty', and I am sometimes quite puzzled just why we should think so. The drawing is hopelessly unrealistic, and the basic human proportions are wildly distorted - look at the size of her right hand compared to her overall height, or the size of the mouth compared to the overall face. How on earth can we the viewers ever think that such grotesque distortion of a figure is attractive? Was Harunobu an incompetent artist?

Incompetence obviously isn't the question, but rather how much any given artist is 'allowed' to create for himself, and how much he must adopt from his predecessors. The men before Harunobu drew hands and mouths that way, and he simply accepted 'that's the way it is' and drew his figures in a similar way. Indeed, this standardized ukiyo-e portrait, with the simple hook nose, the tiny mouth, and the shrunken hands, lasted for hundreds of years, evolving only slightly as it went along, and its successor can still be found in contemporary *manga* illustration.

And viewers do the same thing - they accept without much question the standard ways of 'seeing' things. Just how much basis any particular image has in reality doesn't seem to have too much to do with it. In fact, it seems that the reverse from what we would expect is true: if a strong original artist comes along and suddenly breaks from tradition and draws his subject in a vivid and more *realistic* manner, showing us something closer to what we are really seeing, such work does not find favour, and is passed by. The best example of this may be Sharaku, whose work, although still heavily 'distorted', was realistic to the point where the actors could be recognized from the images. When such work is seen by people who stand *outside* the tradition - by westerners in the case of Sharaku - its originality can be seen more clearly, and appreciated.

Well, if you hadn't been worried about the 'bad' draftsmanship, perhaps you were wondering about just what a young woman in elegant kimono is doing poling a heavy boat down a stream ... Surely we are not expected to believe that she could do this while dressed that way?

Again, *realism* has nothing to do with this print. In Harunobu's day, an image like this was in no way intended to be a depiction of an actual event. We are supposed to look at the picture, and recognize the literary allusion that it represents. Harunobu was a master at this sort of 'puzzle', and his *Zashiki Hakkei*, in which eight domestic scenes represent eight traditional landscapes, is considered the masterpiece of the genre. Viewers of Harunobu's day apparently had no trouble recognizing such allusions based on their knowledge of classical literature, and I suspect that they wouldn't have thought of this as a 'puzzle' at all. But for me, with a poor knowledge of Chinese classics, it was necessary to 'call for help'.

I posted a message to an internet group that studies *ukiyo-e*, and soon received a reply from a scholar in the US. He pointed out that the image represents the well known episode 'Dharma crossing the Yangtze'. He even showed me another version of the print, in which the girl is actually accompanied in the boat by Dharma. Once I saw this, I realized that the solution to the puzzle should have been obvious - Harunobu even left a large hint in the upturned shape of the prow, which mirrors the shape of the leaf on which the crossing was supposed to have been made. Well, I failed the test this time, but perhaps next time I'll get it!

Carp Climbing a Waterfall

I get fairly frequent feedback from collectors of these prints, either through personal discussions, or by letter or comments added to the post office payment slips, and of course the annual exhibition is also an excellent opportunity for me to observe at first hand how people react to my work. Each Surimono Album covers quite a wide mix of print styles, and it is always interesting to see which type of prints get the most positive reaction. Peoples' tastes differ, and the feedback reflects this, varying from month to month. But every year, when I include a 'painterly' print in the set, I find *that* is the print that gets the most attention.

I can only suppose that this is because of the cultural background here in Japan - everybody has experience using the *fude* (the calligraphy brush), and whether or not they consider themselves artistic, they do have an appreciation for this type of work. Most people could never make an ukiyo-e print, but they *can* draw with a brush, and they know what's good and what's not ...

Shibata Zeshin, designer of this image, was an acknowledged master of his brush, and this print is a good example of one of his major strengths - leaving things out. Just a fish shape, a rock shape, and a dash of water ... enough to tell the whole story. I have books here with more Zeshin designs, but some of them I couldn't dare to send you - you would send it back saying "David, you forgot to finish this one; it's mostly blank paper!"

Just because these prints are 'minimal' though, doesn't mean that they are easy to make. This print has nine impressions, ranging from faint 'scratchy' falling water, to the deep black gradations on the fish and rocks, and getting the balance right between all the different 'levels' is not easy. One of the 'ingredients' that went into this edition was beer ... and I guess that needs a bit of explanation ...

Just a few steps from my front door is a small restaurant/bar. Mr. and Mrs. Hamanaka, the owners, are friendly and the place is a popular gathering place for local people in the evenings. Mr. Hamanaka prepares a tasty hand-made udon, and I sometimes drop in to have some. But I don't 'join in' the convivial drinking; it's not that I want to be unfriendly, but simply that if I have a drink of beer with my meal, when I return to my printmaking work after dinner I won't be so careful as I should be, and the work gets 'sloppy'.

In the past though, I have heard comments that my work is *too* careful, that I control too much, and that a feeling of freedom and naturalness is sometimes missing from my carving and printing. If you think about Zeshin creating this design with his brush, there is no way that he could be tightly controlled while doing it - the brush had to move quickly, dabbing here and there at the paper. Spontaneity is much more important than control. Although of course that is only possible when the brush (or baren) is so well trained that one can 'let go' to this degree ...

I guess that perhaps you can see what I am getting at. One day last week I was over at Hamanaka-san's place, and yes, I did order a glass of beer to accompany my dinner. When I got home, I went back to the bench and continued work on this print, doing the heavy black gradation on the back of the fish. Now I don't suppose for a minute that this made any real difference in the way that the print came out, but I do know that I enjoyed the work that evening, and did feel that I was slapping on the pigment in a way that more closely approximated the way that Zeshin must have done when he drew the original.

As with anything in life, balance is important. I'm not about to start to get drunk before sitting down to work every evening (to be honest, I don't like the stuff so much ...), but this was a good, if gentle, reminder that I shouldn't put quite so much emphasis on rigorous control. A while back it was suggested that my work was *teinei-sugi* (too careful), and I understand the comment; as my experience grows, I'll try to work as freely and naturally as I can.

Ichikawa Danjuro

How could I have come this far in my Surimono Album series - well into the fourth year - without making a kabuki print!? When you consider that prints of actors were one of the most popular of all ukiyo-e genres, it seems that I have been somewhat remiss by ignoring them until now. But perhaps there is enough life and energy in this print to more than make up for my oversight!

Even if the actor's name wasn't inscribed on the print, nobody with any knowledge of the kabuki theatre could be in any doubt at all as to just who we are looking at - the large 'mon' (actor's crest) in the shape of three concentric squares tells us that this is the famous Ichikawa Danjuro. Ukiyo-e researchers seem to be divided as to whether this is Danjuro I or II, just as they are divided as to the identity of the man who designed this print. Some say Kiyonobu, some say Kiyomasu ...

I don't have too much interest in such details. We know next to nothing about *any* of the men of that era, so which particular person's name we attribute the print to just doesn't mean much - all that matters is that one day, some particular man sat down at his workspace, picked up his brush, and in a few quick strokes, created this masterpiece - a simple, but extremely vivid design.

I wish that I could say '*a few quick strokes*' for *my* part in making this print! As usual, I kept my internet webcam running while I was working, and I received a number of emails from friends asking pretty much the same thing: "Dave, what are you doing? Why are you *painting* instead of *printing*?" Yes, the colours you see on this print are not applied in the usual way by being printed with a baren from carved blocks, but instead are painted on with a brush. I haven't given up woodblock printmaking - it is simply that this print is from an era (the early 1700s) that predates the introduction of colour printing. It is the type known as *tan-e* (red picture). The black outlines of the image are carved and printed in the usual way, and once that part of the work is done, the colours are then painted on.

Of course I kept to the original techniques when making this reproduction. I knew when I started that I was in for a long month's work, and I was right - painting in all the colours by hand takes far longer than printing them on. Many of the old *tan-e* are quite roughly and quickly made - the colours are just roughly smeared on. But the print that I reproduced is made quite carefully; the colours don't fit *exactly* within the outlines, but they are close. So I too had to work to that same standard, and it was a long haul.

As far as possible, I used pigments that matched those that would have been used on the original. For the yellow I used the pigment known as *seki-o*, and for the red, actual *tan*. Both of these pigments will alter considerably as time passes; even over the first few months there will be a change in the appearance of this print, and you will be able to see it take on a more pleasing tone quite soon.

These pigments are also quite poisonous, containing sulphur, arsenic, and lead, among other things. You the owner don't have to worry about this, as these poisons will not be released into the air from the paper, but I had to be somewhat careful to avoid excessive contact when working with them. They are very difficult to obtain these days, as they can no longer be simply purchased in a shop, and I was lucky to have been given some small quantities of them by some other printers.

It has been an interesting experience making this print; step by step I am getting familiar with all the wide variety of traditional printmaking techniques. Am I nearly 'there'? Not at all ... I have decades of learning still to go!

June 2002

Pair of Fans

From last month's design right at the beginning of Japanese traditional printmaking, we now jump almost all the way to the end ... The two designs you see in this print were created by **Takahashi Shotei** in the 1930's. He didn't do them as fan prints - these are just two among hundreds of 'stock' designs that he created for one of the publishers of the day. The clientele was presumably among foreign tourists to Japan, and most of the designs are quaint images of the sort you see here. I have picked up quite a number of these prints over the years (after nearly 20 years living here, do I still behave like a 'tourist'?), and this month I selected these two from my collection to use for the annual 'fan' print because they are images that might help bring a slight cool feeling to the hot summer's day on which you will be opening this package!

I do have mixed feelings about using this type of image. Some years back, I made a pact with myself - "I will *never* make quaint prints! Snow in the temple courtyard ... Old buildings with tiled roofs ... Broken down farmhouses in the countryside ... These dated and hackneyed themes I will not touch!" I think that the closest I have come to breaking my promise has been with two Hokusai designs: the horse in snow picture with which I began the first album, and the snowy landscape that ended the third album. Those two designs have depth beyond their 'pretty' imagery though, and I have no regret about making those prints. But this one is getting closer to the line; although I suppose in 1930 such a scene *could* still be seen on a Japanese river, I think the only purpose of making the original print back then was to satisfy a tourist craving for such images.

But I have to admit that someone who tries to take a stand against the use of quaint imagery while making traditional Japanese prints is going to have a pretty rough ride during any debate on the topic. I can well imagine the sort of arguments that a debate opponent could use: "Dave, the use of 'touristy stuff' in Japanese prints goes back well before the westerners came - look at the famous Tokaido series of Hiroshige for example! Or how about all the Yoshiwara prints that people took back to the provinces as 'souvenirs' of their time in Edo? Why would you think that it is wrong for a print to be attractive to a tourist? Don't forget that the Japanese print is primarily a *decorative object*, and has no pretensions to any intellectual content."

And that is indeed an interesting point; when compared to such work as the German black and white expressionist prints, in which social/political argument is the primary point, Japanese traditional prints do come up short. But if I accept such an argument - that Japanese prints are the beautiful 'bimbo' ... the airhead among the intellectuals of art as it were - where does that leave me and all the work I have done over the past couple of decades? Although I am not a 'capital I' intellectual, I would like to think that there is something more than pure 'prettiness' in what I am doing with my life.

So in response to my imaginary debate opponent, perhaps I could reply like this: "You say Japanese prints are 'simply decorative objects' but I would delete that word *simply* - they *proudly* are decorative objects. There is a time and place for everything - I understand that artists must sometimes act as protesters to help us correct injustices in society, but what an unpleasant world we would live in if they all took that path. We need as much, if not more, of the other side - men who look around them, see what is beautiful, and focus our attention on it. Without that, all else is worthless!"

Where does this debate leave you, the viewer of my work? I would like to think that each Surimono Album offers a reasonable balance: although it is in essence simply an object of 'pure' beauty, I hope that the package *in toto* is something more than that, and that it does offer plenty to think about along the way. Whether or not I am succeeding in this will I think only become apparent quite a bit later, when we look back on the completed albums from a point in the future.

As for the immediate present ... I find myself in a slight quandary ... I have *such* a beautiful design chosen for next month's print!

Morning Glories

*The morning glory
Twining round the well handle ...
Next door for water!*

Kaga Chiyo

I mentioned at the end of last month's little story that I had a beautiful design selected this time, and now that you see it, I hope you agree ...

Who drew it? I can't tell you; the colophon page of my copy of the little book from which it comes has been partially torn away, and the designer's name (if indeed it was actually included on that page) is missing. The date of publication is still visible - Meiji 23, or 1890, as is the title - *Bijutsu Gafu*, or 'Art Album'. It is subtitled *Kacho Sansui*, 'Nature and Landscape', but this is somewhat misleading, because the content of the book ranges farther than these traditional themes.

I found it in an old bookshop in Kyoto last year; Sadako and I were browsing through the shelves looking for anything interesting and she pulled this book down and passed it to me "This looks worthwhile ..." It certainly did, and I purchased it without hesitation. Well, that's the first part of the story behind this print, but there is more to mention ...

The little book was printed in only black - none of the images were coloured. But no sooner had the idea arisen to use this image in my Surimono Album, than the colours too came to life in my mind. I don't mean the exact shades that you see here, they came later; I mean the general *style* of the colouring. During the long history of traditional Japanese printmaking, the way that prints have been coloured has passed through many styles. Many of these were influenced by the particular pigments available at certain times and not at others, while others had their origin in the preferences of some particular artist, or some particular publisher.

Differences in style are striking, and well marked. Somebody who knows Japanese prints well can identify the era in which any print was made even if all but a couple of square centimeters of the surface is hidden from view. The particular pigments used, the way that they have been prepared, the colour combinations created by the printers, all these provide clear signposts to identify a print. An obvious example would be that of the time in the Meiji era when imported foreign dyes became commonly used in printmaking. The resulting garish prints are unmistakable from a hundred yards away!

Towards the end of the Meiji era yet another new colour style appeared, in the breathtakingly beautiful creations of the publisher Takejiro Hasegawa. Hasegawa's particular market was the foreigner interested in 'things Japanese', and he produced books and prints for sale both here in Japan to tourists, and overseas in bookshops and at exhibitions. He published a wide variety of items: books of Japanese fairy tales (in English, Spanish, French and German), calendars of Japanese scenery, books of translated Japanese poetry with images, and many other similar products.

And the colour style he created? How can I describe it ... very clean, very delicate; a range of pastel shades that had never appeared in Japanese prints before; gradations of a subtlety previously unknown ... I have a small collection of his books here in my workshop, and visitors who see them are always bowled over by their beauty.

It is this Hasegawa style that I had in mind when I set to work to produce this month's print for you. Did I succeed? Well, I think I have captured some of the *cleanliness* of a Hasegawa print, but not much of the subtlety I am afraid ... I rather suspect that if I had handed this in to old Hasegawa as a proof copy, he would have passed it back saying "Close, but you haven't quite got the idea ... better let somebody with a bit more experience take over ..."

Well, these days there simply *isn't* anybody with 'a bit more experience' at making this kind of print. I have never seen them reproduced, and I can never understand why; I myself find their simple but subtle beauty completely captivating. I keep a list of prints I'd like to make (a list that endlessly grows and grows), and there are a *lot* of Hasegawa san's products on it! Maybe before I'm done I'll be able to make a print that would meet with his approval!

September 2002

Ebisu and Daikoku

No room for all seven of them in this circular design by **Totoya Hokkei** - you'll have to be satisfied with just two of the *Seven Lucky Gods*. Ebisu is here, together with his fishing rod and the sea bream he has caught, and Daikoku raises his magic mallet while dancing in front of his sack full of treasure. But just in case you might think that only two of them won't suffice to bring enough luck, Hokkei has included a background pattern containing even more symbols of good fortune: the straw raincoat and hat providing invisibility, a scroll representing wisdom, a purse of inexhaustible riches, cloves (a very rare spice in those days), and a four-way divided circle *shicho*, which makes a pun on *shippo*, seven treasure jewels. Still not enough? Well, repeating those symbols more than a hundred times should do the trick!

I certainly needed all the 'good fortune' I could get this time! When I started making this print I recognized that I was taking on a major technical challenge; I knew that I would have to carve at a level of delicacy that I had never reached before. Perhaps I'm not supposed to talk about such things - after all, a concert pianist doesn't usually turn to his audience and say "What did you think of my wonderful finger technique in that piece?" But while with a pianist 'technique practice' and 'performance' are always separate, with me this is not the case, I have no rehearsals, I only have performances. Each month I 'step onto the stage' and set to work to make your print. Just how it will turn out I'm never completely sure, I simply do my best ...

I'm fairly happy with the way that recent prints have turned out, and this makes it a bit frustrating to keep hearing one particular comment repeated again and again from other people involved with printmaking. I have heard it from printers, from carvers, and from some of the people who prepare my supplies. The question comes in various forms, but all have the same basic message: "Are these small prints *all* you make?", "When are you going to make some large prints?", "Don't you want to make *real* prints?"

Among traditional printers in particular, the perception is quite strong that nobody can really consider himself to have 'arrived' as a printer unless he is skilled at making *nishiki-ban* - those traditional ukiyo-e prints of the most standard size, as commonly seen in work by Hiroshige, Utamaro, Hokusai, etc. In their minds, beginners start with small prints (postcards, etc.) and then progress up the ladder, making ever larger prints as they become skilled enough to do so.

Well, in recent generations, that indeed has been the common pattern. For most of the past hundred years *nishiki-ban* have been the staple of the reproduction business, and have provided the bulk of work for most printers. But when one looks further back, to the Meiji and Edo periods, the 'larger = better' equation breaks down. I introduced the Hasegawa prints last month, and they are an excellent example, being very finely produced yet generally of small dimensions. And of course the original prints of the *surimono* genre, from which my own series takes its inspiration, worked on a reverse equation: 'smaller = better'. So when contemporary printers ask when I'm going to make 'real' prints, I think they are being a bit short-sighted; they themselves are perhaps not too familiar with the history involved ...

A possible reason for this is that during the working life of most of these men, prints like the ones in my albums have simply not been made. This has partly been due to fashion - the *nishiki-ban* captured everyone's eye - but perhaps a more fundamental reason has been economics. There is rather a lot of carving in this print, most of it quite delicate and time-consuming, there are quite a lot of printing impressions (including metal powders), and the keyblock is a very expensive piece of boxwood. The costs are thus very high, but because the finished product is so small in size, the public generally will not pay much for it. As a consequence, work of this type disappeared from the market long ago, and most currently active printers have never even *seen* prints like this, let alone had a chance to work on one.

I hope you collectors aren't starting to get worried about the direction in which I am heading - carving ever smaller and smaller; after all there wouldn't be much point in my trying to carve lines any thinner than the fishing line in this print! I'll try to keep a balance - to make prints that give me a personal technical challenge, yet which display an overall beauty and meaning. So relax, *next* month you won't need a magnifying glass to enjoy the print!

October 2002

Nanga Landscape

The image was created by **Nakabayashi Chikuto**, and was published in a collection of his designs *Chikuto Sansui Gako* in 1812. He worked in what is known as the *Nanga* (Southern painting) style, which - as you can see - owed much to its origins in Chinese painting. When I learned that Chinese painting in the previous centuries was divided between 'Northern' and 'Southern' schools, I assumed that this was a geographical distinction, but this was apparently not the case. The division was by style, not location - Northern painting was focussed on details and was more colourful, while Southern painting was of a sort that is always described with the same word - 'impressionistic'.

In a typical Nanga-style landscape some particular object forms the focus around which the rest is framed. Here of course it is the figures of the two men sitting by the stream. The actual scene is (we assume) completely imaginary; this is no particular mountain. The idea was to create an 'impression' of the elements - tree, rock, flowing water - to show their inner spirit, and not to depict them with any intent of realism. I think it quite succeeds in this; you viewers will be looking at this print probably for only a few minutes, and may feel that it is 'a nice peaceful scene', but during the weeks of work it takes me to make a print like this, I 'look' at it for many hours indeed, and I can tell you that it does indeed repay time spent ... I now 'know' what it feels like to sit by the riverbank in this deep and distant valley ...

In the last couple of albums at this point - for the eighth print - I included a *sumizuri-e* ('black printed picture'). I have done the same thing this year, but with a difference. Although this print also could technically be described as a 'black printed picture', it is actually *tashoku-zuri* (multi-coloured printing). There are eight impressions, using nothing but *sumi* (with the exception of a faint splash of sepia on the clothing of the two men). So where do all the different shades come from? Well, there is *sumi* and there is *sumi*. When I first started out in Japanese printmaking, I used standard *bokuju* (pre-mixed liquid *sumi*) for all my work. It made a basic black, and I learned that by diluting it with water, I could get basic greys.

As time went by though, I learned that many different types of *sumi* were available, each one having its own particular tone or shade. This is of course not 'news' to most Japanese readers, because they have been choosing *sumi* to use for their calligraphy since they were children, but my eyes - as I suspect would be the case with most westerners - simply hadn't seen the differences. To prepare for making this print, I visited a *sumi* shop, and spent time browsing through their *iro-mihon* (colour sample book). I also learned that in addition to the many colours available with *sumi*, there is an incredible price range - some of the more rare and 'famous name' *sumi* types seemed to cost as much as an equivalent bar of gold! Please don't feel disappointed that I didn't choose from that type ...

I brought home a number of different types of *sumi*, some specifically named - *ao-zumi* (blue *sumi*) for example - and a selection of various 'just plain' *sumi* inks. I had fun balancing and mixing them to make an attractive print; the combinations are quite literally endless, and I am sure that another printmaker would have come up with a completely different palette.

I think that this is actually much more difficult than working with 'normal' colours; to put green pigment on a block and make you see green pine needles is not so difficult, but to put *grey* on a block and make you see green pine needles is a bit more of a challenge!

Next month we'll be back to 'normal' *tashoku-zuri* (and how!), but I hope you've enjoyed this quiet one

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December 2002

Milton

So much to tell you about with this month's print, and so little space to do it in! As you can see, this is not an *ukiyo-e* reproduction; just as I did last year at this time, I have brought you an image by a contemporary designer. **John Amoss** lives in Georgia USA, and sometimes has occasion to drive past the large pulp/paper mill you see depicted here (located in the town of Milton, thus the name). He himself made a woodblock print of this mill a few years ago, and when I saw it, I instantly felt that I too wanted to have a go at using the design in my series. He gave me permission, and this is the result. My print is not simply a reproduction of his version, but more of an adaptation.

There was actually quite a collaboration between us; here's an outline of our working process:

- After we discussed what I had in mind for the design, John created the *shita-e* (the 'key' outline of the design), and sent it to me from Georgia over the internet.
- I printed it out from my computer onto thin *gampi* paper, pasted this onto a blank woodblock, and set to work with my carving tools.
- Just as I was finishing the carving, John arrived in Tokyo (together with his wife Margaret) to stay at my home for a while. I printed some samples from the newly carved keyblock, and John and I studied these together and worked out the colour separations.
- John and Margaret then left for a couple of days vacation in Kyoto while I carved all the colour blocks.
- Once they returned, he and I sat down together in my workroom and began the test printing. He mixed colours and gave general directions; I printed. Because of the large number of colour impressions - 36 in all - it was very difficult to establish a good balance between them, and we had to mix and re-mix, print and re-print. He wasn't a 'dictator', and was quite willing to listen to my suggestions; the final version we settled on reflected plenty of ideas from each of us.
- John and Margaret then flew back home, and I set to work to print the edition. Once the prints were done - weeks later (36 impressions on a large batch of prints like this takes a *lot* of work!), I wrapped everything up for express shipping over to Georgia. John inspected them, added his signature, and then returned them to me.
- Ichikawa-san was standing by, having already prepared these essay folders, ready to quickly insert the prints, wrap them up, and mail them to you. It has been quite an adventure bringing you this print!

But what do you think of it!? This print is in what is known as the *shin-hanga* style, but unlike nearly all other *shin-hanga* I have ever seen, it does not depict a 'beautiful' object. Ladies walking in the snow with umbrellas ... Mount Fuji at dawn ... these are the standard themes typical of *shin-hanga*. But to my mind, the beauty of woodblock prints is not only in the object shown in the print, but in the *way* that it is depicted. As John wrote when describing his design to me "*A paper mill is completely disgusting - both in smell and appearance - but seen in the right way, it can become a thing of terrible beauty.*"

And beautiful this is! Look at the way that the *hosho* paper absorbs all these multiple overprintings, to give a rich deep texture; look at the way that the dark surrounding areas make the light places glow brightly; look at the building - covered with many layers of thick dark pigment, yet shining in pale moonlight!

The wonderful Japanese traditional woodblock techniques are capable of *so much* expression, that I can only just scratch the surface of the possibilities in the prints I bring you. Of course I'm not going to hunt up 'ugly' objects for themes for the prints - and next month we'll have a very peaceful and 'classical' scene to end the album - but I'm not going to shy away when I think I've found something special, even if it doesn't particularly fit the standard mold.

I hope you can understand, and can enjoy this month's print!

January 2003

Winter Landscape

After last month's somewhat shocking print, we're back to something more serene to close this album. The designer's name does not appear anywhere on this print, but that we are looking at a design by **Ando Hiroshige** is beyond doubt. I have no idea which of his many print series this is taken from, but a good guess would be that it might be part of an *Edo Miyage* (Souvenirs of Edo) series. Eh? Hiroshige designed prints with *English* lettering? Well no ... but as usual, there is quite an interesting story behind it!

A few month's back - in the story to accompany the sixth print of this album - I mentioned the name of Meiji-era publisher Takejiro Hasegawa. That print wasn't a reproduction of one of his publications, but this one is. It is from a beautiful 3-volume book he produced entitled '*Sword and Blossom Poems*' (this image is from Volume 1, published in 1907). The book was intended for the foreign market, and he of course was playing on the image of Japan that was held by most foreigners of that time - in which *bushido* and *sakura* were inextricably linked with their view of life in this country. Here at the beginning of the 21st century, swords are certainly not something that immediately comes to our mind when we think of Japan, but we are happy to see that cherry blossoms are still an important part of the national culture!

The image you see here is taken from the 'blossom' section of the book, in which each picture is paired with a poem from the *Kokinshu*, the famous old anthology of *tanka* poetry created many centuries before. The poems were not written in traditional calligraphy, but were translated into English, as you can see here. This was still 'early days' in western studies of old Japanese literature, and it took two people to make the translation; the poem was first put into basic English by a scholar in Japan (Shotaro Kimura, a member of the British Society of Japan at the time), and then rendered into literary style by a lady over in England, Mrs. Charlotte Peake. The resulting poem has come out in a style that sounds quite archaic to us now, but perhaps this is just as well, considering that the Japanese original version is more than a thousand years old, and must sound pretty archaic to Japanese ears too!

In that previous story I talked about just how thorough Hasegawa-san was in creating his products, and when we look a bit closer at the poem on this print, we can discover evidence of this. In the early Meiji period other woodblock printed materials using English had been made, mostly English/Japanese dictionaries. When we look at those books now, we are struck by the clumsiness of the lettering - it is evident that the Japanese carvers had no idea how to carve those strange .. *a* .. *b* .. *c* .. shapes - and such books are ugly indeed. Hasegawa-san must have been aware of this problem, and to solve it he created (or commissioned?) an alphabet font specifically designed for carving on woodblocks in the traditional manner. Each letter is delineated in a way that makes sense to the carver, and as I well know from having carved this myself, the knife slides easily around each letter just as it does when carving Japanese cursive characters. Even though the old carvers wouldn't have been able to read the text they were working on, they *would* have been able to carve it with beauty and taste. Hasegawa used this font for many of his publications, and we now refer to it with his name; this type style is called **Hasegawa**. To Japanese viewers it looks English ... to English readers it looks quite Japanese. An excellent solution!

So this peaceful snowy scene brings our album to a close, and as the poem mentions, I'm sure spring is just around the corner. We've really covered a lot of ground in the album this year; I hope you haven't become too dizzy with all the coming and going ...

February 2003

Afterword ...

We are now at the end of the fourth Surimono Album, but when one includes the set of ten *Hyakunin Isshu* albums that I produced in the years previous to this series, we come up with a total of 14 albums, each one containing ten prints. Each of the 14 years has followed the same pattern - January as 'exhibition season', when the previous year's work is shown and orders are collected for the upcoming album, and then the rest of the year devoted to producing the ten prints.

It has worked very well, but as you can see by the date at the bottom of this page, I have recently had a lot of trouble keeping the albums properly 'aligned' with the calendar! The *Hyakunin Isshu* albums were by-and-large produced on schedule - with an average number of colours per print in the 8~9 range, and with a print 'run' of 100 copies of each design, it wasn't too hard to stick to the plan. But these newer Surimono Albums are turning out to be a more difficult proposition; the *average* number of colours is 13~14, and the print run is twice as large - 200 copies of each design. In addition, many of the prints involve a lot of delicate carving, and this of course adds greatly to the time taken. So considering all these factors, it's actually not such a tragedy to have the album finished 'only' two months late. But I really do want to keep to the 'one new album every year' system, so will make every attempt not to let the schedule slip further.

For those of you collectors who have been occasionally disappointed by the length of time the prints are taking to arrive at your door, I can only offer these words, which appear at the top of a menu from the Restaurant Antoine in New Orleans:

Avis au Public

*Faire de la bonne cuisine demande un certain temps. Si on vous fait attendre,
c'est pour mieux vous servir, et vous plaire. **

Are you familiar with 'pointillism' - the painting technique in which a picture is made up of innumerable small dots of colour? When the viewer stands close to the canvas, each dot is seen clearly as an individual item, but when looked at from a distance, a wider picture emerges. I like to think that I am kind of a 'pointillistic artist'. On my canvas so far 40 dots have appeared - the 40 prints in this Surimono Albums series ... can you see the picture that is starting to become apparent when you 'stand back'?

During that ten-year period before starting these Surimono Albums, my 'theme' was a simple one - to recreate Katsukawa Shunsho's *Hyakunin Isshu* series. That was kind of an apprenticeship for me, but once it was done the time had arrived to take up a wider theme - to show the world just how beautiful woodblock prints can be. That is the 'picture' that I hope is becoming more legible month-by-month and year-by-year as more 'dots' accumulate on my canvas.

Do you find each and every one of my dots beautiful? I rather suspect not; the only person who will love *all* these children is their father, everybody else will have favourites, and others not-so-favourite ... But my pointillism analogy is a serious one; the world of traditional Japanese woodblock printmaking is so deep and varied, that it is going to take a long time - and a great many points indeed - to create a clear picture in the viewer's mind. The picture will never be completed of course, but over the coming years I am going to have a wonderful time painting it ... dot by dot!

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

David Bull

February 2003

Seseragi Studio, Ome City, Tokyo

* *Good cooking takes time. If you are made to wait, it is to serve you better, and to please you.*