

摺物

# Surimono Album #5

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

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# The Biwa 'Seizan'

To open this fifth Surimono Album I have chosen a 'classical' surimono design in the *shikishiban* format, created in about 1820 by **Totoya Hokkei**, whose work has appeared twice before in these albums (and will undoubtedly appear again in the future!). It is one print from a series of five images entitled *Gogyo*, or Five Elements. In this series, the images and poems pick up themes from the group of five elements the ancient Chinese considered to make up the world around us: fire, earth, metal, water and - the substance depicted here - wood. The items selected by the artist and poets to represent wood are a plum branch and a *biwa*, a Japanese lute. But this is not just any biwa, this is the famous 'Seizan', the instrument that we read about in the Tale of the Heike. When Tsunemasa was being raised at the temple Ninna-ji, he was given this biwa. As with every aspect of that epic old tale though, this too would 'end in tears', and we read that years later, at the moment of his death, the strings of the biwa spontaneously broke, and it would never be played again ... by mortals. The noh play 'Tsunemasa' depicts the episode where the ghost of Tsunemasa, sensing that Seizan has been laid on the altar as an offering for him, visits his own funeral service and performs on it one final time, before returning to the netherworld ...

Even though the theme of the print is 'wood', a biwa with such a splendid history could of course not be depicted in a surimono print in a plain and simple fashion - so the old printers used three different metals for decorating the instrument. I can't clearly identify the substances they used back then, but I have used copper powder for the strings and clouds, bronze for the sky above the mountain, and platinum leaf for the moon. Please don't get too excited by that word 'platinum' ... this metal is indeed expensive, but the amount in your copy of this print is only a tiny fraction of a gram!

I had originally thought about using silver leaf for decorative parts of these surimono prints, so I did some experiments some time ago to see how it would stand up over time. I applied silver to a few sheets of paper then stored them in various places around my workshop, some open to the air, some protected in a book. Over a period of a couple of years, they all became heavily oxidized and turned quite an unattractive colour. Whether this is an observation on the quality of our air here in Tokyo, or whether this would happen anywhere, I can't really say, but this was enough to convince me that untreated silver isn't suitable for these prints. Platinum, I am given to understand, will remain 'silvery' pretty much indefinitely.

I have used powdered metals on a number of previous prints, but this is the first one in which I have used 'leaf', and with such a small area being covered, it was an excellent chance to learn how to handle and apply it. My appetite has been whetted somewhat, and I'm looking forward to the time when I can take on the challenge of one of those magnificent Gakutei surimono prints that uses metal leaf as a full background ...

But that won't be next month. As long-time collectors of my work know, the second print in every series is a *bijin-ga* ('beautiful woman picture'), and I have a most interesting design selected, one that I am sure you will not have seen before. More than that I won't say though; you know my policy - the pleasure of having the set come to life one print at a time as you receive them is a major part of the enjoyment of these albums. At least it is for *me*!

Thank you for joining my project this year!

March 2004

# Woman with Letter

As I write these notes to accompany the print each month, one of the first things I try to get into the story is the name of the person who designed the print. That's going to be somewhat difficult this time - it's a bit of a long story!

On the face of it, there is no problem; I can tell you that the artist involved is **Miyagawa Issho**, one of the followers of the far more famous *ukiyo-e* painter Miyagawa Choshun. But members of this school never had anything to do with woodblock prints; they were painters of *kakemono-e*, picture scrolls. I have never seen the original painting from which this was taken; what I do have is a collection of a hundred pictures issued by the *Kokkei Shimbun* of Osaka in 1909-10. The set of pictures is entitled '**Collection of 100 Artists' Depictions of Beauties**', and was issued one sheet at a time over an extended period, being passed out as a 'freebie' to subscribers of the newspaper every two weeks (a custom still common in contemporary Japan, where at least one major newspaper frequently chooses *ukiyo-e* subjects for their free handouts.)

Now it is obvious that the 100 artists themselves were not involved in the production of this album (of course most of them were long dead by this time.) It seems that a Meiji-era artist, Shuntei Maeno, was commissioned to produce the 100 designs, *based* on the work of the original men. He was pretty good at this job of imitation, and most of the pictures are indeed quite recognizable; this is 'Shunsho', this is 'Sukenobu', etc. etc. When inspected by somebody with long experience in the field though, some of the images look a bit 'funny' - there is just 'something' wrong somewhere, even if it is impossible to pin down actually what it is. But in this particular image, he has caught the correct flavour of the Choshun school of painters, and their manner of depicting women with quite marked sensuous overtones.

The album seems to have been popular, and it was re-published a number of times in the early Taisho period in book form; copies are still frequently seen in the used bookshops in Kanda.

Once work on the carving was under way, of course I found myself curious about the meaning of the calligraphy on the letter she is holding. Her face is fairly impassive, and doesn't give us many clues - is this a pledge of eternal love, or is it a 'Dear John' type of letter? I took a copy of the letter over to an acquaintance, a man who has considerable knowledge of Edo period history and calligraphy, to see if I could learn something about it. I had been puzzled by the fact that the letter seems to be written in a feminine hand; this led me to think that *this* woman had written it, and was reading it over before sending it off. But he pointed out to me that in those days it was not uncommon for a *man* to use such a delicate cursive hand when penning a letter to a woman. This may partly have been because women in those days received little formal education and were thus unable to read many Chinese characters, usually reading and writing in the phonetic *kana* syllabary instead, but I think that perhaps it was because that for a conversation full of delicate nuance, the spidery cursive phonetic writing was much more capable of communicating the essence of the message than were scholarly *kanji* characters.

This calligraphy was a joy to carve ... long sweeping curves like we see here are always the carver's favourite part of the job! And the pleasure is doubled when the materials are suitably matched; I did this part of the job - and her delicate hairlines - on hard dense boxwood. And as a final note - I might also mention that after finishing the carving work on these delicate parts of the print, and quietly comparing my work with the old print, I recognized that if I were suddenly transported back in time to the Meiji era, maybe ... just maybe ... I wouldn't starve to death after all!

May 2003

# Stork in Rain

*Is this a stork? I have to say, I don't really know! But then, I never could tell all those long-legged birds apart ... heron, egret, stork. In any case, this bird is obviously of that type, whichever it may be ...*

Some of the collectors of my prints who use the internet like to look at my Webcam sometimes and try to guess the designer of the print I am working on. I received emails from such people this month, and each one guessed the same person - Ohara Koson, a well-known designer of nature prints who worked in the first half of the 20th century. They thought it was an easy guess, as it is very similar to a print he designed, but I had to inform them that they were wrong. The original that I reproduced was not only designed, but also cut and printed, by **Yoshijiro Urushibara**. And what is most interesting - it was 'Made in England'.

The influence of Japanese design on the West during the period after Japan's 'opening' is well documented. Japanese participation in many large-scale International Expositions in Europe and America in the last half of the 19th century provided one of the main routes for Japanese culture to be disseminated throughout the world. A popular 'feature' of these expositions were the demonstrations of various Japanese arts and crafts given by craftsmen. For the Anglo-Japanese Exhibition held in London in 1910 a group of woodblock print craftsmen was brought from Japan, and among them was the young (he was then 22 years old) printer Urushibara. At the closing of the Exhibition, he did not return to Japan, but stayed on in London, where he worked at the British Museum on the making of reproduction prints, print restoration and scroll mounting. He did a bit of work with European designers, doing the carving and printing for some 'collaborative' prints, and also produced a series of his own prints, and although they are not particularly 'original' in design - as this example demonstrates - they are all attractive and tasteful.

Urushibara had quite an influence on the development of a group of British artists who were attempting to make colour woodblock prints during this period. They had almost no access at all to traditional Japanese techniques, and were struggling to 'figure out' how it was done, but with his assistance, they were able to start producing interesting and attractive prints, doing all parts of the work - design, carving and printing - on their own.

Unfortunately, the seeds thus planted did not result in a flourishing 'garden' of European colour woodblock making, and I believe this was due primarily to a sort of contradiction inherent in their approach to the craft. The type of person who can create interesting designs on a blank sheet of paper is almost never the same type of person who can take on the long and repetitive work necessary to produce many copies of that print. In a nutshell - one is either a 'free-spirit', or one has a lot of patience and perseverance. The two character types simply don't mix well. In Japan, it was the normal practice for designers to work with craftsmen to produce the prints, but these Europeans wanted to do it on an 'all by myself' basis. The inevitable result though, was that the European 'school' of colour printmaking slowly faded away to nothing.

Urushibara himself returned to Japan in 1942, on a Swedish neutral exchange ship. I have no idea if he wanted to go back, or was forced to go - even after more than 30 years in Britain - because he was an 'enemy alien'. Reading about this of course makes me wonder how I would feel if I found myself in that situation. I am still fairly young, with many decades of life left; who can tell what will happen during those years ... might I one day be deported from Japan as an 'enemy alien'? Such an idea seems inconceivable to us these days, but perhaps it was similarly inconceivable to Urushibara-san back then.

In any case, there are no such clouds on the horizon at present of course, so I don't anticipate any obstacle in continuing to work on these prints! I have a small surprise coming up for you next ... and the surprise is that - there is no surprise; unlike the recent work, it will be a print by a designer of whom you have heard before!

# Bando Mitsugoro II

Certainly no doubt at all about the designer of *this* print - **Toshusai Sharaku!** This is a reproduction of one of his famous actor prints, and depicts the kabuki actor *Bando Mitsugoro II* in the role of *Ishii Genzo*, in the play '*Hana Ayame Bunroku Soga*'.

A great deal has been written about Sharaku, about the mystery of who he was, where he came from, and why he 'disappeared' so suddenly after producing so many interesting print designs in such a short time. Quite an 'industry' has grown up around these questions: I was buttonholed at one of my exhibitions a few years ago by an elderly gentleman who had gone to the expense of publishing his own research volume describing how Sharaku was really Hokusai working under another name (it seems the key point was the way in which big toes were drawn in a similar fashion!). As I certainly don't have anything to add to such debates, I'll leave the detective work and analysis to the scholars and stick to the job of trying to produce the print as well as I can!

This is the first Sharaku print I have ever made, and indeed, it is the first 'classical' reproduction to be included in these albums, in the sense of being a well-known design from a well-known artist - a 'standard number', as they say in Japanese. Ever since Japan opened up to the west the market for such prints - Hokusai's wave, Hiroshige's Tokaido, Utamaro's 'large heads', and of course Sharaku actor portraits - has been insatiable. These images 'represent' Japan, and are instantly recognizable all over the world. The viewers may not know that this is Bando Mitsugoro, and they probably will not understand what he is doing and why his eyes are crossed, but they will certainly know that this is 'Japanese'.

I can't even begin to imagine just how many hundreds of thousands of reproductions of the most famous prints have been made down the years, providing 'bread and butter' work for generations of traditional craftsmen. This is a major reason behind my own general reluctance to include such designs in these Surimono Albums; I'm much more interested in showing people some of the *hidden* treasures of Japanese traditional printmaking. But it would be a strange series of Japanese prints that ignored such work altogether, so I think that now and then I *should* dip into the repertoire of 'standards', and set to work in the footsteps of all those craftsmen down the years, cutting the same designs that have been cut so many times before ... (But only now and then!)

I *did* enjoy making this one though; it might be routine work for many craftsmen, but the fact that a design is famous certainly doesn't mean it is easy to produce. For example, this actor's head is printed from two blocks, one in light grey and one in dark black. The registration between these two blocks is critical (particularly in the area of the mouth and eyes), and as the light grey is printed right at the beginning of the process, to be followed by the dark black only at the very end after the paper has been repeatedly printed (and stretched) with all the other colours and the background, it is quite a challenge to get them lined up properly.

Then there is the *karazuri*, the blind printing ... After last month's print went out, I waited to see what kind of feedback came in, and among the notes was one that I had pretty much expected: "*You really are insisting that we learn to appreciate 'blind printing', aren't you!*" I wonder what this collector will feel when she opens the package this month; so far this year, *every* print has had some embossing! I certainly didn't plan it this way, things just seemed to get out of hand a little. But considering the variety of designs that we are covering, I suppose that nobody will really complain about the prints being 'all the same'!

All in all, I'm glad I chose this design; I learned a lot while making it, and based on reaction from people who saw it on my workbench during the time I was working on it, I think it should be received well by the collectors too. I hope you agree!

August 2003

# Scene from 'Hizakurige'

Last month, when I was preparing the story to accompany the print by Sharaku, I wondered how much 'background' to include; should I have told you about the actor, the scene in the play, the action that was about to take place? In the end, I decided not to discuss such things, but to keep my commentary based on print-related points. That's actually the safest course for me to take - I know a lot more about woodblock prints than I do about old Japanese culture - but it always leaves me wondering about the way that the collectors 'understand' these prints. During the years that I was making prints based on the *Hyakunin Isshu* poetry, this wasn't a concern - most of the collectors of that series had a good understanding of what each print was 'about'. But now that I am making prints with a much wider variety of subject matter, it is far less clear to me just how much I should assume is understood, and how much is necessary to explain.

This month's print is a perfect example. The original viewers of this fan image would have recognized at a glance exactly what they were looking at: they would recognize the designer, the title of the book from which this is an illustration, the names of the two characters depicted, and I think probably they would even recognize the particular episode from the story. But a lot of years have passed, and I suspect that the number of people who could score 100% on this 'test' might be rather few and far between. Let's see!

If you answered Hiroshige for the designer, you couldn't be faulted, although this print is actually only an imitation of a Hiroshige design; the signature of the real designer is difficult to decipher, but perhaps reads **Shoshin**.

The book? It is the famous '*Hizakurige*', commonly translated into English as 'Shank's Mare', the serialized story of a pair of characters and the adventures they have while travelling the length of the old Tokaido route, penned in the Edo era by Ikku Jippensha.

The characters are remembered as Kita and Yaji, and perhaps some of you would even recognize their full names: Kitahachi and Yajirobei ...

But those were all 'easy' - now for the tough one ... what is the scene from the book depicted here? The Tokaido route crosses many rivers - why would the designer have found *this* particular crossing worthy of illustrating? Perhaps because this little episode captures in a nutshell all we need to know about Kita and Yaji ...

They are a couple of good-for-nothings swaggering and blustering their way down the highway. They have arrived at the Oi River, where teams of porters make a living carrying passengers across to the other side. After failing to strike a good bargain with a porter, Kita and Yaji decide to pose as a high-ranking samurai and his attendant. Yaji takes Kita's dirk and arranges it with his own in such a manner as to imitate the two swords of a samurai, and while Kita carries both their bags, they approach the head riverman. But when they announce themselves as travelling on important business they are asked about the rest of their party. Yaji starts making up a story about their large 'kago with eight tall fellows to carry it', their standard bearers and twelve attendants, the bearers for the lacquered boxes, the retinue of thirty people in all ... His explanation for them being unaccompanied at the moment is that these other people have all caught the measles and have been left behind at various points along the road. What Yaji doesn't realize is that his empty scabbard has become snagged on a post and bent, thus exposing him as a fake samurai and his story as a tall tale. So they are ridiculed and chased away, something that seems to happen to them a lot during their travels!

So in our print we are being treated to a view of Kita and Yaji's magnificent (and completely imaginary) retinue as it is carried across a river in the appropriate 'high style'.

How did you score on the 'test'? I should be honest and admit that although I could recognize the designer, the book, and yes, even the two scoundrels' names, I wasn't able to pull the particular episode out of my own memory, but had to ask for help!

I wonder - a hundred years from now, just how many people will be able to recognize something like an episode from say, a Tora-san movie?

# Tokugawa-era Tea Bowl

Most of the prints that I have selected for inclusion in these Surimono Albums were created originally as 'art' objects; some were made to be given to friends, some were illustrations for books, and others were 'stand-alone' art. But by choosing only 'art' images, I am distorting the historical picture somewhat, because back in the 'old days' woodblock printing was not seen as an 'art' technique. It was simply 'printing', and was thought of in much the same way that we now think of commercial printing - the books, newspapers, pamphlets, packages and all the other assorted products of the modern printing industry - the main point was not the *technique* used, but the *content*. So it's time that I addressed this imbalance, and reproduced a print from that 'other side' of woodblock printing history; the image we see here is an example of woodblock printing being used simply as a vehicle to bring us a particular image.

These days we are so flooded with imagery - and beautiful full-colour realistic imagery - that we tend to forget that most of our ancestors lived in a world where 'illustrations' were rare. In a world without photography and the ability to print and distribute photographic images, there was simply no way to 'see' something at a distance; if you had no chance to see the real thing, you just had to try and imagine what it looked like.

Perhaps - just for example - you had an interest in old tea ceremony objects; you were a connoisseur of tea bowls, and enjoyed seeing them whenever you had a chance. You had *heard* about the famous old bowls in the Tokugawa collection, but of course you could never actually *see* what they were like. In an era before the invention of photography, you were simply out of luck, and that was that. As the country opened up after the Meiji Restoration though, the hugely expanding thirst for knowledge meant that this situation became intolerable - a way had to be found to provide realistic illustrations.

So it was during that era that publishers found ways to respond to these demands by pushing the boundaries of what had previously been considered possible with the woodblock technique. The classical *ukiyo-e* prints had been made with flat, transparent colour and with no attempt at 'modelling' of the objects depicted, but with expanded use of the *bokashi* shading technique, and a great increase in the number of impressions taken from the blocks, much more realistic images could be produced.

In a short 'window of opportunity' - between the development of these new techniques and the arrival of the mechanical printing technologies which killed them off almost as soon as they had been born - a stunning range of illustrated prints and books were produced from woodblocks. The image you see here is taken from such a set of books, "*Encyclopedia of the Arts of Japan*", which illustrated a wide range of items from ancient times up to the end of the feudal era. This tea ceremony bowl is illustrated in two views, the general view you see here, and an illustration from the underside of the bowl which helps the viewers to see the out-of-round shape and the important maker's markings. It is all so beautifully done that I am sure it is 99% as good as seeing the real thing!

To my eyes now (and I hope to yours too) this sort of image is far preferable to a photographic reproduction - this has tone, depth, and a texture that flat kinds of printing just cannot capture; but I am sure that when photographic printing techniques arrived, these books were tossed aside in the rush to adopt the more 'modern' methods. And I suppose I can understand that - the photographs must indeed have looked more 'real' to their eyes at the time. I think though, that a lot was lost in the transition ...

Perhaps in future Surimono Albums I can bring you some more treasures from these old books: a lacquered calligraphy box, a pair of gorgeous door panels, a delicately engraved silver-fitted tea canister ... So much beauty, so little time!

October 2003



# The Bandit Lu Zhishen

I don't quite know how it happened, but it seems to have become a tradition with these Surimono Albums that the seventh print each time is something a bit 'special', with plenty of delicate carving, special pigments, a large number of impressions ... Well, if those are the requirements for this spot, then one name will soon bubble up to the top of the list of contenders - **Totoya Hokkei!** Hokkei's name is of course very familiar to collectors of my prints, and indeed, he has already appeared in this year's album - starting it off with the first print. The basic theme this time - *Suiko Gogyo* (Suikoden and the Five Elements) - overlaps that of the earlier series - *Gogyo* (Five Elements) - and in both cases (with a lamentable lack of imagination) I ended up choosing the 'wood' element!

I say 'choosing', but it was more serendipity than anything else; during a short trip to the US earlier this year I ran across this print for sale in a museum shop - not a photograph, but an actual old Japanese woodblock print. A group of them were being 'deaccessioned' by the curators, and I was more than happy to 'accession' them for my own collection! And so this one now turns up in yours ...

*Suikoden* is the Japanese name for a hugely famous long and winding Chinese classic story about 108 bandits, one of whom we see in this print - Lu Zhishen, a burly tattooed bear of a man who gets involved in far more adventures than I can recount here; simply let it suffice to say that most of them involve drink, and all of them involve fighting! The particular episode wonderfully depicted here by Hokkei's brush is one in which he pulls a willow tree out of the ground in a demonstration of his superhuman strength.

There are of course five prints in Hokkei's series, representing wood, water, fire, earth and metal, just as there were in the case of the earlier print this year. Each time I make such a print - a single design taken from a larger set - it leaves me with a kind of unfinished feeling. I've been sort of playing a mental game with myself, saying "*Sometime in a later Surimono Album I'll return to this series and do another one; that way they'll all get completed bit by bit.*" But when I look through the pile of prints I've done so far in these albums, I see that around a dozen of them are in this category - from an unfinished series - so it's obvious that I'll never complete them all!

The concept that things can come in sets - and that the existence of a 'set' seems to trigger a desire to 'cover the whole thing' - is a most interesting one. When I was a child I seem to have been quite susceptible to this effect; I collected little cards that came in packages of tea, of course many sets of postage stamps, and even started a project to identify and write down licence plate numbers of cars from every state of the US as they passed down our street, a thoroughly useless activity if ever there was one. In recent years, I have basically managed to keep the 'accumulate the complete set' virus under control - I now own *one* print from Hokkei's series, but will not start a great hunt for the other four members of the set. Having said that though, I'm not quite sure how I would behave if I found myself with *four* of them - that 'missing' fifth member would certainly be something that I would like to have, obviously.

Having brought up this topic, I suppose I have to address the fact that the very reason I myself am able to make a living at woodblock printmaking is the existence of this 'accumulate the complete set' virus! During the ten years that I worked on the prints of the '100 Poets' I wondered time and again, "*Will people really continue with me for 100 prints?*", but the virus did its work, and we all got to the end to complete our sets!

This growing collection of Surimono Albums has no 'end' of course, so there is no 'complete set' that I am trying to encourage you to collect. Next year, for example, I think I'll work on a different set of prints, and will probably return to making Surimono Albums the year after that ... I'm still not sure.

But did you notice ... I said "Next year, a different *set* of prints ..." Well, of course!

# Name Change Announcement

I mentioned last time that the seventh print in each album seems recently to be a bit 'gorgeous', and that's all very well of course, but there *is* a downside; because such prints take a long time to make - the Hokkei took me nearly two months - the next one has to be a lot quieter! But look at this one! If it were any 'quieter', it would be a blank sheet of paper!

Actually, that's not really a joke. I keep here some pieces of exactly this same type of paper presented to me by Mr. Ichibei Iwano, the man who made the paper for all the prints in this album. The pieces are about the size of this print, are blank, and carry his seal in the lower corner. They are works of art. So I think that when Iwano-san sees this print, he will be very happy ... at last people will be able to see the 'raw' beauty of his paper without the sizing and pigments getting 'in the way'!

This print of course, is mainly 'about' a poem, and to understand it needs some explanation ... This is an 'announcement' surimono issued by an amateur poet, probably only in a dozen or so copies handed out to the members of his poetry circle. Members of such circles in those days used poetic names for themselves, which they changed as they felt appropriate. One such man decided to start calling himself *Ichō Mitsukado*, and composed a poem to communicate to his acquaintances why he had chosen that particular name. A little tidbit of historical background is needed before we in our era can understand his feelings - the fact that in those days ginkgo (*icho*) leaves were pressed between the pages of books with the belief that they repelled insects.

*Just like a ginkgo leaf  
Pressed in the pages of a great book,  
I too wish to be among books  
To take on the ways of wise people.*

This is a sentiment to which I subscribe whole-heartedly; and if I ever decide to take an 'art' name, I'll keep this idea in mind!

The designer of this print is **Yanagawa Shigenobu**, but he is not really responsible for what you see here. Most of the prints in this album so far have been quite strict reproductions which follow the original model very closely. This print however, is more of an 'adaptation'. I know it only through a book reproduction, and a quite poor one at that, but I was so captivated by the elegance and simplicity of the design that I wanted to include it in this album even though I had no chance of obtaining a clear image of the original.

The embossed ginkgo leaves didn't pose too great a problem; I sketched them based on Shigenobu's outlines and then carved a block to match. But for the calligraphy, which was far too indistinct for my requirements, I had to call for assistance. Mrs. Yuko Tauchi, a professional calligrapher who lives in Saitama and whose calligraphy I admired at first sight, consented to write the poem out for me in her elegant hand. She was somewhat hesitant when hearing my request, but once I made it clear that I wasn't looking for a 'reproduction' but was giving her a completely free hand, she accepted enthusiastically.

When I received her manuscript, I was glad to see that she had used 'dry brush' work in places; the 'standard issue' calligraphy on most of the old surimono is always very clean. I love carving it, but also appreciate the challenge of this type.

Then printing ... this was another challenge; as you all know, woodblock printing is a 'flat' process, and the baren moves across the back of the paper applying even pressure to all carved parts of the block. Printers in the Meiji days though, found ways to create such variations in depth of tone as you see here, and I have studied their prints to try and emulate their achievement. To print calligraphy this way takes a great deal of 'extra' work, but it is especially gratifying when somebody sees the result and says "That *can't* be carved and printed! Surely it was drawn by hand!"

So there we have it, a 'simple' print that I hope will give you plenty of quiet pleasure.

January 2004

# Fuji from Tago Bay

After the previous rather minimalist print, I wanted to work on something a bit more full-blooded this time! I've been trying to include a *shin-hanga* print in each recent album; from a living designer when I can, from a public domain source otherwise. Japanese copyright laws stipulate that works are protected for a period of 50 years after the death of the creator, so as the designer of this print - **Tsuchiya Koitsu** - passed away in 1949, his works may now be reproduced freely. (In recent years there has been a move - particularly in America - to legislate extensions to copyright terms; large corporations are having laws changed in order to try to hold onto their copyrights indefinitely. If this trend catches on in Japan, it will put an end to my work, at least as far as the *shin-hanga* genre is concerned ...)

Printing the colours on a *shin-hanga* design is infinitely more difficult than working with an older style of Japanese print. An *ukiyo-e* design is for the most part all 'visible'; the outlines are clean and sharp, and the colour areas are clearly defined. The essence of a *shin-hanga* design though, lies in its multiplicity of colour blends and overlays, and it can be very difficult indeed to determine just what block layout was used to make any particular print. I of course have no access to the original block set, so have to work through a sort of 'reverse engineering' process to try and establish how this print was 'built'. That is only half the challenge though, because once I have a set of blocks ready, test printing begins, and this brings with it a whole new set of decisions that must be made.

In a famous set of prints he produced in the 1920's, Hiroshi Yoshida showed how a single set of blocks could be used to make an entire series of prints of dramatically different appearance. A sunlit scene, a misty scene, a night scene ... by altering the application of pigment to the wood, all these variants could be produced. This is a blessing and a curse for the printmakers; of course the designer enjoys a wonderful flexibility, but with a literally infinite range of possibilities available - nearly all of which look beautiful - proofing can be a long (and expensive) process before a 'final' version is pinned down.

And for the printer, what a difficult job he then faces in trying to make the entire edition match the proof copy! The *tiniest* adjustment in the way he blends the pigments will alter the entire mood of the print ... the depth of the water, the glow in the sky, the mist ... all these things are infinitely adjustable, and extremely difficult to control. Before I started proofing work, I used the internet to inspect a number of different images of this design; these were all issued by the original publisher, at intervals of some decades apart, and were of course all printed from the block set owned by that publisher. They are *hugely* different - a bluish lake/a greenish lake, sunlight on the tree trunk/no sunlight on the tree trunk ... practically every part of the image is changed from sample to sample. Some of this will have been due to changing fashion as the years went by - the more modern examples are quite garish - and some will be due to the printers being not quite so careful in following a proof copy.

Which 'sample' did I follow? Well, none of them actually. Because the original publisher issued so many variants of this print, I myself felt quite at liberty when creating this one; I looked carefully at the block set, studied those older images for quite a long time, and then came up with what you see here. I am pretty happy with it, and almost feel I am right there at Tago Bay when I look at this ...

And that reminds me there is something else I should mention about this print - regular collectors of my work know that I usually insist that the prints in my albums look better when seen close up and held horizontally in the hand, but I have to admit that this one - based as it is on western principles of design and perspective - looks much better when placed vertically and seen from a bit of distance.

Please enjoy your trip to Tago Bay!

February 2004

# Priest on Snowy Path

I don't know if any of you collectors are 'tracking' the coverage of the history of Japanese prints in these Surimono Albums. After five albums and 50 prints, have I actually selected a balanced survey of the field? The answer to that is a very clear 'no', although it would not really be a fair question, because I have never intended these albums to represent an accurate historical overview. The selection has ranged quite far and wide, but there is one underlying criteria for inclusion that guarantees the albums will never have a truly representative balance - I only choose prints that I myself like! So if you've been waiting for something by Kunisada, Kuniteru, Kunihiro, Kuninao, or any of the other numberless followers of Toyokuni, you'll have to keep waiting ...

There is one man though in that 'Kuni' group (which numbers more than 50 artists) who stands out from the rest - **Utagawa Kuniyoshi**. This print, originally published just one year after Hiroshige's famous Tokaido series, is not really representative of his work, as his later style is dramatically different, but as I said, I'm not trying to be 'complete', I'm just following my own preferences.

The design is one from a set of ten, and has become one of Kuniyoshi's best-known works. It makes rather heavy use of the *bokashi* gradation technique, just as did the previous print by Tsuchiya Koitsu, but in this case, there is an extra 'twist' that rather complicates matters.

In that print of Mt. Fuji, the gradations were for the most part applied to smooth open areas of the print - the sky, the water surface, etc. In this print though, all these areas are not smooth, but are interrupted by snowflakes. As I have mentioned before in these stories, whenever you see white in a classical *ukiyo-e* print, you are looking at the white of the paper, not at white pigment, and so it is in this case. All those white specks are bare paper, and this means that on each of those blocks - sea, sky, mountainside, buildings - each and every one of those specks is carved out of the wood. Now this poses no special difficulties for the carver, but when the printer sees a block like this, he knows he is facing a challenge.

The problem is water. In order to print a smooth gradation, the surface of the block must be moistened, and of course, wiping water across a piece of wood riddled with tiny indentations tends to leave the holes full of water. When the pigment is brushed over the surface, the printed result is not 'empty' white spots, but coloured 'blots'. The difficulty is magnified on this print by the fact that many of the blocks - the sea for example - must be printed more than once to produce the required effect, making it quite a challenge to keep all the specks clear and bright.

I knew what I was letting myself in for when I chose this design, with snowflakes covering almost the entire surface of the image, so made no complaint while working my way through the large number of impressions. All in all, it was very good practice, but I was glad to get to the end of the stack of 200 sheets!

To me, this image makes a very good choice to finish off this album, and indeed, to finish off the group of five Surimono Albums that I have made so far. As you will read in the Afterword, I will not be continuing immediately with another one of these albums; there will be a 'change of pace' for at least a year.

So I will go out in much the same way I came in five years ago, with a soundless image of a passage through falling snow ...

April 2004

# Afterword ...

So here we are at the end of another album, and the 'end' of this group of five albums. When I began this Surimono Album project five years ago, I had absolutely no idea how many albums I would make or how long the series would continue. In fact, at the time that the first set was getting under way, I still wasn't perfectly confident of actually being able to *make* the prints I was planning to include. Up to that point, my printmaking activities had been tightly bound up with the creation of the *Hyakunin Isshu* print series, and I had very little experience with making any other type of print.

The Surimono Albums were conceived partly to address this inexperience - to provide me with a structure within which I could investigate many of the interesting facets of traditional Japanese woodblock prints; so many wonderful images ... so many wonderful techniques ... all waiting for me to explore!

It has worked out far better than I could have imagined. Although I can't remember my thinking of five years ago in clear detail, I am sure that if you had shown some of these recent prints to me at that time and told me that I would soon be able to do such work, I would have been rather skeptical ... But here I am five years later, and here are the prints; evidence that it has been a very productive and educational time for me.

The next question is "Where do I go from here?", and I have to say immediately that I am not 'finished' with making Surimono Albums. Although I am going to work on a different project for the balance of this year, I fully intend to continue extending the surimono series; as it so perfectly gives both of us what we need - I the printmaker with a venue for expanding my skills, and you the recipient with a collection that (hopefully!) will never be boring or stale.

The Surimono Albums will return!

\* \* \*

Over the years - and I am speaking of the years that have passed since Japan opened up to the west - quite a number of westerners have become interested in Japanese printmaking. People from many countries have come here, picked up knives and baren, and set to work making woodblock prints. But with one exception, all these people have approached printmaking from an *artist's* point of view; making sketches of something that interests them, then preparing the blocks, cutting the design, and finally doing the printing. There are at least a half-dozen such people working here in Japan even as I write this, and some of their work is very interesting and attractive. But I mentioned 'one exception' and of course, that is myself. I do not have an artist's point of view, but a craftsman's. Now there is no right and wrong here, and of course there is room for both types, but there is one question in all this to which I have never been able to find an answer - why am I the only one? Why are there not *many* people doing what I do?

If one looks at other fields, in fact almost *any* other field - Early Music, old-fashioned press-type printing, boatbuilding ... - you will find an abundance of people studying and practicing the craft using original old methods. In many cases there are so many people doing this that they have formed groups and international societies.

But why is it that nobody else on this planet other than me seems to be interested in making reproductions of traditional Japanese prints? The prints themselves are *hugely* interesting to foreigners, and Japanese culture in general is a topic of immense attraction to people from all over the world; these two facts would seem to guarantee a steady stream of people heading over here to do what I do. But there are none. A stream of young Japanese people goes to Italy to learn to make old-style violins, but where is the corresponding stream headed in the other direction to study traditional printmaking?

Perhaps I should be thankful for this, after all, it means that I have no competition! Actually though, I would very much welcome the entry of other people into this field. A person *can* run a marathon by himself, but what a difference it would make to hear some footsteps coming up behind ... and gaining!

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April 2004  
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