Individuality Asserted

# One and One Only

Featured Guest

The Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints

## Meguri Nakayama

Meguri

## The issues involved in preserving traditional techiniques

When we see ukiyo-e prints at an exhibition, the colors are usually faded and the paper yellowed with age. To prevent further fading, the prints are usually shown under glass and with subdued lighting, making it even more difficult to appreciate the beauty intrinsic to ukiyo-e. After all, the freshly-pulled prints that delighted the people of the Edo period (17th to mid-19th century) were so gorgeously colorful they were known as "brocade prints" (*nishiki-e*).

The Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints is a traditional woodcut-print publisher (*hanmoto*) founded in 1928 to make ukiyo-e reproductions. In fact, it combines the roles of printer and publisher, and can thus be called a production company of prints. With an exclusive team of block carvers and printers, it produces reproductions that are as faithful to the ukiyo-e of masters such as Toshusai Sharaku and Katsushika Hokusai as possible, providing customers with prints that are as vivid and colorful as the Edo-period originals

The printing blocks reproduced before World War II were all destroyed in the firebombing of Tokyo, so Adachi Institute had to start again from zero at the end of the war. I think we can be a bit proud of the fact that since that time we have reproduced more than 1200 sets of blocks. In addition, over the past decade we have also engaged in the production of original woodcut prints by contemporary artists and graphic designers.

Even so, the present state of affairs in the world of traditional woodcut prints does not encourage optimism, beset as it is by problems of a shrinking market and difficulty in finding people who are willing and able to master the difficult artisanship involved. In the Edo period, woodblocks were used for almost all printed matter, from Buddhist sutras and popular novels to calendars, though ukiyo-e were perhaps the aesthetic pinnacle of this craft. However, from the late nineteenth century onward, woodcut printing was gradually eclipsed by movable type and offset printing. Before World War II, woodcut printing continued to be used for matchboxes, greeting cards, gift envelopes, and the like, but nowadays demand for woodcut printing of these items has shrunk and it is difficult for block carvers and printers to make a living.

In a similar fashion, the techniques of traditional papermaking, and of making other tools

I want people to experience in the midst of their daily lives the ineffably clean lines and lovely colors that can be achieved only with woodcut printing backed by a long tradition of artisanship.

Nakayama

of the trade such as graving knives and chisels, inking brushes and *baren*, are also being lost. The *baren* is a disk-shaped device wrapped in bamboo skins and with a woven bamboo handle that is used to burnish the paper onto the inked block—an essential part of the printing process. A hobbyist might find something viable in almost any art-supply store, but to buy a *baren* of genuinely professional quality these days you might have to spend close to 100,000 yen. This is because artisans who know how to select the proper materials and fashion them into a quality *baren* have almost disappeared.

When I joined the Adachi Institute a year and a half ago, it was because I wanted to do something to help revive this world of the traditional woodcut print.

## What a long strange trip it's been …

I entered Hitotsubashi University intent on becoming a lawyer. After graduation, and failing the national bar examination three times, I gave up on that idea.

The reason I wanted to be a lawyer was that from my high school days I had been interested in modern and contemporary history, and particularly in citizen's movements. And as I studied prewar and postwar Japanese history, the problems of discrimination against foreign residents and other groups were brought home to me in an immediate way. And I thought that knowledge of the law might be useful in efforts to resolve these issues. In other words, for me studying law was a means, not an end. So even though I was enrolled in the Faculty of Law, I spent most of my first two years taking social science classes. Beginning my third year, I enrolled in the seminar in international private law and tried to concentrate on my legal studies, but I think somehow my heart wasn't in it. I never really got to the point that I enjoyed it.

I had decided I would try for three years to pass the bar exam and if it didn't work out I would give up and do something else. So eventually I saw a recruiting ad in the newspaper for a company called Urban Club Co., Ltd. that the Tokyo Gas Co., Ltd. had set up as a platform for cross-industry collaboration and applied for a job there. When I first started looking for work I had been sort of dreaming of a job that had something to do with the citizen's movement, but having graduated from college I didn't want to continue to be a burden on my parents. This job looked like a stable one, being a subsidiary of Tokyo Gas, and I thought perhaps cross-industry collaboration would involve the cultivation of the sort of horizontal ties that might be useful in civic activism.

As far as the company was concerned, they were trying to set up a temporary staffing operation as part of the cross-industry collaboration scheme, and were looking for people with a knowledge of law.

## I began to want to do work that let me experience a sense of accomplishment as part of a team

The work at Urban Club was really interesting, and I think it suited my personality.

It was a small company with less than twenty employees, but people were seconded to us from a variety of other companies, and for someone like me who didn't have a lot of practical knowledge of the world, it was a pretty comprehensive education in such things as customer satisfaction, how you went about setting up a profit-making organization, and so on. Cross-industry collaboration involved organizing and managing a variety of seminars and workshops, and by working in the secretariat for these events I got to meet people from a number of different industries. And more than anything else, being involved in the start-up of the temporary staffing operation taught me how much fun it can be to invent your job as you are doing it.

The work I was doing in temporary staffing basically involved liaison and coordination between the employing firms and the temporary staff sent to them, sorting out whatever problems or issues might arise. It was work that seems to have been a good fit for me. When relations between employer and employee come to a deadlock the final resort is legal action, but it is important to try to get

communication between people running smoothly and to make improvements to the work environment before things come to such a pass. This was something I was able to learn through working as such a coordinator. There are many things that cannot be resolved simply by legal means. I really think if I had realized this when I was studying for the bar exam things might have turned out somewhat differently.

So why, if I was so fortunate in my choice of jobs, did I decide to leave it for another workplace?

Speaking from a completely selfish perspective, the problem with working as a temporary staffing coordinator was actually that if the staffing was a good match and no issues arose, there really wasn't much of anything for me to do. The temporary staffers themselves could feel a certain sense of accomplishment through the work they were doing at the companies where they were assigned, but that was something I couldn't really be a part of. So I began to feel a bit dissatisfied.

It wasn't that I disliked working in a support capacity. But even if I was working in a support capacity, I wanted to be doing something where I was involved right to the end and had a chance to share in the sense of accomplishing something as a team. When I began to rethink my position in this way, the Adachi Institute was the answer.

## Here is something that only I can do

Actually, the Adachi Institute was founded by my great-uncle on my father's side, and both my uncle and my father were involved with it later on—in other words, it's a family business.

I thought there were a number of potential disadvantages to my getting involved in such a company, but I also felt that if I made good use of the strengths of being a member of the family, there were things I alone might accomplish. In addition, here was a place where I knew I could be involved in the total process of production from beginning to end.

As I expected, when I first started talking about this idea, my mother and father were violently opposed. They said, "What's got into you! You know the kind of shape the world of traditional printmaking is in right now!" But I stuck to my guns, saying that after a few false starts I'd finally found what I wanted to do, and eventually they gave in and let me do what I wanted.

Now that I was an insider, I realized that the industry was in even deeper crisis than I had imagined. It was a

closed little world, shut off from outside influences, and the people in it had rigidly fixed and antiquated ways of thinking. It seemed to me that if things continued in this vein the business would simply die of natural causes, but the people involved in it felt that cutting themselves off from the outside world had been the key to their survival. Certainly no one was going to listen to a newcomer like me lecture them on how to break out of the impasse they were in.

But it was expressly because the industry was in such a state that I felt there were a lot of things I could probably do. It wasn't a situation like my work as a coordinator where if all went well there was nothing to do. Nor was anybody happy about the idea of all these traditional skills and techniques disappearing. We all shared a desire to see them recover, and be passed on to future generations. So there was material for something other than pessimism.

## My job is to nurture young artisans and build an environment in which they can learn their trades

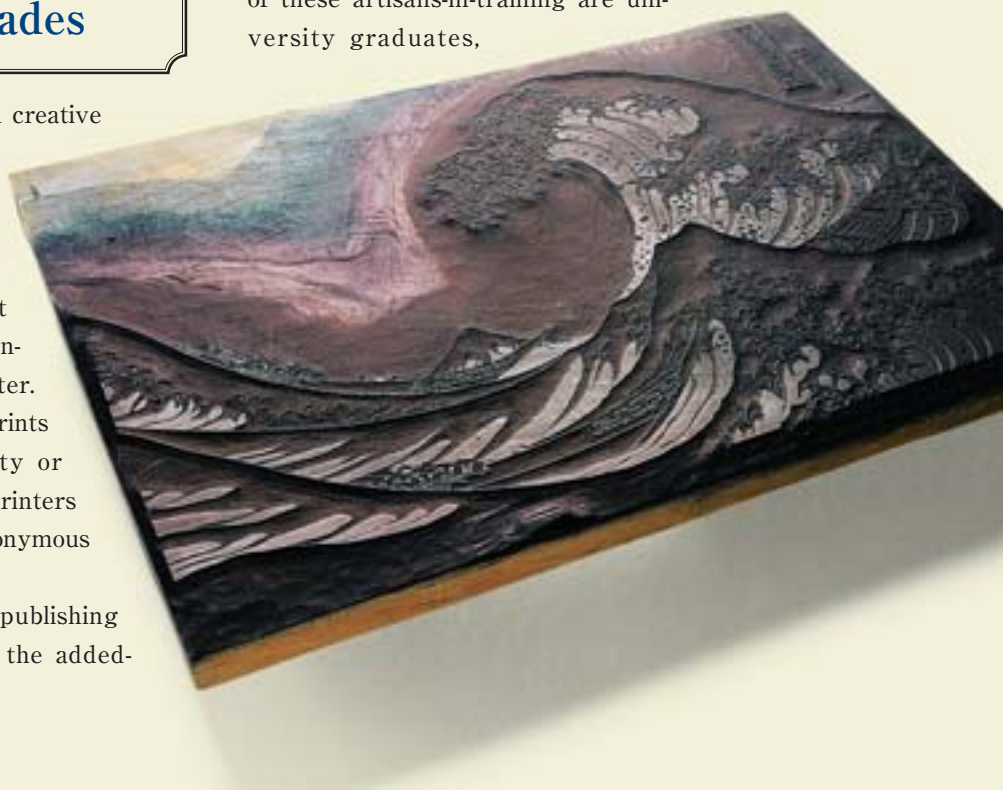
There is a difference between modern creative woodcut printing, in which the original design, block carving, and printing are all done by an individual artisan, and traditional printing, which has an industrial aspect to it in that there is a distinct division of labor between the artist designing the print, the carver, and the printer. Another way of putting it is that these prints are not marketed on the individuality or unique qualities that the carvers and printers bring to the table. They are strictly anonymous artisans.

The Adachi Institute specializes in publishing artistic works as one way to increase the added-value of our products, but to the carvers and printers there is not much difference between ukiyo-e reproductions or more bread-and-butter commercial jobs in terms of the way they do their work—just as there is no fundamental technical difference between printing a banknote and printing a magazine.

But traditional woodcut printing does not use presses or other machinery; it is sustained by the skills of the artisans. And naturally enough, differences in the level and maturity of those skills is reflected in the final output. These skills are one of the crucial keys to traditional printmaking, and fundamentally there is no other way to acquire them than through repetition and practice.

At present it is said that there are probably no more than sixty to seventy artisans—carvers and printers included—who are skilled enough to make a living plying these trades. And most of these are elderly; the number able to maintain a full-scale working life is much lower.

On the other hand, there are actually a significant number of young people interested in learning to be carvers and printers. At the Adachi Institute, we have a system in which each of our master artisans has two or three apprentices working with them, learning the trade. Most of these artisans-in-training are university graduates,





among them young women who have graduated from art colleges. My first priority in my own work is to provide backup for the professional development of these young artisans, from the perspective of preserving and passing on the craft tradition.

The mentality of these young artisans is different from that of the lowly live-in apprentices of days gone by, who learned by watching and imitating their masters. Not to put too fine a point on it, they have other ways of putting food in their mouths. And if we don't provide a workplace environment and structure adapted to these young people, there won't be any others around to inherit the tradition.

## Building new networks to create new markets

The first priority in creating an environment to foster young artisans, however, is to create conditions in which they will have a steady flow of work. With enough work on hand, there is a natural incentive to master the skills needed to do it speedily and efficiently, especially since there is profit to be made proportionately. The work itself is what nurtures artisans.

Because of this, we cannot simply sit about bewailing the fact that the traditional markets have dried up. To revive and sustain the craft of traditional printmaking, we must create new markets to replace the old ones.

So what are the potential markets for woodcut prints? Well, one is the market composed of people who want to buy something to hang on their wall. Another is the gift market. These are probably the two most important. There is another market, that of collectors or connoisseurs, but because this is something of a closed market, the real issue is what can be done to create the first two markets I have mentioned and make them appealing to modern consumers.

In today's Japan there is still not much of a custom of buying art to hang on one's walls at home, and as a result there is not much of a gift market for such art, either. One reason for this is that fine art tends to be priced beyond a level that people can comfortably afford. This is why we have made it possible to buy a print you like from among our lineup of 1200 ukiyo-e reproductions for around 13,000 yen. And in addition to ukiyo-e reproductions we have a selection of modern and contemporary woodcut prints as well. While it is true that these are just prints, they have been printed by artisans from hand-carved blocks on handmade Japanese paper in a multicolor process using inks made from all-natural pigments. As a result, they can give you a better taste of the unique qualities of woodcut printing than even that offered by an original ukiyo-e. If you would simply hold one in your hands, you could see this for yourself.

The more people come to understand and appreciate the world of traditional woodcut printmaking, the closer we will be to creating a new market and new customs of decorating our homes with art. With this in mind, I am using the contacts I made through cross-industry collaboration work with my former company in an effort to build new networks.

When *Hitotsubashi Quarterly* first approached me about this interview, I thought, why would they want to talk to someone with such an unconventional career path, but I decided to go ahead with it in the hopes that I might reach even one more person with information about the joys of the traditional woodcut print.

**Meguri Nakayama**

Joined The Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints in 2004. Prior to that she had been with Urban Club Co., Ltd. since 2001. Graduated from Hitotsubashi University Faculty of Law in 1998. Born in Tokyo in 1974.