

Carving a Living Out of Pop Culture

A woodblock printmaker hosts “print parties” from his workshop in Asakusa and continues the tradition of woodblock printing as an everyday popular news medium.



The beauty and refinement of the woodblock print depends on the creator's fine touch and attention to detail.

“Let's do this!” enthuses energetic woodblock printer and carver David Bull with a clap of his hands, launching into a series of rapid instructions that signal the start of one of his “print parties,” workshop-like experiences that allow visitors to try their hand at woodblock printing themselves using Japanese techniques.

“they want to touch Japan. We give them that experience”

While Bull has been in Japan for over 30 years, slowly but steadily building up his woodblock printing business, his current shop and workshop space in one of Tokyo's essential destinations for visitors, Asakusa, only opened in 2014. In addition to the print parties, he and his staff also create prints that are sold at the shop and online.

“We constantly hear from the tourists that they want to do stuff. They've seen the temples, they've been shopping, they've eaten sushi, and now they want to touch Japan,” Bull says. “We give them that experience.”

Bull first happened upon Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints in Canada. *Ukiyo-e*—literally “floating world pictures”—subjects included female beauties,

kabuki actors and sumo wrestlers; scenes from history and folk tales; travel scenes and landscapes; flora and fauna; and erotica. It was the original Edo period (1603-1868) pop culture. They captivated him so much that he began trying to teach himself how

to reproduce them, learning from his mistakes and failures as he went. When he and his family moved to Tokyo over three decades ago, he continued to do printmaking in between teaching English classes. But his real break came when he embarked on an ambitious project to make prints of *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, a famous anthology of 100 poems by 100 poets that dates from around 1200 and is often published as individual prints or playing cards, each with the poem often accompanied by a portrait of the poet. He sold subscriptions to the series, making a limited run of 100 prints of each of the poems. Reproducing 10 of the poems a year, Bull dedicated himself to the project for a decade, enabling him to finally make a living from printmaking.

woodblock prints of his designs feature themes from modern pop culture

The 100 poems project is also what allowed Bull to save the capital needed to expand his workshop by hiring staff to help him make his prints. However, he quickly ran through his funds. Just as Bull had told all of his staff he would have to lay them off, his next big break came in the form of an email from Jed Henry, a young American artist and illustrator who wanted Bull to create handmade woodblock prints of his designs, which featured themes from modern pop culture. Bull eventually agreed to partner with Henry, and the two got the project off the ground with the largest non-movie-related Kickstarter campaign up until that time, raising \$330,000.

“We're the right people in the right place at the right time doing the right thing”

Now 66 years old, Bull has expanded his Asakusa workshop and has made the first floor of the building a retail shop. And while it has taken him a lot of hard work and determination to get where he is today, he also says that he never felt ostracized by other craftsmen, even as a foreigner trying to break into a Japanese field.

“There has been no hostility, no barriers, they helped me,” he says.

Bull's space in Asakusa is on the historic Rokku Dori, just steps from Sensoji Temple. “There's no better location in the world. We're the right people in the right place at the right time doing the right thing,” he says.

“This is my dream. I'm living it every day, and I love it.”



Woodblock printer and carver David Bull at work in Asakusa.