



BOOK MAKER, PHILOSOPHER-ARTIST

Ito Akira

the creative spirit in cultural preservation

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, I happen to be passing through Tokyo during one of my friend Ito Akira's very infrequent art exhibitions. On the blue walls in the low and quiet lighting of the small gallery hang Ito's many paintings illustrating the life of a Japanese man of letters living in the mountains, and the forest plants and creatures in the circle of life around him there. On several tables are copies of his richly colored children's books, a single-edition book of watercolor paintings of wildflowers from Shikoku, and his small, hand-bound volume explaining how theoretical astrophysics and yoga practice (as well as classical Chinese philosophy) can, together, explain the working of all energy in the universe, from the quantum level to the big bang.

But of all the quite different works at the exhibition, the most moving for me is the smallest: a hand-sewn volume that fits into a box about the size of two packs of cards. The book, a loving documentation of traditional Nepali papermaking processes, displays Ito's affection for the ways of life of traditional rural peoples.

"I made this," he says to me, in his

halting, gentle voice, "as a way to try to support their way of life at the time that industrially produced paper was coming into Nepal from factories in other parts of the world. I had been doing research on handcrafts in the Himalayas in the 1970s, and I devised this project as a way to introduce Nepali methods to Japanese craftspeople, artists, and collectors."

By gathering funds from "subscribers" in Japan, Ito hired Nepali artisans to make the paper, carve the woodblocks, produce the prints page by page, and sew the pages together to produce a boxed edition of one hundred and eight copies.

The paper itself is baby soft, and so pleasing to the touch that I feel myself relaxing just holding it in my hands. In the gentle images on each page, I find women walking mountain pathways with straw baskets on their backs, while the trees, the river, the yaks, the clouds, and even the rocks of the mountain themselves vibrate with Ito's energetic line. Nepali men in woolen caps harvest branches from saplings which, on another page, are soaked in a rushing river and then beaten against rocks. Like the meshed fibers



An excerpt from
A Different Kind of Luxury
by Andy Couturier





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of the supple paper, the people seem completely woven into the energy of the landscape.

In this book I can feel what Ito cherishes. The pictures are of the peasant life of Nepal, yet the influence of Japanese folk art is evident as well. The entire process of boiling and pounding the fibers, sieving the pulp in screens under a thatched roof, drying the individual sheets in the sun or by the fire, are rendered in such an intimate and inviting style, yet the book has enough information that papermakers in Japan could use it to replicate all of the techniques, and at the same time feel a sense of connectedness with others doing similar work far away.

Bringing his skills as an illustrator, a writer, and a book designer, and being the son of a traditional craftsman himself, Ito manages to have the book “say” (without saying) that in these mountain villages of Nepal, the daily life of the people, their artisanal craftwork, the specific local culture and the entire life-world are enmeshed into one single fabric. His book project is a creative and nourishing way to accomplish actual cultural preservation and save traditions from extinction: financially supporting craftspeople so that they can continue to do their work, while at the same

time documenting the craft for posterity and introducing it to people in another country. It revitalizes both parties.

As Ito said to me once in his house in the mountains near the slopes of Mt. Fuji, “The *good* things of the past, that’s what we must preserve. They have passed through the hardships of history to become a tradition, and we who are alive today must treasure them, and take care of them for the future.”

As we talk, Ito’s eyes show a softness and compassion, although somewhat tinged with sadness. His treble voice seems to come from far back in his throat and is often marked by a hesitation, a slight pause before choosing the right words. He is generous to a fault, and his hollow cheeks remind me of his many fasts. His sparse, triangular eyebrows, his gray wispy beard and spotted skin, and the way he carries his head slightly forward reveal his age, but underneath these surface things, one can always feel the glow of energy coming from him, something I imagine is a result of his years cultivating his interior resources.



ITO TELLS ME ABOUT his boyhood: “I was born in 1935 into a family of

paperhangers. My father was an artisan, doing hand-work with paper for sliding paper doors.

“They gave me a militarist education in school,” he says, matter of factly. Calculating backward to figure out when Ito was born, I realize he was being trained for fighting in Japan’s Imperial Army. “But when I wasn’t in school,” he says, “I spent a lot of my time dancing in the fields with the grasses and flowers, or going fishing. Other than that, I spent time drawing pictures.”

Early on Ito showed promise in mathematics and the sciences so the family decided to send him to high school, something his elder brother, who was to take over the family business, was not permitted. College, however, was impossible — “We were too poor,” Ito says — so after graduation, he went to work as an electrical engineer in a petroleum refinery. Like so many in his generation, he was caught up in the postwar expansion of the Japanese economy and left his small town to receive training in Western science and technology. The changing economy of the heavily populated countryside could no longer give work to its sons.

This change from the hand work of

his father's generation to the industrial salaried work that Ito took up seems to me archetypal of the wrenching shift the entire society experienced in the shock of the postwar period. But Ito did not follow the path of so many others of his generation. At twenty-eight, he gave up that high-status life as an engineer, its money and its security, to begin a journey that led him through being an itinerant artist and philosopher, and later, to living in his house in the woods in order to follow in the footsteps of the Chinese mountain literati of ancient times. His choice to try to wrest freedom from a society not accustomed to granting it easily says to me that Ito was somehow able to break the dual trances of achievement and money that so many people today are living snugly inside of.

After quitting his job at the oil refinery Ito worked for a few years in book design and publishing, and though he was skilled in that technical world, he eventually threw that all

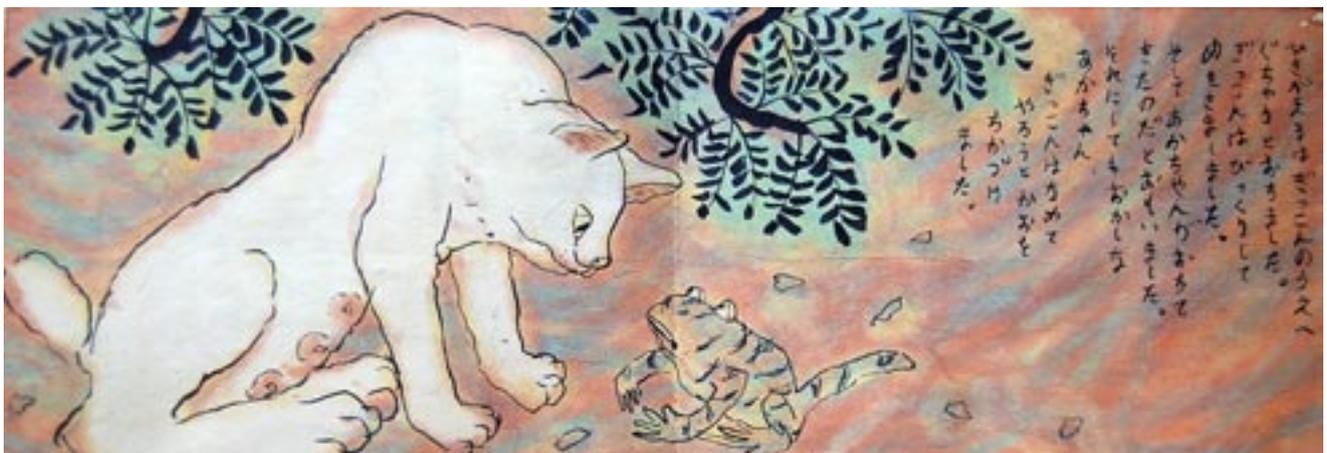
answers in the way that many before him had, in the worlds of spirituality and art. He traveled through Europe and then overland through the Middle East, through Afghanistan and Pakistan, heading toward India. "I took twenty-two months on this journey, moving without any hurry, although my plan was only to be gone six months."

It was also on his first journey to India that Ito first met his lifelong friend and future collaborator, Shucho Takaoka. They traveled together trekking in the Himalayas, visiting *gompas*, (Tibetan monasteries) and exploring Buddhist art.

"You can't imagine what it was like in the late 1970s in Nepal," says U.S. Buddhist scholar Hank Glassman, an associate of both Ito and Takaoka's. "Pages were being ripped from ancient texts and sold to tourists one sheet at a time on the streets of Kathmandu." We are talking about Ito's second long journey to India and Nepal, from 1977–81, which came at the invitation

of Takaoka, who was embarking on a large-scale cultural preservation project of Buddhist iconography in Nepal. "Nepali Buddhism exists solely in the Kathmandu Valley. The rest of the country is overwhelmingly Hindu, and there was little recognition of the value of that ancient culture. Takaoka and Ito recognized the situation and set out to try and rescue what they could."

Takaoka invited Ito to come to Nepal to be the project's artistic coordinator, documenting the 108 manifestations of the Buddhist deity of mercy and compassion, known as Kwan Yin in China, Kannon in Japan, or Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit. After years of research, and with the help of Nepali monks, artisans, and academics, as well as other Japanese collaborators, they produced a very large-format book on thick yellow handmade paper, hand bound in blue Nepali hand-spun cloth. Each page displayed a finely detailed woodblock print of a lithe dancing female deity



over to try to understand some of the more fundamental questions of life. The urgency to try to solve these came, he says, from an experience he had when he was ten years old.

"Near the end of the war, the town next to mine was heavily firebombed one night. My family was evacuated, and although I escaped unhurt, I became terrified of death. A question had been posed for me: 'When will it be my time to die, and where is that we are headed after death?'"

In pursuit of the question of where we are headed after death, Ito decided in 1970 to leave Japan and look for



holding dozens of symbolic objects in her dozens of hands. This was accompanied by two slim industrially printed volumes, one edited by Takaoka on the religious and historical background of these images, the other edited by Ito on the handcrafts and techniques of wood-block carving and papermaking.

To fund this massive six-year project, Ito and Takaoka used their connections in the worlds of arts and culture in Japan to find financial sponsors, who would each receive a single finished copy of the book. Although these supporters' life circumstances may have prevented them from traveling to, much less living in, Nepal, they were able to learn of another strand of Buddhist culture and at the same time support a work of real cultural preservation.

The 108 Kwan Yins book project implicitly said that cultures are not preserved in artifacts, but in techniques alive in the hearts and hands and minds of people. By means of the project, Ito and Takaoka showed the wood-block carvers, the papermakers, the hand binders, as well as the fabric spinners, and weavers and dyers who made the fabric for the cover, that their work was valued in the world, that people would pay for it, even pay *more* for it than for something made by a machine.



IN THESE YEARS, although in his late thirties, Ito lived like a student, or so it seems to me, getting part-time work in factories or polishing bamboo. Sometimes he and his friends would live in dormitories, and travel by boat back to the subcontinent whenever they had enough money saved up. Ito once told me that it took about half a year of working in Japan to put together five thousand dollars, on which he could live for almost four years in India and Nepal. This was right smack in the middle of the biggest economic expansion Japan had ever seen, which is to say that Ito and his friends could have gotten wealthy along with the rest of Japan if they had wanted to. It seems like a nugget of wisdom to me: If you don't need it, don't take it.

"I had one other important experience on that journey," Ito tells me. "I traveled to a small village on the northern shore of the Ganges, a small village called Mithila in the northern Indian state of Bihar, to do research on their paintings. This was a village that was almost totally self-sufficient and not so oriented towards economics. They did not even have electricity. They lived from the soil, and made their own food; even the tools they used every day they made for themselves. I lived with them and saw how they worked with their hands." (Translated literally, what Ito says is "how they caused their hands to work.") I had an

awakening then, that yes, *this* way of living, really was good for humans to live. I understood clearly that this was what I had been pursuing all this time, and that when I went back to Japan I would quit that Tokyo life, and would live in a mountain village myself."

This was also the period when, he says, "my heart began to turn from India more towards China," and he began an intensive study of the Chinese classics. These ancient texts inspired him to adopt many of the recommendations on "the life of the mountain literati," such as doing calligraphy for hanging scrolls and playing the Chinese table harp, the *qin*. Without models in the materialist Japan of the 1980s for living as an artist (at least as one who rejected commercialism) he looked back in history to men who faced similar incongruencies between their hearts and what society expected. He found these answers in the writers of T'ang Dynasty China.



IN HIS HOME in the woods, Ito spends his days painting, bookbinding, studying both ancient Chinese philosophy and modern theoretical physics, as well as in deep contemplation of nature. This is in addition to his daily yoga practice and devotional chanting. He is also a prolific letter writer and I have had the





Growing like thunderheads all summer long, the trees and plants of the woodlands thrive and cover every bit of the mountain until they finally begin to lose their momentum, and in the dark shadows of a forest which has gone through its adolescence and prime, one feels a touch of sadness. ☀️ The forest in September is so abundant in foliage that underneath everything is darkened. However, in winter, trees lose their leaves and you can see through the woods very well. Then the dramatic transformation a mixed-species forest goes through every year in early spring is truly extraordinary. Young shoots growing from the branches of trees burn like light green flames, and before long, the forest which had been empty is filled with green leaves. Walking over the pass which leads to my house and observing the changes, I understand the Buddhist phenomenon of “existence emerging from nothingness” and the phenomenon from modern physics of “energy transforming into matter.” I understand that these abstract, philosophical ideas represent exactly what is happening here. ☀️ “Energy transforming into matter” is the process of photosynthesis — sunshine energy, with carbon dioxide, creating organic compounds, that is to say plants creating leaves with the energy that they have taken in. “Existence emerging from nothingness” can be seen when shoots and then leaves appear from the bare branches of the trees using that potent energy-nourishment. And then in autumn they fall off of the trees and return into the forest, or into the original state of “emptiness” or “nothingness.” ☀️ Thus in the forest I am able to learn that these phases of the circulation of energy, the “formation and disappearance” are common to all phenomena of energy, and this understanding can advance my work in the contemplation of the universe as a phenomenon of energy.





pleasure of receiving several of them over the years. They always include margins filled with birds and frogs and moths, and all the pages are glued to each other so that they open as if they were scrolls. It is as though he has taken his small share of the world, and is doing all he can to create beauty, and to preserve the beauty given to us by generations gone by.

Once, however, talking with me at his home, Ito let out just a little bit of his disappointment at what's happening on this earth. "For the sake of money, and for the sake of 'economic activity,' people try to change things, products, works of art — everything — as quickly as possible. To win at competition, everyone tries to make new things as quickly as possible. But the human body and spirit cannot withstand this kind of acceleration. This is what I hate the most."

On everything he publishes or makes, the paintings, the books, the wood-

block prints, he uses the imprint, "Thousand Eyes, Thousand Hands Workshop." As he explains, "It is the eyes that do the work of perceiving, of seeing, and the hands that do the work of holding things and of expressing things. Because to live is to suffer, and all living things suffer, I decided that as much as possible I wanted to give to others, to lessen their suffering, and I knew that my purpose in life was to use my eyes and my hands to work for that purpose. Even in writing poems or essays, you are working with your eyes and hands to express that compassion and kindness in words. I vowed then to not increase the suffering of others, and that would be my way of making a living as well."

One hand-bound book of Ito's contains a series of original watercolors centered around the life of a single but massive persimmon tree, from its first emergent leaves to the harvesting of the luscious fire-orange fruits. In one

of the paintings the artist, a younger Ito of twenty years past with jet-black curly hair, is sitting on a second-floor balcony amidst a flurry of cherry blossom petals, eating a bento box breakfast and gazing at the tree in the first flush of springtime, light all around. In another, he is perched in the thick brown branches of the tree, gazed at by mythic-eyed birds straight out of central Indian tribal art. On the next page, a brown bear takes the place of the human in the branches, snacking on the succulent fruit in the half-moonlit night. In one of the last illustrations, the young Ito has tied a rope around his waist and hangs from the branches harvesting the bright orange globes, hundreds of which populate the now otherwise barren and brown scraggly branches of the big tree.

Like much of Ito's work, in these paintings the very vibrations of the air and light hum through the brushstrokes like thousands of tiny white threads caught on the wind. He has captured the many energies of this world, and put them on paper, so that all of us can see.



Ito Akira passed into the infinite on February 9, 2007

Andy Couturier's A Different Kind of Luxury: Japanese Lessons in Simple Living and Inner Abundance, containing eleven portraits from rural Japan to inspire choices in meaningful work, art, and sustainable living, has just been published by Stone Bridge Press. He also contributed "Hidden Japan," in KJ #46 (Media in Asia), "Asymmetry, Writing and the Mind," in #47, and "Living the Abundance of Less," in #51.

