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Julie Nelson Davis

University of Pennsylvania, [jndavis@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:jndavis@sas.upenn.edu)

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**Review of Roger S. Keyes, *Ehon: The Art of the Japanese Book***

**Disciplines**

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# The Art of the Japanese Book

Julie Nelson Davis

Roger S. Keyes, *Ehon: The Artist and the Book in Japan*, New York, The New York Public Library, 6 October 2006–4 February 2007, Seattle, The New York Public Library and the University of Washington Press, 2006, 320 pp., 243 col. ills., \$50.

Produced in association with an exhibition of the same title held at the New York Public Library, and with extensive colour illustrations and thoughtful text, this book will be appreciated by a wide audience. Roger Keyes writes thoughtfully about selected examples from the rich holdings of the Spencer Collection at the Library. With over 300 manuscripts dating from the twelfth through twentieth centuries, and 1,500 printed materials and books ranging from AD 770 to the present, this is one of the most extensive collections of Japanese material texts in the United States. Keyes, an accomplished scholar of Japanese print history, completed the cataloguing of the collection, and developed both the exhibition and the accompanying book in coordination with the collection curators and library staff while he was a research fellow at the library.

The exhibition was heralded for presenting the art of the Japanese book to a broader public. The catalogue makes a close study of 70 *ehon*, or 'picture books', from the larger number featured in the exhibition. Organized chronologically, *Ehon* offers the reader the opportunity to develop an understanding of the technical and artistic innovations of the illustrated book in Japan. Throughout, Keyes demonstrates his own sensitivity to the master craft of woodblock (along with selected other) print techniques in Japan, drawing the reader's attention to the quality of line, colour and texture that are among the most impressive features of these works. Keyes emphasizes the ways in which books can be transformative experiences for their readers, stating that the *ehon* functions as '... microcosms of individual, social, and occupational worlds in convergence' (p. 12). He engages with that central idea throughout the text, taking as his credo John Milton's statement in *Areopagetica* (1644) that 'Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as the soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a viol the purest effacacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them' (p. 11). Throughout, his philosophical engagement is with the 'life spirit' of the illustrated book and of its makers, as hand-made objects that, he writes, have 'much in common with ... artists' books, or *livres d'artistes*, although they addressed a wider audience' (*ibid.*). Thus, Keyes emphasizes the remarkable creativity and skill that were brought to works that date from the eighth through twentieth centuries.

As represented in *Ehon*, the Spencer Collection's strengths are clearly those of the early modern era, particularly from

the late sixteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. Of these, works by artists in the *ukiyo-e*, or 'pictures of the floating world', made in the city of Edo (modern Tokyo) are well represented, including some very fine examples by the genre's famous names, such as Hishikawa Moronobu, Kitao Shigemasa, Katsukawa Shunshō, Kitao Masanobu, Kitagawa Utamaro, Utagawa Toyokuni and Katsushika Hokusai, among others. Keyes also included exceptional books produced at the same time in a variety of other styles, with significant works by artists from the Kyoto-Osaka region, including Itō Jakuchū, Mori Rinsai, Ki Chikudō, Nakamura Hōchū, Ike Taiga, Saitō Shūō and Yamaguchi Soken, as well as many others. Examples from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show how the illustrated book was also used for more practical concerns, such as describing styles of flower arranging, documenting the study of snowflakes, representing Chinese painting styles and making Western knowledge of anatomy and cartography available to Japanese readers. Several literary classics, a few examples of pulp fiction, ghost stories and other genres represent the wide range of illustrated books from the period.

These are all framed as individual works, highlighting the achievements that they represent, and the book is thus a treat for the *ehon aficionado*. But it may be more difficult for the general reader to gain a sense of the overall conditions of book publishing in the early modern period. In addition, with so much of the highest quality here, one perversely wants more examples of the low and the cheap. To be sure, a few of these are included, and their lack in *Ehon* is due to their being little represented in the collection, as Keyes acknowledges. Yet these more popular books, and other facts about publishing, might have been addressed further in the introductory essay in order to round out the context. The trouble with having so few of these commercial and trade examples is that general readers may be under the misapprehension that the exquisite examples featured in *Ehon* represented the majority of works produced in the period, rather than its rarities. In fact, most illustrated books in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were cheap ones, serving as comic books, romance novels, parodies, guide-books, didactics and the like. For readers in the Tokugawa era (1615–1868) illustrated books offered a welcome respite from the stress of living under a highly stratified political regime. This project might have also gone further in addressing the social conditions and related restrictions on expression (in effect, censorship) that both readers and book producers encountered. It is to be hoped that in due course these kinds of issues, as well as the broader range of illustrated books – both increasingly under discussion by scholars – will receive wider discussion in exhibitions and related

books.

The Spencer Collection's second area of strength, as represented by this publication, is in the field of modern and contemporary illustrated books. The few works bridging the Tokugawa and the Meiji (1868–1912) periods testify to the illustrated book as a forum for illustrating rapid cultural changes. This is visibly demonstrated in Hashimoto Sadahide's *Observations of the Open Port of Yokohama* (1862), where the ships of the 'Five Nations' in the port of Yokohama and the new technology of photography are among many powerful images shared with the reader. Several early twentieth-century books, including Kamisaka Sekka's *Flowers of a Hundred Worlds* (1910), Kaburagi Kiyokata's *The Whirlpool* (1913–14), Iguchi Kashū and Ōtani Son'yu's *The Tōkaidō Handscrolls* (1922), among others, engage a range of styles present in the period while also demonstrating an increasing awareness of the possibilities of *print* as an artistic style. Of these modern works, Onchi Kōshirō's *Sensations of Flying* (1934) and Takeuchi Seiō's *Masterworks of Seiō* (1937–42) show the ways in which the formal study of the fine arts and the development of art academies transformed the illustrated book into the 'artist book', part of a larger cultural awareness of print as an *art*. Keyes concludes *Ehon* with close studies of post-war picture books, selecting examples by Japanese artists and Western-born artists influenced by Japanese books that stretch the potential of the medium and are intended as *livres d'artistes*. In the addenda, the book also offers an extremely detailed catalogue of the 70 titles, including complete physical descriptions and thorough references and a full inventory of the Spencer Collection. Here, the amount of work that went into researching the books in the exhibition and its accompanying volume is made manifest. The inventory, listed by title in Japanese characters as well as in romanized form, and with reference given to their previous publication, is a welcome feature.

This is certainly a significant contribution to the study of the illustrated book in Japan. Yet some aspects of the book's organization and elucidation struck this reviewer as puzzling. By employing the conceptual category of the *livre d'artiste*, Keyes draws due attention to the high quality of the craft, but the association also alludes to Modernist paradigms of the 'artist' and to the making of 'art' that were not necessarily being invoked at the time many of the works were made. In addition, applying the term *ehon* (and linking it to *livre d'artiste*) as a categorical label throughout, misrepresents all examples as 'picture books', glossing over specific historical and format distinctions. Some of these early works – an eighth-century printed (unillustrated) *sutra*, a thirteenth-century handwritten petition with printed illustrations, a late fourteenth-century luxurious gold on blue paper *Lotus Sutra* and a sixteenth-century 'white-drawing' set of illustrations of the *Tale of Genji* – represent important precedents to the development of the 'book' format. However, these are not 'books' but handscrolls. In these, the text and/or image advances as one rolls out the paper, moving from right to left, so that one's progress through the work is governed by the way in which it is opened. Each experience may be different, depending upon how the object is

unrolled, and makers and viewers were extremely sensitive to the linked experience of seeing and revealing that the format supported. The handscroll thus represents a material and visual choice distinct from that of the sequential turning of the discrete pages of a book. Since handscrolls continued to be made well after books came into common use, they represent a distinct choice by their makers (as well as by their patrons). Moreover, illustrated handscrolls (*emaki*) such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Tale of Genji* included here were not printed multiples but singular paintings, and as unique objects would have been even more precious.

Had these handscrolls been presented as precedents, or alternatives, rather than being glossed under the rubric of the *ehon* (and, more worryingly, the 'artist's book') more could have been made of the fact that both formats represented specific artistic choices. For example, in the early modern period when many of these illustrated books were being produced, the artist Itō Jakuchū and the writer Daiten Kenjō chose to present their rumination on their trip down the Yodo River, *Aboard the Ship of Inspiration* (*Jōkyōshū* 1767), in the form of a printed handscroll (using the 'stone rubbing' technique), rather than a printed book. Keyes offers the notion that they wanted 'to mimic their surprise and joy and the intensity of their experience' (p. 86), and while that may have been the case, the sceptic wonders what else might have gone into that choice in an era when art was not made for its own sake (as well as who would have paid for this sumptuous work). Likewise, what does the decision by Iguchi Kashū and Ōtani Son'yu signify when they made the same move to the illustrated handscroll for *The Tōkaidō Handscrolls* (*Tōkaidō gojūsantsugi emaki*, a title that may be more accurately translated as *Illustrated Scroll of the Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō*, 1922)? A deliberate return to a traditional format (and one with plenty of associations) must have linked their project with specific ideas about the meaning and uses of art. Such distinctions between kinds of formats and their significations are unfortunately masked under the generalizing term *ehon*.

Keyes's emphasis on the *ehon* as representative of the creative genius and spiritual life of its makers, while expressing a kind of charming enthusiasm and marvellous appreciation, makes the book seem at times a personal account. The fact that other kinds of issues – including those of manufacture, use, cost, censorship, commercial viability, artistic status and market, among others – that contribute to an understanding of the history of the book, and which have been taken up by several others in recent decades, were rarely addressed seems something of a missed opportunity. It is also surprising that a number of factual misrepresentations were not caught along the way. Among these, it is stated that 'the precocious young painter Ike Taiga was twenty-two when he arrived in Kyoto in 1745', when Taiga was in fact born and reared in Kyoto (p. 164). The painter Tokuyama Gyokuran was not the 'daughter of a Kyoto geisha' but the daughter of the teahouse owner and recognized poet, Yuri, and she had begun painting well before she met (and married) Taiga (p. 168). Mori Sosen is described as one of 'two outstanding painters in Kyoto', when he was

based throughout his life in Osaka (p. 160). As some of the book titles also feature new translations, it would also have been useful to the general reader to have had the previous English title included in the general entry or the addenda.

*Ehon: The Artist and the Book in Japan* demonstrates Keyes's mastery of the history of the Japanese print tradition and his deep affection for the 'picture book' as a venue for artistic expression. The range of illustrated books from the early modern period alone makes this a welcome volume. By con-

tinuing the discussion of the illustrated book into the modern and contemporary periods, *Ehon* documents how much it remained a vital forum for expression. This book is a significant contribution to the history of the material text in Japan, and it raises the New York Public Library collection to due prominence. With its fine production values and informative text, it is sure to appeal to a wide array of readers.

## Mexican Prints

Reba White Williams

*Mexico and Modern Printmaking: A Revolution in the Graphic Arts 1920–1950*, edited by John Ittmann, exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia, PA, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 21 October 2006–14 January 2007; Nashville, TN, First Center for the Visual Arts, 1 February–5 April 2007; Phoenix, AZ, Phoenix Art Museum, 29 June–16 September 2007; San Antonio, TX, McNay Art Museum, 3 October–6 January 2007; Philadelphia Museum of Art and McNay Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, 289 pp., 53 col. and 250 b. & w. ills., £40.

This stunning catalogue contains almost everything anyone would want to know about an important subject that has received far too little attention. When the topic of Mexican prints has been addressed, the resulting books and catalogues often perpetuated old inaccuracies. Contributors to this new catalogue have taken a fresh look at existing material, updated it and provided new information, including elusive death dates. The scholarship is thorough and comprehensive; the 30 pages of discursive footnotes are an education in themselves and earlier misinformation has been eliminated. The 125 prints and posters in the exhibition, drawn almost entirely from the collections of the two organizing museums, are magnificent. Such a lavish display of Mexican prints in the USA has rarely, if ever, been seen, and like all great exhibitions it makes the viewer long for more.

Anyone interested in Mexican prints or the beginning of printmaking in the Americas will want to read the opening essay by Lyle W. Williams, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the McNay Art Museum. 'Evolution of a Revolution, a Brief History of Printmaking in Mexico' is only 21 pages long, but it is crammed with fascinating tidbits, like 'The first press in the New World was established in Mexico City in 1539', and 'Lithography [was] brought to Mexico in 1826'.

When Williams turns to a general view of Mexican printmaking, he explains that although 'a parallel is often drawn between Mexican and U.S. printmaking of the 1930s and 1940s, the prints and their makers were much more thoroughly integrated with the social fabric of Mexico'. This is true, but US art of those decades may have become more integrated into society as a result of lessons learned from their Mexican associates. North American art owes an enormous debt to Mexican artists, a debt rarely recognized in art history courses or textbooks, but that will be obvious to perusers of this catalogue.

Diego Rivera (1886–1957), José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974) made many of their prints for the US market, and all three worked with the New York-based master lithographer, George C. Miller, from whom – like other artists of the time – they learned a great deal. The publication of their prints spread their ideas, images and artistic styles and was an integral part of the cultural exchange between Mexico and the USA.

Innis Howe Shoemaker, Senior Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, addresses the exchange in 'Crossing Borders, The Weyhe Gallery and the Vogue for Mexican Art in the United States 1926–40'. Shoemaker documents the rôle of the New York-based Weyhe Gallery; its Director, Carl Zigrosser (1891–1975) from 1919 to 1940; the US writer and Mexico resident, William Spratling (1900–67), and other American citizens in bringing both Mexican prints and printmakers to the United States.

In 1940, when Zigrosser left the Weyhe Gallery, he joined the Philadelphia Museum of Art as Print Curator, remaining there until his retirement in 1965 and continuing to explore his interest in Mexican art. Shoemaker's account of Zigrosser, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Mexico is especially valuable, dealing as it does with a less-publicized