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Japanese Printmaking in Context

Julie Nelson Davis

The Commercial and Cultural Climate of Japanese Printmaking, edited by Amy Reigle Newland, Amsterdam, Hotei Publishing, 2004, 272 pp., 18 col. and 53 b. & w. ills., €68.50.

This book brings to a wider audience the full-length papers originally presented at 'The Hotei Publishing First International Conference on Japanese Prints', held at Leiden University in January 2000. It demonstrates the strength and range of research in the field of Japanese print studies, with contributions from Chris Uhlenbeck, Asano Shūgō, David Waterhouse, John Carpenter, Roger Keyes, Timothy Clark, Ellis Tinios, Matthi Forrer and Oikawa Shigeru (listed in order of presentation). In the foreword, Uhlenbeck accurately characterizes the active state of the field in Europe and America, and the increased understanding of the cultural context of Japanese print history. The Leiden project, he explains, was designed to build on this strength and to redirect attention to issues of the commercial climate.

The volume's opening essay, also by Uhlenbeck, reassesses information from standard texts, to stress that premodern Japanese printmaking was a commercial venture in which the publisher functioned as producer-director. Accordingly, publishers both manipulated and responded to their audiences, producing a range of print types for different markets. Some prints were sold directly to the public, with the publisher's profit margin foremost in mind; some were probably made as advertisements for shops and entertainments, with a portion of the costs underwritten by the advertiser; and some (particularly *surimono* and poetry albums) were made as privately commissioned luxury items where the investment was borne by the patrons. Print style, format, quality and subject related to these distinct markets, and like all commodities, prints were subject to the vagaries of taste, fashion and profit. As Uhlenbeck points out, *Ukiyo-e* print production was a 'money-making venture' in which market forces 'must have influenced certain decisions made by publishers . . .' (his italics; pp. 20–21). Emphasizing the rôle of the publisher in directing the final outcome does not necessarily diminish the contribution of the artists, but it does make it clear that particular decisions need to be recognized as part of that commercial enterprise. The point of agency is thus directed away from the standard 'artist as creator' model, and towards a new configuration of creative collaboration and market negotiation.

Aspects of production and distribution are further considered in Asano Shūgō's essay on Hishikawa Moronobu (d. 1694). Through close analysis of printed materials produced by six publishers, Asano proposes that some of Moronobu's illustrated books were remanufactured with recut woodblocks, following the devastating fire of 1682. For example, of

the sixteen book titles and two print series produced by the publisher Urokogataya Sanzaemon between 1670 and 1683, eight (possibly nine) titles were reissued in wholly or partially recut versions from 1683 onwards; they were presumably lost through fire and the publisher subsequently elected to reissue them. Yet some of the six publishers were apparently more fortunate – none of their inventory needed remanufacturing. Asano does not speculate as to why a publisher would have found it beneficial to make such a significant outlay to reconstruct lost materials. Market demand might be taken as the simple answer, but we might also consider why and how Moronobu's books retained their enduring appeal and guaranteed profit, even years after their first publication, and perhaps reconsider as well the status of the artist and his 'popular' books.

The next four essays discuss aspects of print culture through the interaction of the artist, patron, publisher and their market. David Waterhouse's essay on 'The Cultural Milieu of Suzuki Harunobu' adds considerably to English-language writing on Harunobu (?1725–70). Themes of the artist's collaboration with two private poetry groups, their further association with such Edo notables as Ota Nanpo and Hiraga Gennai, the parodic treatment of classical literature and images of known beauties in Harunobu prints, are among the topics examined here. Unfortunately, the article seems somewhat dated, and consultation with more recent publications on literary groups, on the problems of *mitate* and on the artist's *œuvre* and association with known publishers, would have further enhanced this essay's worthy contribution.

Essays by John Carpenter and Roger Keyes discuss the *surimono* print type as a nexus of artistic and literary collaboration. Carpenter's essay presents the important print designer, Kubo Shunman (1757–1820), as a participant in various literary circles; he deftly handles the text-image problems posed by *surimono* prints and excels at the translation of witty poems. He locates the enterprise within a range of aesthetic emphases associated with National Learning (*Kokugaku*). Some aspects of the connections to National Learning, the problem of agency for various artistic decisions and the rôle of the publisher (particularly Tsutaya Juzaburō), could have been taken further. The essay displays a thorough command of the material and scholarship, making it the most significant study of Shunman to appear in English so far.

Keyes also writes on the topic of the *surimono* print, focussing on two albums assembled by a nineteenth-century Osaka enthusiast that included examples both of Edo and Osaka. Keyes's lucid discussion of the manufacture, usage and collection of these special commission prints further develops themes raised in the previous essay. Through his

study of the albums, Keyes reconstructs the affiliations between individuals and develops a picture of a fairly fluid world of exchange and participation. Particularly striking is the discussion of woodblock cutter Tani Seikō (active 1819–31) as more than a mere artisan. Seikō's participation in the *surimono* milieu implicitly raises the issue of the potential impact made by such artisans in the manufacture of printed materials. Keyes reconstructs through a known collection – and by studying the single album that remains in its original form – the connections between the collector and others in his circle, although here, too, there is the occasional assumption of individual intentions that needs further explication.

Clark and Tinios consider the potential interaction between the printmaking cultures of the city of Edo and the Kamigata region. Clark proposes that the Edo *Ukiyo-e* master, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), was influenced by the naturalistic style of the Kyoto-based Maruyama-Shijō painters. As Clark points out, several Maruyama-Shijō artists designed illustrated books and others worked in Edo, making it possible that Hiroshige could have been familiar with that style. However, to take Hiroshige's naturalistic effect of gloaming against a snowy hill and seek its origin in Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–95), or to find the precedent for the misty treatment of a distant landscape by Kikugawa Eizan (1787–1867) primarily in his study with Maruyama-Shijō painter Suzuki Nanrei (1775–1844), seems to discount the fact that a skilled artist like Hiroshige would have had some familiarity with these classic idioms from ink painting. Both effects can ultimately be traced back through Edo painting to Muromachi appropriations of Southern Song styles, and were known to period painters. Yet in pointing out the possibilities for artists to learn new styles in the period – through printed illustrated books, study with other masters and demonstration of facility at *shoga-kai* (calligraphy and painting parties) – Clark does well to remind us that such impulses may have been cued by the experience of encountering other styles.

Clark's important contribution of opening up *Ukiyo-e* representation to a wider array of possible sources is well supported by Tinios's essay on Maruyama-Shijō book illustrations. Tinios discusses the rôle of the *gafu* – the illustrated books that replicated a specific artist's style and could thus serve as an instruction manual – as a significant means of transferral, and shows how such printed books by Kawamura Bunnō (1779–1821), a Maruyama-Shijō-style painter, were likely sources employed for compositions by the Edo-based *Ukiyo-e* artists Utagawa Kuniyoshi

(1797–1861) and Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1865). Tinios makes a compelling argument for the rôle played by such illustrated books in the transmission of style.

Ferrer returns to the question of production in his essay, 'The Relationship Between Publishers and Print Formats in the Edo Period'. He reconsiders the output of several significant *Ukiyo-e* figures – Harunobu, Kiyonaga (1752–1815), Kitagawa Utamaro (?1753–1806), Keisai Eisen (1790–1848) and Hiroshige. By organizing their work according to the known data for medium, format and publisher, Ferrer makes a case for the changes in an artist's production to be related to the realities of the print as a commercial product. In addition, by shifting his emphasis to the publisher as the arbiter of format, subject and style, and adding to this the information about the locales of publishers' shops within the city of Edo, he shows that some publishers seem to have tailored their offerings to the specific clientele they were likely to encounter in their quarter of the city. Ferrer's essay, like Asano's, returns to the status of facts and what may be learned through close analysis of such data; of all the essays in this volume, this one most thoroughly challenges long-held presumptions about the marketing and distribution of single-sheet prints.

In the final essay, Shigeru uses one of Kawanabe Kyōsai's (1831–89) illustrated diaries of his daily activities (the *Kyōsai-e nikki*) to recreate the painter's artistic and social milieu. Through the 1884 album, Kyōsai's interactions with such important figures as Kuniyoshi, Toyokuni III (Kunisada), Toyohara Kunichika (1835–1900), Utagawa Yoshitora (active c. 1830s–80s), Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–92), Shibata Zeshin (1807–91) and others are more fully and complexly represented than ever before. Oikawa's essay functions as a bridge from the previous Tokugawa-era studies to bring the volume into the Meiji period, in a study that shows just how much things changed, while they stayed the same.

Overall, this is a volume that offers significant information about Japanese print studies from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Each essay presents a model for a specific mode of interpretation, and each provocatively opens up its subject to the possibilities of further engagement. The result is a broad-ranging, occasionally uneven, yet densely informative group of essays that demonstrate the increasing sophistication being brought to the issues of the commercial and cultural contexts of Japanese printmaking. The inclusion here of print culture in the Kamigata (Kyoto-Osaka) region and the Meiji context further broadens the scope of study. This is a very welcome addition to the field.

