

Introducing an album of preparatory drawings by Katsushika Isai (1821-1880)

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要旨

最近になって葛飾為斎(1821-1880)が元治元(1864)年に刊行した絵手本『為斎画式』下図が再発見されたが、そこから、北斎漫画などの絵手本、さらには絵入版本全体の制作過程を明らかにし得る、貴重な情報が読み取れる。本下図を入念にみていくことで、版下の制作は手練れた複製技師によって最終的には書き写されて完成するという機械的なものではなく、絵師の構想力が発揮されるプロセスであることが明らかになっていくのである。絵師による最終的な図案が版下であり、実際に刊行される作品と、絵師の構想とを直接に結びつけるものである。つまり、刊行された版画、版本は版下の忠実な複製であるのである。

abstract

A recently rediscovered album of preparatory drawings by Katsushika Isai (1821-1880) for the book *Isai gashiki* (1864) provides insights into the production of *Hokusai manga* and illustrated books more generally. Comparing those drawings with Isai gashiki demonstrates that the production of the block-ready drawing is a creative act, not a mechanical process that could be completed by a copyist however skilled. It is only in the block-ready drawing that the artist fully realises his intention; they are the critical link between the artist's conception and the printed image. The printed image is a facsimile of the block-ready drawing.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2021, an album of thirty-eight preparatory drawings by Katsushika Isai 葛飾為斎 was sold by an auction house in Geneva. The album had belonged to the celebrated French jeweller and collector, Henri Vever (1854-1942). It was previously unknown. The title slip on the album reads: 'Preparatory drawings for Isai's Drawing Method' (*Isai gashiki shita-zu* 為斎画式下図). The drawings it contains do indeed relate to the illustrated book *Isai gashiki* 為斎画式. The album is now in the collection of the British Museum.¹ In this essay, I will introduce and discuss its contents.

Very little is known about the life of Katsushika Isai beyond his dates, and his family name, Shimizu Sōji.² Isai associated with Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) in the 1840s, when Hokusai was in his eighties and Isai in his twenties. In the course of his subsequent career, Isai did not create a large body of artworks. From

the 1860s he lived in Yokohama, and he is reported to have created paintings for sale to foreigners—indeed some of his paintings are now found in foreign museums, particularly in the USA. He designed very few *nishiki-e*. However, Isai illustrated some fifteen books during the 1850s and 1860s.

It was only after Hokusai's death that Isai began to illustrate books. In 1849 Isai published his first design book (*e-dehon*), Drawing Method for Birds and Flowers and Landscapes (*Kachō sansui zushiki* 花鳥山水図式). After the publication of that volume, Isai concentrated on illustrating poetry anthologies and *yomihon*. (It was not until the mid-1860s that he returned to *edehon*, with the publication of further volumes of *Kachō sansui zushiki*.) Isai provided illustrations for *yomihon* between 1848 and 1858; for Japanese poetry anthologies, in the early 1850s; a text on surveying, *Ryōchizusetsu* 量地図説 (1852); a Buddhist sutra (1862); and three multi-volume *e-dehon* clustered in the mid-1860s.

¹ The entire album may be viewed on the British Museum website:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2021-3020-1

² His family name is given in Iijima Kiyoshin. *Hokusai den* (1893) vol. 2, folio 7 verso.

Isai's stylistic debt to Hokusai is readily apparent in all these books.

Today he is best known for one of the *edehon*, *Isai gashiki*, which was published in 1864. It was intended as a model book for craftsmen. It provides numerous designs for netsuke and for lacquer decoration on *inrō*. However, the preface also recommends it to beginners studying the art of painting (*shogaku-ga* 初学畫). The book was advertised as a four-volume work but only the first two volumes were published; even though the back-matter in those volumes announces that volumes 3 and 4 will soon be published (*kinkoku* 近刻). The published volumes are organised as follows (I provide transcriptions of the names of the sections when they are given in the book):

1. The Fifty-four Genji chapters 源氏五十四
帙之図 (six images per page for 4½ spreads)
2. Courtly matters (2½ spreads)
3. Warriors (4 spreads)
4. Netsuke designs 佩墜鄙之編 (3 spreads,
which are divided between the two
volumes)
5. *Inrō* designs 印籠蒔絵雛形 (8 spreads)
5. Plants (2 spreads)
6. Landscapes (2½ spreads)

The printing blocks were finely cut. The book was carefully printed on high-quality paper. In the first printing, all the folios were interleaved. *Isai gashiki* is thus a well-made, attractive late Edo period publication. In early Meiji-era printings, thinner paper was used and there was no interleaving. Furthermore, the two published volumes were bound together and sold as a work complete in one volume. In addition, there was no back-matter; not even a colophon. Omitting the interleaving, using less expensive paper, and reducing the book to one volume reduced its thickness as well as its cost. *Isai gashiki* proved so popular that a fresh set of blocks were cut in the mid-1890s to keep up with demand.

Isai gashiki was Isai's finest achievement in book format. The designs are assured, and often engaging. His warriors crackle with energy. His flowers are closely observed and skilfully arranged on the page. His landscapes are characterised by meticulous brushwork and breadth of vision. His *inrō* decorations are varied and imaginative. His multi-faceted netsuke designs are ingenious. Isai's style remained deeply indebted to Hokusai, but the illustrations in *Isai gashiki* could not be mistaken for the work of Hokusai. They are the work of an accomplished—but not a great—artist.

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The preparatory drawings in *Isai gashiki shita-zu* tell us a great deal not only about the way *Isai gashiki* was designed and produced, but also how perhaps *Hokusai manga* and many other such books would have been designed and produced. In the analysis that follows, I will use two words that require clarification: penultimate and antepenultimate. Close study of *Isai gashiki shita-zu* suggests the following stages in the creation of a printed book illustration:

1. Preliminary drawing. The preliminary drawing provides the foundation for the design. It is quickly done using dilute ink and a relatively thick brush with which the artist roughs out the general composition. The brushstrokes of the preliminary drawing can be seen beneath most of the more fully worked out antepenultimate drawings in the album.

2. Antepenultimate drawing. This is built up over the preliminary drawing. The lines are thicker than the lines that will appear in the printed image. They are drawn using denser ink, and there is much evidence of working and reworking of contours and adjusting the placement of parts of the composition. Modifications, revisions and corrections are often added using small pieces of paper pasted over parts of the drawing. (Such adjustments and changes are called *pentimenti*.) Sometimes the antepenultimate drawing is made up in part—or entirely—from numerous smaller, separate drawings that have been cut out and pasted onto a backing sheet (Fig. 4).

3. Penultimate drawing. This is the drawing done just before the block-ready drawing (*hanshita-e*). The lines are much finer, about as fine as the lines that will appear in a printed image. There is limited use of *pentimenti* to make modifications, revisions and corrections. Many but not all of the details of the final image are worked out on the penultimate drawing.

4. Block-ready drawing *hanshita-e* 版下絵: The artist fully realises every detail of the design in the block-ready drawing. He employs his finest brushwork to do this. He also indicates the areas that are to print black by filling them with a wash of grey ink. Only block-ready drawings for books that never went into production survive.

5. Printed image: The printed image is a facsimile of the block-ready drawing. In essence, the skilful block cutter captures the artist's brushwork on the surface of the printing block. Comparison

between the penultimate drawings in *Isai gashiki shita-zu* and their respective printed images in *Isai gashiki* reveals how much the artist added as he prepared the block-ready drawings. Much more was done than merely filling in fabric patterns or adding the stitching on armour. Elements of the design were clarified, elaborated, modified. Such modifications could only have been the work of the artist.

* * *

I will now illustrate these stages by presenting four case studies based on *Isai gashiki* and *Isai gashiki shita-zu*.

Case Study 1. [Fig. 1]

This penultimate drawing illustrates the manner in which a design might be constructed. The mount for a large hanging scroll painting was drawn onto a sheet using a straight edge. It fills most of the image field. The more detailed and complex elements of the designs—the landscape painting mounted on the hanging scroll, and each of the two figures seated in front of the painting admiring it—were drawn on separate pieces of paper. All three elements had been brought to a high level of finish and were carefully positioned against the prepared background before being pasted onto it. The artist then completed the block-ready drawing on a sheet of thin paper placed over this penultimate drawing. He followed the penultimate drawing closely, without stifling the fluidity and freedom of his brush. Two further elaborations were added to the block-ready drawing: the patterns on the garments of the seated men and on the painting's silk mounting. The most significant addition is the foliage in the centre foreground of the landscape.

Case Study 2. [Fig. 2]

In the section of *Isai gashiki* devoted to netsuke, the artist presented front and back views of each of his designs. (In the case of one complex design, he presented three views.) The detail reproduced in Figure 2 is the reverse of a netsuke of the Chinese hero Wu Song 武松 grappling with a tiger. Comparing the two images reveals how the artist must have brought the penultimate drawing further to life in his block-ready drawing. In the former, the fur of the tiger is indicated by coarse, perfunctory lines. In the block-ready drawing the artist turned those cursory lines into a far more realistic depiction of

the creature's thick, rich fur. The block cutter expertly cut the artist's fine brushstrokes into the block.

Case study 3 [Fig.3].

Significant revisions to the penultimate drawing made by the artist when preparing the block-ready drawing are apparent when this penultimate drawing is compared with the printed image. (Reproduced here is the right half of a double-page design. For a fuller analysis of the evolution of this design, see the author's lecture on this album available on YouTube.³)

A. In the penultimate drawing, the steep bank to the right of the upper body of the warrior was too bare, too open. When preparing the block-ready drawing, the artist enlivened it with vegetation, and reduced the void with an additional ridge. Notice that traces of the artist's earlier design are still visible above the warrior's proper left arm. They reveal that when Isai prepared the penultimate drawing he shortened the banner attached to the warrior's back and modified its form. These revisions appear in the printed image.

B. The surface of the stream is perfunctory in the penultimate drawing. It is as though the artist used short-hand to indicate that water was flowing in the channel. When preparing the block-ready drawing, he imbued the lines of the water with greater variety and energy, which we see in the printed image.

C. The configuration of the bank at the bottom right was modified in the block ready drawing to restore what appears to have been the artist's initial intention—as indicated by traces of an earlier sketch that are visible in the penultimate drawing.

D. The look of terror on the face of the vanquished foe, whose head is under the warrior's right foot, does not read as well in the penultimate drawing as it does in the final printed image. Small adjustments, particularly to the hair falling across the foe's face and the size of the eyes, make his expression more immediately readable in the printed image.

Case Study 4 [Figs. 4-7].

Isai gashiki shita-zu contains three and a half spreads (five pages) devoted to 'genre scenes' (*jinbutsu* 人物), a category missing from the

³ The 83rd International ARC Seminar:

<https://www.arc.ritsumei.ac.jp/news/pc/009546.html>

published volumes of *Isai gashiki*. It is likely that these designs were meant for one of the projected, unpublished volumes. Here we will consider a design that appears twice in the album, as an antepenultimate drawing and as a penultimate drawing. Comparing the two reveals the attention to fine detail that went into the creation of such a design.

The overall composition was worked up by carefully arranging thirteen drawings of individual figures or groups of figures on a backing sheet. These are revealed in the back-lit photograph (Figure 4). Notice that certain details were drawn directly onto the backing sheet, as was the caption 'summer' 夏之部. There is even a pentimento on the face of the figure of Shōki painted onto the banner held up by a man in the upper left corner.

Comparing the antepenultimate and the penultimate drawings reveals a considerable number of adjustments (Figs. 5, 6 and 7):

A. The antepenultimate drawing reveals the artist's change of mind about where to place the pipe the woman is holding. In the penultimate drawing the artist decided to have the woman puffing on it. In doing so, the woman's breasts are no longer partially visible. The penultimate drawing reveals a new uncertainty about the depiction of the woman's clothing that was not evident in the antepenultimate drawing.

B. In the penultimate drawing, the proper left hand of the young boy holding up a cricket cage has been tilted downwards, his proper right hand with the pointing finger has been brought closer to the cricket cage, and his lips have been opened to make it appear that he is calling out in excitement.

C. The tray of fruit that a young boy is voraciously consuming was drawn onto the antepenultimate backing sheet. In the penultimate drawing, it was been brought closer to the boy and has one less piece of fruit on it.

D. In the antepenultimate drawing, the child sharing the bathtub with his mother has one hand raised; in the penultimate drawing his excitement is amplified by having him raise both of his arms.

E. There is a pentimento on the penultimate drawing over the man's head, which moves it very slightly away from the edge of the mat on which another man is reclining. Initially, the artist had followed the antepenultimate drawing in which the man's head slightly overlaps the edge of the mat. The artist also changed the image on the fan the man is holding. He replaced a

generic group of pine trees with a crane flying beneath a full moon.

F. Here again, after the artist had copied the antepenultimate drawing, he decided to increase the distance by just a few millimetres between the woman's head and the edge of the mat. Once again, he used a pentimento to achieve this.

These two drawings reveal the constant fine tuning that went into the preparation of book illustrations. That process continued as the artist prepared the block-ready drawing.

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Some Western scholars have claimed, without concrete evidence, that copyists were responsible for the creation of block-ready drawings, the *hanshita-e*. This view is well expressed by Matthi Forrer, in his review for *The Burlington Magazine* of the 2017 British Museum exhibition *Hokusai: beyond the Great Wave*. In the review, Forrer challenged the attribution to Hokusai of the *hanshita-e* for the late print series *One hundred poems retold by the nurse* [One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets, Explained by the Nurse]. Forrer does not believe that the drawings were by Hokusai because, according to him, 'it would be contrary to common practice if they had been drawn by Hokusai himself, and there is no reason why he would be an exception in this respect. Such detailed drawings are normally the work of professional – and highly skilled – copyists.'

This blanket assumption that it was 'common practice' for the block-ready drawings to be produced by copyists reflects—I believe—the biases and assumptions of some Western scholars, steeped in a very different tradition of printmaking. In Western printmaking, copyists or draftsmen played a significant role because most European prints were reproductive of images created in another medium. Copyists were the intermediary between the artist's work, typically an oil painting, and the finished print. They translated images from one medium into another. They stripped out colour and they also usually reduced the size of the image. There were some European artists who worked directly and creatively in the print medium, such as Rembrandt, in the middle years of the 17th century, and Goya, in the early years of the 19th, but they were exceptions. Such original prints—prints that did not reproduce images created in another medium—made up a very small part of the enormous output of prints produced in Europe between 1600 and 1900.

In Japanese printmaking, the block cutter did not 'interpret' or 'translate' or 'adapt' an

image created in another medium. The Japanese block-cutter worked from block-ready drawings that had been created by the artist expressly for reproduction through printing. The block-cutter followed the lines of the block-ready drawing as closely as humanly possible when cutting the printing block. His goal: to cut a block that would print an image that was a completely accurate facsimile of the block-ready drawing.

There were copyists *hikkō* 筆耕 responsible for the production of *hanshita* for text pages. These skilled calligraphers were hired to copy out the texts in a clear, uniform style for cutting into printing blocks. They provided texts that were 'easy to write, easy to cut into the block, and easy to read.'⁴

I have not encountered any evidence to support the assertion that copyists created block-ready drawings. In fact, the small amount of surviving evidence suggests the opposite. When, for example, Hokusai complained to the publisher Sūzanbō that the eye and noses in the figures he created for *Picture Book of Selected Tang Poems* (*Tōshisen ehon*) were not correct, he did not blame a copyist—he blamed the block-cutter.⁵ There was no copyist for him to blame. Hokusai demanded the faithful reproduction of his line in print. He would not have handed over the production of the block-ready drawing—the critical link between his vision and the printed image—to a professional copyist; no matter how skilful, no matter how well trained that copyist might have been. Publishers paid Hokusai high fees for his drawings—they paid for block-ready drawings from his hand.⁶ The power and energy of the lines, the coherence of the overall composition, the truth of the most intricate details all relied on the block cutter's faithful reproduction of a block-ready drawing created by the artist.

In conclusion:

—The creation of the block-ready drawing is a creative act. It is not a mechanical process.

— It is only in the block-ready drawing that the artist fully realises his intention.

— The block-ready drawing is the critical link between the artist's conception and the printed image.

— The printed image is a facsimile of the block-ready drawing.

Isai gashiki shita-zu, introduced in this essay, provides us with valuable insights into the way in which illustrated books were created in early modern Japan.

⁴ This description appears in the explanatory front matter in the first Part hen 編 of *Shunketsu shintō suikoden* 俊傑神稲水滸伝, written and illustrated by Gakutei Teikō 岳亭定岡 (1829), Volume1, folio 3 recto. Thanks to Alessandro Bianchi for bringing this passage to my attention. It neatly sums up the requirements of publishers.

⁶ Ellis Tinios. 'Hokusai and his blockcutter' in *Print*

Quarterly, XXII, 2015, 2. pp.186-191. Also '北斎とその彫師' [Hokusai and his blockcutters] (翻訳者: 赤間 亮) in *Art Research*, Vol.16. (Ritsumeikan University Art Research Center, 2016) pp.39-44.

⁶ For the fees paid to Hokusai, see the two letters written by Hokusai that are discussed in Timothy Clark. *Hokusai: The Great Picture Book of Everything* (The British Museum, 2021). pp.29-30.

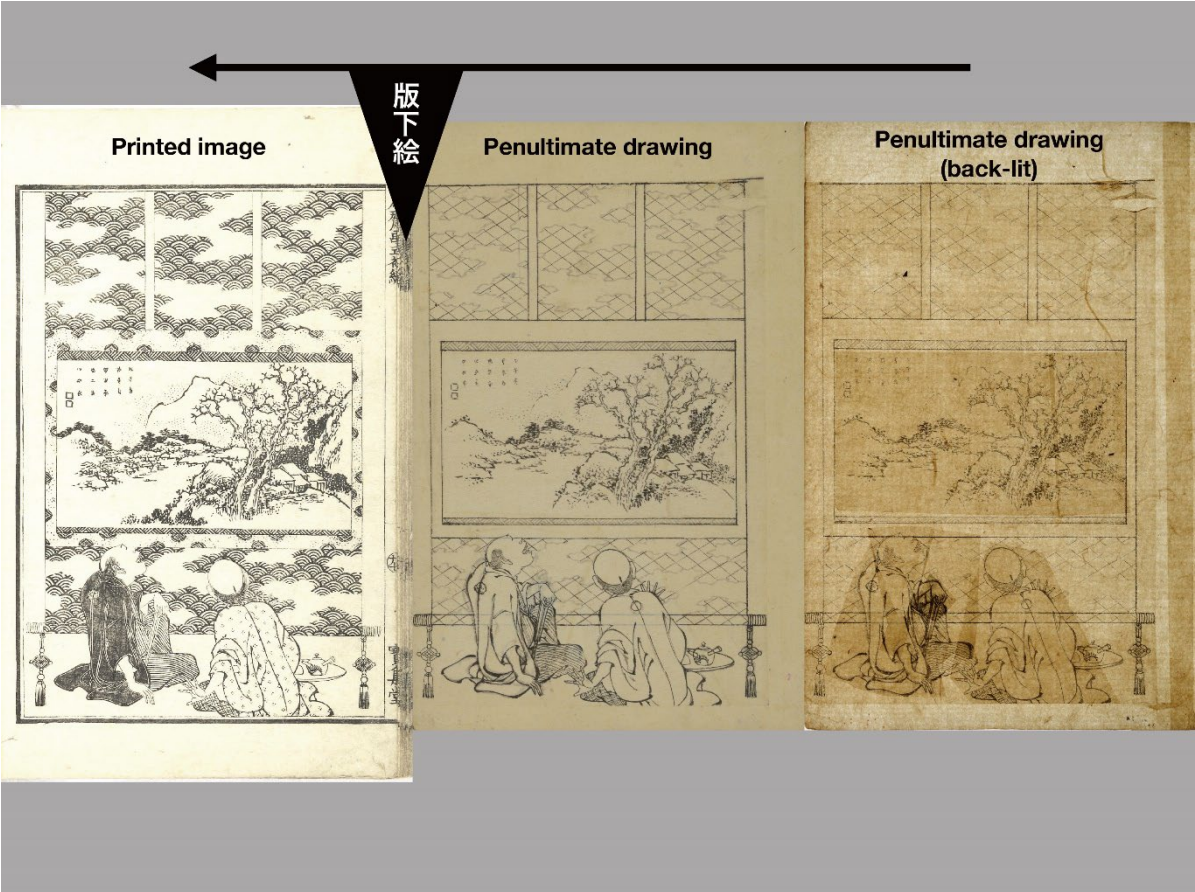


Fig. 1.

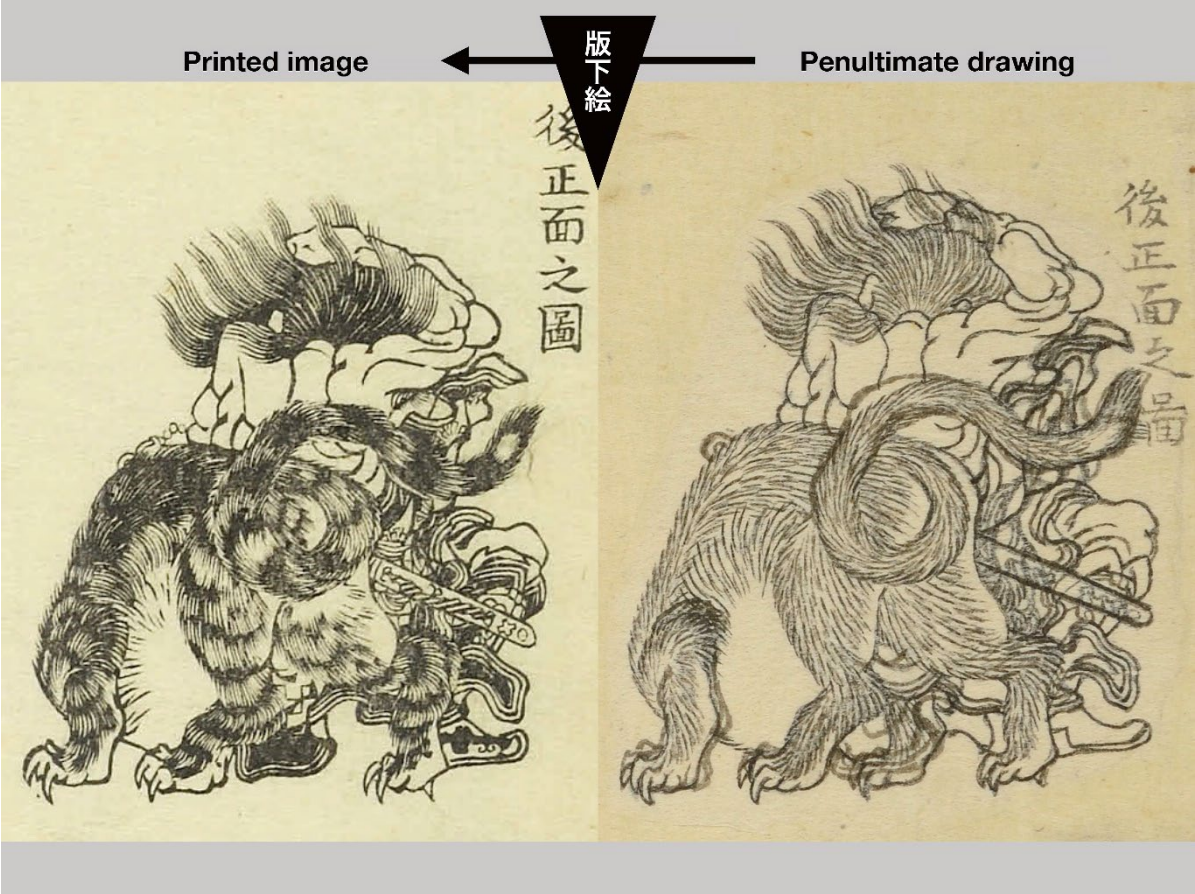


Fig. 2.

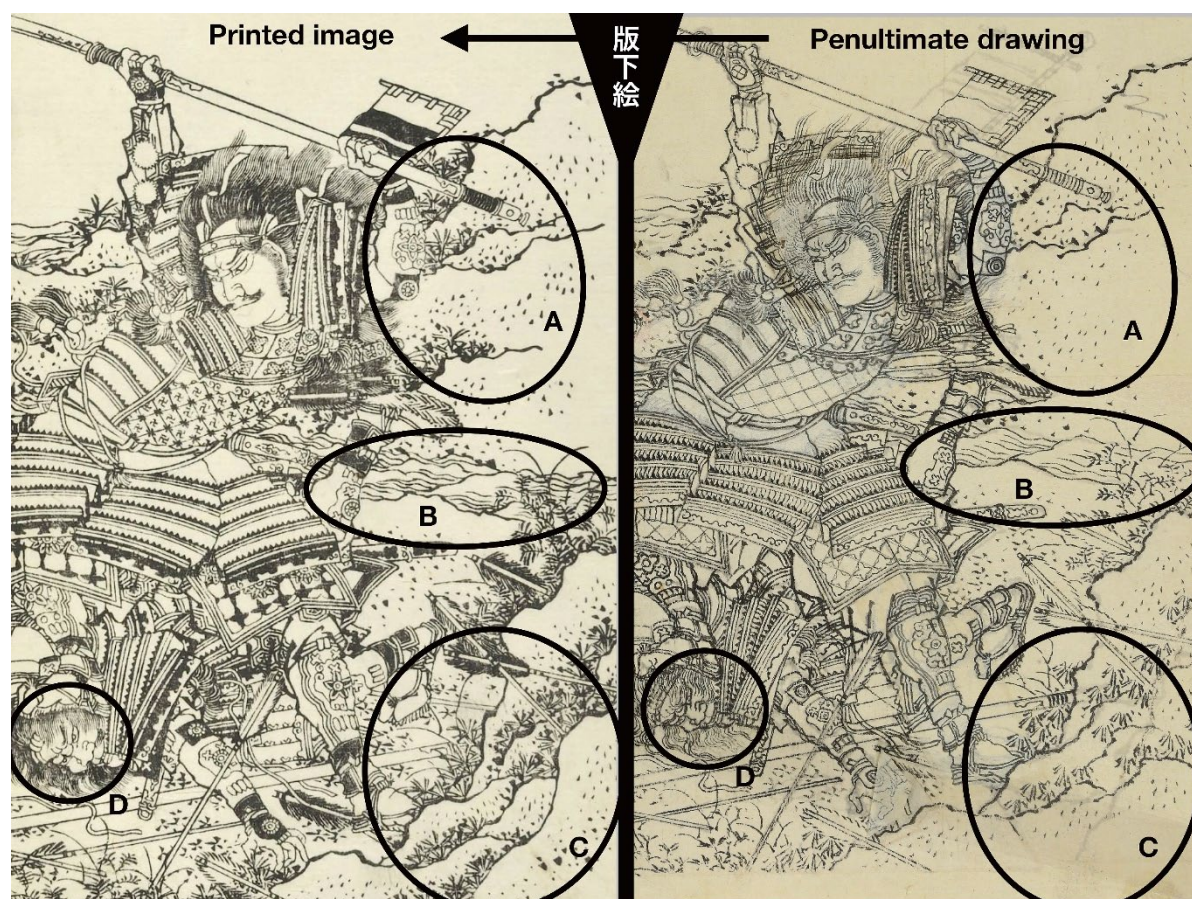


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

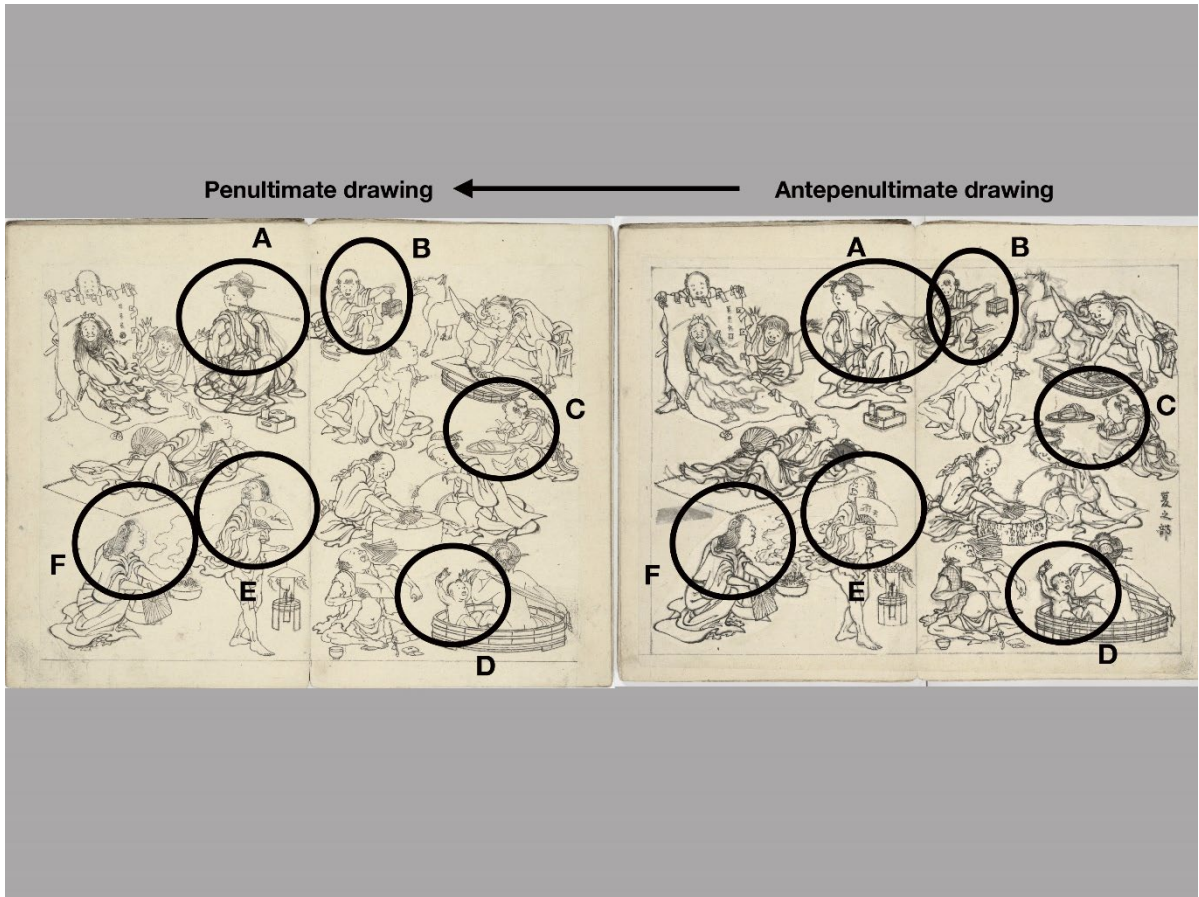


Fig. 7.