
<Review of the 125th International ARC Seminar (Dr. Ellis TINIOS)> ——Hokusai the Alchemist: an exploration of sources for his book illustration

Dr Stephanie Santschi (Postdoctoral Assistant, Japanese Art History, University of Zurich, Switzerland)

E-mail stephanie.santschi@khist.uzh.ch

1. Introduction

This event report provides an overview of and comment on the research currently undertaken by Dr Ellis Tinios, Honorary Lecturer at the University of Leeds, and ARC Visiting Researcher. He presented his research in a lecture on the sources of painter and illustrator Katsushika Hokusai's (1760–1849) book illustrations and Hokusai's role in manipulating these sources so that they became useful for him.

Tinios' lecture took place as the 125th International ARC Seminar on 8th November 2023.¹⁾ It is his latest in a series of ARC seminars in which he focused on the materiality and the content of illustrated books and the publication context that had surrounded Hokusai.

After outlining Tinios' lecture, this report discusses two focus areas. Firstly, the socio-economic conditions within which illustrated bookmaking and -using processes occurred. And secondly, the components Hokusai employed to animate motifs belonging to the Tokugawa period iconographical program.

2. Outline of the seminar

Referring to the development of Hokusai's rich visual output, Tinios has reframed common academic and popular narratives about Hokusai from one focused on his "genius" to one focused on his "alchemy".

Tinios employed a second-hand quotation about Hokusai's alleged plagiarism in *Denshin kaishu Hokusai manga* 伝神開手北斎漫画, attributed to Kitao Masayoshi 北尾政美 (Ku wagata Keisai 鯀形恵斎) and recorded by Kitamura Intei 喜多村筠庭 (1783–1856)²⁾, to prompt a discussion about the relevance of the different stages of reworking visual materials

into new formats.

The dichotomy between reproducing and creating became evident once Tinios expanded his focus from "sources to titles"³⁾. In a parallel chronology of reference works and works that Hokusai illustrated, Tinios' concrete evidence demonstrated that while Hokusai relied on previously published materials, he also shaped images to his distinct style: Hokusai animated his images with relatable human figures.

References to the ARC Rare Books Database⁴⁾ encouraged attendees to make comparisons themselves. This educational approach should be applauded and undoubtedly contributes to establishing illustrated book research as an increasingly popular discipline.⁵⁾

A Q&A session following the lecture discussed further sources, such as Crispijn van de Passe's (1594–1670) *Lumen picturae et delineationis* (1643), Gérard de Lairese's (1641–1711) *Het groot schilderboek* (1707), Morishima Chūryō's (1756–1810) 森島中良 *Kōmō zatsuwa* 紅毛雑話 (Tenmei 6 [1787]), and various Maruyama and Shijō schools' *gafu* 画譜 ('illustrated album'; representations of drawn paintings in the format of manuscript or printed illustrated books).⁶⁾

3. Considering the market

The metaphor employed throughout the lecture was Tinios' attributive label of Hokusai as an 'alchemist' who, instead of 'turning lead into gold' turned 'ideas into profit'. Early modern print research has long pointed out the nature of illustrated book production as a commodity.⁷⁾ Tinios contributed to this understanding with concrete evidence.

Commercial considerations prompting format changes and clustering were evident from Tinios' discussion of advertising of thematic

clusters on colophons. This included the co-placement of the three *hanshibon* 半紙本 ('half-size paper book') format *Keisai sogā* 蕙斎 龜画 (Bunka 11 [1814]), *Bunpō sogā* 文鳳 龜画 (first publ. in Kansei 11 [1800], republished Bunka 11 [1814]), and *Hokusai manga* [vol.1] 北斎 漫画 (Bunka 11 [1814]) in Eirakuya Tōshirō's 永楽屋 東四郎 colophon at the end of *Meika gafu* 名家画譜 (Bunka 11 [1814])⁸. Marketing measures which increased affordability of books through cost economization capitalized on the wide recognizability of household names and multiplied individual volumes' sales potential.

4. Letting the human take center stage

Alchemy, in extended definition, comprises understanding the world's elements to generate something new and valuable. In this context, Hokusai could be considered an "image-maker" in search of the best textual and visual language with which he could explain his worldview to readers within the constricted format of the book.

Consequently, the alchemistic process could be interpreted as Hokusai approximating ontological wisdom through the world's material and metaphysical components that he studied and depicted. His turning "lead into gold" was thus not only economically motivated: Hokusai would have understood it as finding ways to make his fellow humans see their surrounding world, and ultimately themselves, in a fresh light.

This interpretation connects to the element of animation which Tinios proposed as the distinguishing feature that makes Hokusai's works stand out against those of his contemporaries. While taking the geographically limited world of late Tokugawa life and its extension into worlds imagined – deities, dragons, and foreign regions such as the imagined versions of Chinese, Indian or Dutch spheres – as an iconographical template, Hokusai did not reproduce the templates he saw line by line. Instead, as Tinios demonstrated, Hokusai contrasted the worlds by introducing an animated element – selected primarily from human figures though animals such as lively-eyed birds or playful puppies were occasionally chosen – to the scene. These inclusions made the scenes more relatable to viewers. They allowed narration on multiple levels, including on the

level of the human figures and their interaction amongst each other and with their surrounding elements.

Textual evidence from some of the volumes' prefaces can support Tinios' interpretation that Hokusai's role as an alchemist is not restricted to combinatory reproduction. Rather, Hokusai animates the motifs he had studied by instilling them with vitality. This author proposes that the preface to *Ryakuga haya oshie* 略画早押南, vol. 2 (Bunka 11 [1814]), Tengudō Nettetsu 天狗堂熱鉄 ("Hot Iron from Tengu's Hall", likely a *nom-de-plume* of Hokusai himself) adeptly characterizes this undertaking: in it, Hokusai ascribes his drawn images such a life-force that he feared they would have escaped from the page if it were not for the skillful knife of the block cutter, which managed to fix the image onto the wooden block:

(...) Me, however, who studied [Hemamushiyo Nyūdō's] style for almost 100 years without understanding more than he did, have had this curious thing happen, I have noticed that my drawn characters, my animals, my insects, my fish, appear to escape from the paper. Is that not truly extraordinary? (...) ⁹

Also, Hokusai's often-quoted yearning for longevity in the "From the age of six..." quote from the colophon to *Fugaku hyakkei* 富嶽百景, vol. 1 (Tenpō 4 [1834]), ends with him reiterating his ultimate goal as "reaching the stage where every dot and every stroke I paint will be alive".¹⁰ Against this backdrop, this report proposes a brief excursion into discussing the role of illustrated books for knowledge acquisition.

5. Future research directions

Tinios pointed out that further research is needed to compare the Chinese origin of Hokusai's 'virtual China' or, in that context, the distribution of Chinese sources among Tokugawa readers and illustrators. These could be enriched by considerations of sources which inspired illustrations in pre-*Manga* books.

For example, a longitudinal study of recurring motifs within Hokusai's work, transposing earlier efforts such as by Nagata Seiji's *Katsushika Hokusai nenpu* into the digital realm, could aid understanding of the distinction between motifs evolving from an

assimilated, tacit cognitive catalogue of imagery, and fresh reference materials. For example, if the *yūrei-zu* 幽霊図 (ghost image) of Kohada Koheiji こはだ小平二 from the simplistic figure (Fig. 1) in the painting manual *Ono ga bakamura mudaji ezukushi* 己痴羣夢多字画尽, vol. 2, Bunka 7 [1810]), to the delightfully frightful specter (Fig. 2) in *Hyaku monogatari* 百物語 (Tenpō 2–3 [1831–32])¹¹⁾ relied on external or internal references: the motif's defining aspects – a skull out of which only a few rotten hairs sprout, the *hitodama* 人魂 ('spirit flames') and a fragile, hunched posture all remain. However, only the dynamic depiction of the later specter makes viewers forget about the lines with which the figure materially manifests. Book evidence can thus enhance understanding of the mechanisms of Tokugawa creating and manufacturing processes.

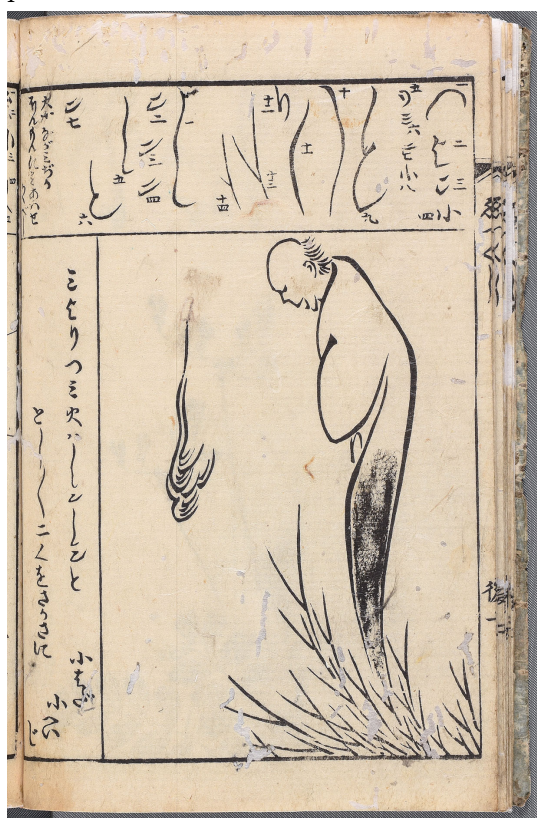


Fig. 1. Kohada Koheiji, in *Ono ga bakamura*. Shimane Museum of Art (1171_0033).



Fig. 2. Kohada Koheiji in *Hyaku monogatari*. Minneapolis Institute of Art (56.52.3).

6. Concluding thoughts

As Akama Ryō pointed out, interest in the contents of Hokusai's personal reference library persists. Sadly, these materials were lost during Hokusai's lifetime to numerous fires and relocations. The few surviving letters and Iijima Kyōshin's 飯島虚心 (1841–1901) *Katsushika Hokusai den* 葛飾北斎伝 (Meiji 26 [1893]) contain little information on his practical work process. Future investigations, as Matsuba Ryoko suggests, should therefore employ publishers as epistemological linchpins: they might have been the ones providing their illustrators access to their own reference material collections. Mounting the discussion on colophon evidence, such as demonstrated by this seminar, reveals information on the networks of individuals interacting in producing and reproducing material and content for illustrated books.

[Notes]

- 1) The webinar is available on the Arts Research Centre, Ritsumeikan University YouTube channel, which can be accessed here: <https://www.arc.ritsumei.ac.jp/e/news/pc/019230.html> (accessed: 2024-01-08).

- 2) For transcribed quote, see Yamamoto [2023], p. 113 / p. 121, who refers to Kitamura Intei: Kansei nenkan kiji. *Edo sōsho* 12 [1960], p.70.
- 3) As “sources”, Tinios discussed *Bunpō sogā* 文鳳庵画 [Nagoya, 1800] / *Bunpō kanga* 文鳳漢画 [Kyoto, 1803]; *Kaishien gaden* 芥子園畫傳 [1748]; *Keisai sogā* 蕙斎庵画 [1814]; and Keisai’s seven *Ryakugashiki* books [1794–1813]. As “titles”, Tinios discussed *Fugaku hyakkei* 富嶽百景 [1834–35]; *Hokusai gafu* 北斎画譜 [1849]; *Ehon Tōshisen gogon zekku* 畫本唐詩選: 五言絕句 [publ. posthum. 1880]; *Shinpen suiko gaden* 新編水滸画伝 [1805–1838]; *Ehon kanso gundan* 絵本漢楚軍談 [1843] and *Ehon saishikitsū* 画本彩色通 [1848].
- 4) Art Research Center (ARC), Ritsumeikan University. The Rare Book Database. (<https://www.dh-jac.net/db1/books-e/search.php>) (accessed 2024-01-16).
- 5) Apart from Tinios, notable recent book research has been conducted by Marquet [2014], Vesco [2020], Moretti [2021] and Matsuba [2023], and in the context of Nagata [2018–2022]. This author hopes to contribute to this discourse by publishing her dissertation research on Hokusai’s early painting manuals *Ono ga bakamura* and *Ryakuga haya oshie*.
- 6) Different views on the relevance of Dutch printed materials versus Chinese geometric principles, such as associated with Mencius, on particularly the geometric shapes of *Ryakuga haya oshie* 略画早押南, vol.1 [1812], are offered in Guth [2008], pp. 125–140; Tsuji, [2005], pp. 347–348, and Lane [1989], p. 116.
- 7) The commercial climate of print production is discussed, for example, by Newland [2004], Davis [2015], Moretti [2021], and others.
- 8) Yosa Buson 与謝蕪村. *Meika gafu* 名家画譜 [1814]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Collection. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/78683> (accessed 2024-01-20).
- 9) From Goncourt, 1896, 200–201, English translation by Forrer, 1988, shortened and slightly adapted by author.
- 10) Translated in Smith [1988], p.7.
- 11) Fig. 1: Copyright with Shimane Museum of Art, 2023, used with permission; Fig. 2: Minneapolis Institute of Art. Collection Database. <https://collections.artsimia.org/art/65734/the-ghost-of-kohada-koheiji-katsushika-hokusai> (accessed: 2024-01-20).

[References]

Forrer, Matthi, ed., with texts by Edmond de Goncourt. *Hokusai*. Flammarion, 1988.

- Davis, Julie Nelson. *Partners in Print: Artistic Collaboration and the Ukiyo-e Market*. University of Hawai’i Press, 2015.
- Guth, Christine M. E. “Hokusai’s Geometry”, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, 2008, pp. 120–32.
- 飯島虚心. 葛飾北斎傳. 小林文七, 1893.
- Lane, Richard. *Hokusai: Life and Work*. Dutton, 1989.
- Marquet, Christophe. “Learning Painting in Books: Typology, Readership and Uses of Printed Painting Manuals During the Edo Period”. *Listen, Copy, Read: Popular Learning in Early Modern Japan*. Hayek, Matthias and Horiuchi, Annick, eds. Brill, 2014, pp. 319–367.
- Matsuba Ryoko, ed. *Mad About Painting*. David Zwirner Books, 2023.
- Moretti, Laura. *Pleasure in Profit: Popular Prose in Seventeenth-Century Japan*. Columbia University Press, 2021.
- 永田生慈. 『葛飾北斎年譜』. 三彩新社, 1985.
- 永田生慈. 『北斎絵手本集成』. 芸艸堂, 2018–2022.
- Newland, Amy Reigle, ed., *The Commercial and Cultural Climate of Japanese Printmaking*. Hotei Publishing, 2004.
- Smith II, Henry D. *Hokusai: One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji*, George Braziller, Inc., 1988.
- Tsuji Nobuo. “The Impact of Western Book Illustration.” *Hokusai and His Age*. Carpenter, John T., ed. Hotei Publishing, 2005, pp. 341–351.
- Vesco, Silvia. *Spontanea maestria: Il Ryakuga haya oshie 略画早指南 (Corso accelerato di disegno semplificato) di Katsushika Hokusai*. Ca’ Foscari, 2020.
- Yamamoto Yoshitaka. “Japan and China in Hokusai’s *Ehon kōkyō* (Illustrated Classics of Filial Piety)”. *Late Hokusai*. Clark, Timothy T., ed. The British Museum, 2023, pp. 113–121.