Japan Culture Group

Project Leader

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Project on the Beauty of Japanese Prints and Books Printed from Woodblocks

This project deals with Japanese prints and books printed from woodblocks that are spread around the world. By utilizing digital archiving, a new research method in the humanities, this project aims to seek new possibilities for a variety of studies that have been considered impossible in the past.

1. The Archive of Ukiyo-e and Books Printed from Woodblocks (Classics)

Ukiyo-e and Japanese classics, especially illustrated books printed in color from woodblocks, are beautiful to the eye, and therefore, they have been collected all over the world. Originally selected for exportation due to their high quality, many of these collections in the West are kept in excellent condition. Therefore, research overseas is essential in this field, but its enormous cost has hindered the progress of research so far. This project intends to develop a comprehensive digital archive of these materials and, by doing so, to construct a foundational environment that makes it possible to compare and examine the materials from anywhere in the world.

Currently, we are developing an extensive digital archive of ukiyo-e and books printed from woodblocks collected mainly in England, especially the ones in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum.

2. The Archive of Printing Woodblocks

We are developing a digital archive of printing woodblocks that used to be considered difficult to handle. Our aim is to publish them as research resources on the Web and make information sharing possible among researchers. We hope to reveal the publication system with its center in early modern Kyoto by applying the research methods of publishing culture whose conventional target has been books printed from woodblocks to printing blocks. We also plan to have the "Exhibition of Early Modern Printing Blocks" in order to let people know about the existence and the values of printing blocks as research materials.

A screenshot from the browsing and research system of printing blocks

Printing woodblocks are much heavier and bulkier than books printed from them. In many cases, moreover, they are printed in Chinese ink and therefore in solid black, which makes it difficult to produce most commonly used black-and-white images or grayscale copies. These are the reasons why printing blocks have not been utilized sufficiently in research. Nevertheless, in this project, we experimented the lighting methods over and over again, established a digital photographing method with five different patterns of lighting, and succeeded in recording the complicated surface of printing blocks as digital images.

Utilizing this technology, we have produced approximately 80,000 shots of digital images on about 4,000 pieces of printing blocks that were actually used by publishers during the Edo period and are currently owned by Nara University. Furthermore, we have developed and operated a database of these images on the Web that can be shared among researchers. What characterizes this database includes, for example, the function to let the user browse the print blocks piece by piece or work by work as if turning the pages of a book, or to let the user switch among the five different lighting patterns while browsing. It is designed in such a way that other entries, notes, and annotations that are necessary for bibliographical studies can be updated on the Web as needed and, by doing so, it is accumulating the results of research analysis.

Our collaborating institutes include the British Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Nara University