Illustrated Books of the Late Edo Japan: The Mitchell Collection in the New York Public Library's Spencer Collection

Uhnsook Park

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol1989/iss87/3
ILLUSTRATED BOOKS OF LATE EDO JAPAN:
THE MITCHELL COLLECTION IN
THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY'S SPENCER COLLECTION

Uhnsook Park New York Public Library

The Mitchell Collection is in one of the Special Collections of the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library. It has unique characteristics that distinguish its holdings from the Japanese works in the Spencer Collection of which it is a part. Charles H. Mitchell, an American businessman and longtime resident of Japan, was also a scholar and collector of Japanese prints and illustrated books. The New York Public Library purchased his collection in 1975 but it is not described in the Dictionary Catalog and Shelf List of the Spencer Collection of Illustrated Books and Manuscripts and Fine Bindings (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1971) which carries the shelf list cards of 600 Japanese titles nor in the catalog prepared by Shigeo Sorimachi, Catalogue of Japanese Illustrated Books and Manuscripts in the Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library (Tokyo: Kobunso, 1978) which describes the Japanese holdings in bilingual text accompanied by many illustrations.

Mr. Mitchell began a catalog of his own collection but he decided to expand his text into as comprehensive a record as he could find of all the artists and their works. Thus in 1972 he published a bibliography, a kind of union list, The Illustrated Books of the Nanga, Maruyama, Shijo and Other Related Schools of Japan (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, n.d.) Previous to this catalog prepared by Mr. Mitchell, the most comprehensive bibliography of those periods listed about 150 additions made after the publication of the 1972 bibliography, the actual number of titles now in the Spencer Collection's Mitchell Collection is over 772, thus making it the largest and by far the most complete collection devoted solely to the Nanga, Maruyama, and Shijo books.

The full repertoire of Japanese woodcut book illustrations is included: from simple lines to sophisticated imitations of brush work shading from pure black to pale gray, to combinations of two or more colors (up to ten or more blocks being used), and sometimes further refined by blind relief printing or the addition of metallic inks and gold leaf. These titles range from small pamphlets and luxurious private publications on specially-made papers to popular collections running into multivolume sets. Titles of importance that were still not in the collection were being actively sought until 1986. When its originator passed away in 1986, the Mitchell Collection ceased growing, although the Japanese collection in the Spencer Collection continues to expand.

Since 1975 Mr. Mitchell continued to be deeply interested in the growth of the collection, keeping in close touch with the Library. Whenever he found fine items, he acquired them, had the slipcase made to dress each individual work, and sent them to us to add to the Mitchell Collection. How much Mr. Mitchell cared for his collection can be seen by examining any one of the 772 titles in the Spencer Collection. They are each preserved in a beautifully handmade slipcase which is in itself an interesting object.
Each case is covered with an elegantly-designed Japanese printed cloth, tailored to the particular work. They are as if Mr. Mitchell's own children dressed for the best occasion.

The Nanga, Maruyama, and Shi jo represent schools of artists in the late Edo period of Japanese history, from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Although each school has its own character, the schools are so closely related that their characteristics can be described together. From the beginning, all these schools were centered in the city of Kyoto. They continued to flourish there into the nineteenth century when the Kanō 狩鶴, Tosa 土佐, and Ukiyoe 浮世絵 movements were in decline.

Let me describe briefly the origins of the names of the major schools. Nanga literally means "Southern painting" which is derived from the word nan which means "south" or "southern" both in Chinese and Japanese. Maruyama, after the Japanese artist Maruyama Ōkyo. And Shi jō is taken from the name of a street in Kyoto where Matsumura Gosshin 松村興春, who started the Shi jō school, lived. Kanō refers to the group of followers of Kanō Masanobu who started his school in the Muromachi period in the 1500s; the group remained active throughout all the periods of Japanese art that followed. Tosa was the most influential school of Yamatoe 大和絵 (Japanese painting). Ukiyoe is the most representative and best known school in Japanese painting.

While the Ukiyoe school appealed to popular taste, these three schools, especially the Nanga school which is most strongly Chinese-inspired, were the favorites of the literati. The Nanga style was the closest Japanese painting came to Chinese without losing its own identifying graces. These graces are represented, in uniquely Japanese style, by two major eighteenth century artists, the painter-calligrapher Ike no Taiga 池大雅 and the poet-painter Yosa no Buson 謝之村. The Nanga continued to hold its own, largely because it was the painting of protest, of implicit resistance to the imposition of foreign domination, and the expression of independence from popular tastes.

The Tokugawa authorities, who controlled Japan from 1600 to 1868, established the Shogunate in Edo. They actively fostered Neo-Confucianism as a code of moral behaviour calculated to keep the feudal nobility in a state of quiescence. Consequently, other aspects of Chinese culture, including painting, were also encouraged in Japan. Chinese art historians broadly divided the Ming and Ch'ing periods into two schools which, while not denoting geographical divisions, are called "Northern" and "Southern". In the former, originating from the painter-theorist Tung Chi-ch'ang 董其昌 (1555-1636), the artists were professional, loved detail, and their paintings were relatively colorful. The "Southern" artists were less realistic, deliberately awkward in style, and amateurish in the sense that, by tradition, they were scholars of literature and philosophy who painted for recreation, combining their knowledge of literature and calligraphic skills with their painting. In Japanese this kind of painting is called Bunjin-ga 文人画. The Kanō school was derived from the "Northern" tradition, while the Nanga school was developed from the "Southern" tradition. Artists of the Nanga, Maruyama, and Shi jō schools always sought to capture the inner spirit of what they were depicting.

To provide a broader perspective of the Spencer Collection in which the Mitchell Collection is housed, first let me introduce one of the highlights listed in the Sorimachi catalog which exemplifies the outstanding qualities that make it part of Spencer's "finest."
In the preface to his revised catalog of 1978, Mr. Sorimachi describes the characterizing feature of the Spencer Collection, specifically the Japanese collection, thus: its distinction in having the finest illustrated books comes from the well-balanced, harmonious effect of the total collection. The Japanese ideal is exemplified by the selection of *Kokin Wakashu* 古今和歌集, the first court-sponsored anthology of Japanese poems, compiled in 905 by Ki no Tsurayuki 紀之嗣之. Mr. Sorimachi claims that the Spencer Collection, in its range of dates and varieties of styles and subjects, comes closest to being the perfect collection "of the finest illustrated books that can be procured."

The books that mark the real beginning of Japanese book illustration were published in the first twenty years of the seventeenth century. Historically they were not the earliest, but it is possible to describe them as the real beginning of book illustration for a wider range of readers. The highlights among these are works of "Sagabon." There are three examples of *Sagabon* in Spencer.

In the history of Japanese printed books, there are only thirteen official *Sagabon* works, though different sources give other numbers. *Sagabon* is the best known and most influential genre of movable type books in the early Edo period. The name, *Saga*, is applied to a collection of at least thirteen titles of Japanese classical literature in various editions, printed by Hon'ami Koetsu 葛飾春起 and Suminokura Sōan 須磨兼隆 at Saga, near Kyoto, a village where Sōan lived and worked.

These works were produced in the years 1608 to about 1624. They were noted for the lavish attention given to the quality of their paper, binding, calligraphy, and overall appearance. Consequently, the *Sagabon* are works of great beauty. Curiously, these publications do not contain the names of the publishers or artists and only a few are dated. This may have something to do with their "very private" category of publication. The following are three examples from the Spencer Collection.

*ISE MONOGATARI* 伊勢物語(Tales of Ise), 1608
The tales are based on the ninth-century poet Ariwara no Narihira's poems and writings, and the book is considered to be the second oldest narrative literature in Japan. The poet is one of the six "Kasen" (poetic sage) as well as of the thirty-six Kasen or Immortal Poets. This is the earliest Japanese printed storybook with illustrations. The story is about a handsome, dashing courtier, Ariwara no Narihira and his amorous adventures. It contains forty-nine illustrations, one each on a single page, of the tenth-century prose-poetry narrative. Both text and pictures were printed on paper of five different colors, blue, green, pink, purple, and white. The paper is called "gampi" . The calligraphy was created by practitioners of the flowing forms of hiragana, also known as onnade . Hiragana was originally intended to be exclusively used by women, a style preferred to the more "muscular" style of the official Chinese characters. The use of hiragana, one of the chief glories of the book, and the five different colors tends to evoke the luxury and splendor of the Heian period in which the tales are set. The Heian period is one of the most glorious times in the cultural history of Japan. To this day, most concepts of modern Japanese aesthetics, especially theories of elegance, are derived from Heian culture.

SANJUROKKASEN (The Thirty-six Poetic Sages), c. 1610
In the Spencer Collection there are more than twenty sets of paintings of "Kasen," both in handscrolls and in albums. The term "Kasen" comes from the importance of waka in ancient Japanese society: some of the most distinguished practitioners of the art were designated as "Immortals." Eventually the portraits, both real and imaginary, of Kasen became an important genre of painting.

This album with these large representations of the thirty-six poets with their poems are thought to have appeared about 1610, slightly later than the Ise Monogatari. The portraits of the poets are mounted on both sides of the folded sheets. The poets in the original arrangement are divided into Left and Right sides. The portraits of those on the Left side are mounted on the front, and those on the Right side are mounted on the back of this album. This canonical selection of thirty-six poets and their poems was made by Fujiwara no Kintō, compiler of Wakan Roeishū in 1013, at the time of the Emperor Ichiyo (987-1011). The thirty-six poets were the most popular of their time and their portraits have been favorite subjects for courtier painters ever since the great series attributed to Fujiwara Nobuzane (1177-1265), one of the most acclaimed of Yamatoe painters. This series preceeds by almost two hundred years Yosa Buson's Haikai Sanjūrokkasen which is mentioned in detail below in the discussion of the Mitchell Collection.
KANZE RYU UTAIBON (Noh Chant of the Kanze School)

This is an example of Kōetsubon, a form of Sagabon whose typeface was modeled on Kōetsu's calligraphy. The Utaibon (texts of the Noh chant) were printed in the Kōetsu style with a silver-mica pattern on colored paper. Tsurezuregusa, a fourteenth-century prose piece, is another example printed in this style.

MICHIMORI, "Kōetsu Utaibon," I

Early seventeenth century
Paper design by Sōtatsu (died c. 1641)
One book, ink and mica on colored paper
Height: 18.2 cm., width: 24.2 cm.
Spencer no. 271
TADANORI, "Kōetsu Utaibon," II

Early seventeenth century
Paper design by Sōtatsu
One book, ink and mica on colored paper
Height: 18.0 cm., width: 26.0 cm.
Spencer no. 272

The text of the Noh play, Michimori, is typical of a number of similar Noh books published around 1610. The calligraphy was printed directly onto the background pattern and there is a conscious treatment of the flattened shape of the pines and the mysteriously marked moon. This almost abstract treatment of the natural forms seems to pioneer the Decorative art of modern times. The pattern was block-printed with mica. We can see an example of this on the back cover of the paper cover edition catalog to the New York Public Library exhibition, Tales of Japan.

Prior to this period, paintings were solely produced for religious purposes and done by groups or institutions. This Sagabon tradition marks the beginning of the individual artist working for secular purposes. It was in this period that popular culture began to flourish and continued peacefully for the next two hundred and fifty years of the Edo period under the stable Tokugawa regime. The Mitchell Collection is one of the fruits of this popular culture in the Edo period.

Now we will move on in time to the late Edo period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Having briefly introduced these schools, including the Sagabon, we shall go on to catch a glimpse of the major Japanese creative trends which contributed to new developments and combinations of both native and foreign-influenced styles in the history of Japanese art.

The first of these four trends was the decorative style, representing one of the main styles of Japan, perhaps its most original and creative one, Sōtatsu-Korin 宋遼十林. The second was a style influenced by China, not based upon the Sung or early Ming masters but on the scholarly, literary painters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This later style, known as Nanga, was the only truly creative one and boasts several artists of great importance and creative ability. The third trend was a naturalistic one, influenced in part by Western art and, even more, by a growing
awareness of nature as seen, rather than as it was reduced to brush conventions. This is represented by Maruyama Ōkyō and his school. The last, fourth school presented a direction that produced some very important paintings of mixed and Ukiyo-e subjects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that culminated in the great wood blockprint masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

*Nanga* was basically a school of landscape painting influenced by the Chinese literati in which literary associations play an important role. Often the style of the *Nanga* school is considered to be “impressionistic,” while “realistic” is the term used to refer to the schools of the Kanō, Tosa, and Ukiyo-e. *Ukiyo-e* played a role similar to today's commonplace photos, featuring as they did the popular Kabuki actors of the time, counterparts to the modern movie stars.

Unlike the realistic and detailed description in *Ukiyo-e*, perhaps even less so in the Kanō and Tosa schools, the *Nanga* paintings are to be recreated by the viewer. Many of them were based on scenes from classical Chinese literature. The association of the paintings to a specific piece of work is not always obvious, in fact, a very remote hint may be all there is. The *Nanga* artists' presentation of their work is unique; full participation of the viewer is required to fully appreciate their art. The role of the viewer completes the work of art. His or her knowledge determines the scope of the whole experience that the *Nanga* artists present. In other words, if the association between the painting with a Chinese literary style is made, it enriches the total experience. It is not a one-way but a two-way channel, born of reciprocal communication.

On this subject of reader/viewer participation, let me briefly explain a somewhat similar analogy between the paintings and literature. In the genre of contemporary Western literary criticism, the term, "intertextuality," coined by Julia Kristeva, might be applied in interpreting the two different genres of art, one a visual art, the other a literary one normally independent of visual art. However, what the *Nanga* artists present is not far from what the twentieth-century French literary critics attempt to view in interpreting art. Both media require the full participation of the reader/viewer in order to realize the work of art as a total experience.
Originally published in Kyoto, 1804
A later edition, in reduced format, published in the early twentieth century
Illustrated by Taigadō
One volume (folding album), complete
Height: 29.5 cm., width: 19.3 cm.
Tan, probably original, covers
Blank title-slip on cover, apparently original

Taigadō is an artistic name for Ike no Taiga, who is considered the founder of the Nanga school. Among all of the editions of this work, the Mitchell Collection holds the original one of 1804. The Taigadō Gafu is considered one of the rarest and most treasured of all the color-printed Nanga albums.

In the album there are four subjects: trees, rocks and stones, mountains, and figures. On the second page in the mountain section, there is a scene of mountain ranges. In between the three large mountains in front, a partial view of smaller ones appear in the back. The smaller, distant mountains anchor the larger ones in the scene. The dark green trees in the foreground are dwarfed by the huge rock-mountains. In a sense, the distant, bluish mountains of the background and the midget trees in the foreground sandwich the three gigantic brown/gray rock-mountains, producing a powerful, moving effect.

The three major rock-mountains vary in size. The largest on the left occupies about half of the entire space, while the smaller ones appear to be as small as the foreground trees. This asymmetry is a clever technique based on a branch of Oriental philosophy. One of the ways of interpreting these three mountains is as Heaven, Earth, and Man.

A tranquil, early morning scene cloaked in a purplish mist is conveyed in subtle color and hints at the mystery, beauty, and peace found in nature; this portrays the ultimate harmony the Taoists seek. Taiga's observations of nature expand his work and make it
much more than simple imitation of Chinese style, although the Chinese Mustard Seed Garden tradition is clearly there. There are few of us who would disagree with David G. Chibbett's statement that it "is a triumphant transference of Nanga landscape style in color to the printed book, a work which has few parallels in book illustration in its quiet beauty." The slipcase is covered with subtle beige to golden cloth material with a geometrical design matching the color of the original book cover. The Mitchell Collection also holds a later edition in reduced format in two volumes but, compared with the original, it is hard to believe that they are the same work—the subtle color of the original is not found in the facsimile.

_Haikai Sanjūrokkasesen_ (Thirty-six Master Poets of Haikai)

Originally published in 1799
Later editions published in 1828 and 1906
Illustrated by Buson
Example "B" (1799)
One volume, complete
Height: 26.9 cm., width: 19.3 cm.
Probably original covers, dark green, with curved network decorative embossing; original cover title, printed in black on light tan slip

Yosa Buson, the other giant of Nanga, was a friend of Taiga, rather than his pupil. In the true tradition of Chinese literati, Buson was a more multitalented artist than Taiga, expert as he was in painting, calligraphy, poetry, and various other arts. Buson is considered one of the three greatest Haikai masters, together with Bashō, and Kobayashi Issa. His abilities as a calligrapher are also demonstrated in the _Haikai_

---

Sanjūrokkasen as well as in Shin Hanatsumi, 1784 edition. In this sense, Buson may be considered closer to the Chinese ideal of the literatus.

This is the only book of Buson’s art work. As we mentioned in our discussion of Sagabon above, “Sanjūrokkasen” is the long-cherished Japanese tradition of the “Immortal Poets” going back to the Heian period. Almost two hundred years after the original thirty-six kasen of Sagabon, Buson selected thirty-six Haikai poets for the occasion. All thirty-six kasen were disciples of Bashō. Buson was deeply devoted to Bashō. It was during the period of the “Haikai revival” that Buson created his art work commemorating the two important occasions for Bashō: 1743, the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Bashō; and 1783, the premature celebration of the centennial of Bashō’s death. The paintings of the Haiku poets were “impressions” rather than exact likenesses. On the same page, the poet’s Haiku appears in light colors. This combination of Haiku and illustration, along with the impressionistic portraits, are the essential features of Haiga 俳画.

Originally published in 1850; a later revised issue published in 1891
Illustrated by Maruyama Okyo
Example “B” (1891)
One volume (folding album), complete
Height: 24.6 cm., width: 19.7 cm.
Original covers, buff, with bold figured decoration printed in brown
Original cover title, printed in black on white slip

This work is much more free-spirited than are works in the Zenga 極 風 style, containing as it does spontaneity. Okyo’s flowers and plants, specifically the plum single branch and the cherry trees, are depicted in a vivid, realistic manner which makes for surprisingly lifelike plants imbued with high spirit.
Okyo's major contribution to Japanese art is his theory that a painter should not copy the works of earlier masters but produce his own, based upon accurate observation of nature gained by sketching the subject before painting it. After this basic form is rendered, its spirit is then interpreted. His works verily exemplify his own theory; this particular album is an especially vivid example. His theory perhaps was directed more to the painters of the Nanga and the Kano schools who tended to spend too much time copying earlier works. For instance, it is inevitable to see a resemblance between the works of Taiga, especially his landscapes, and scenes from the Mustard Seed Garden, whose influence on Japanese painting was greater than any other single work.

*SHIN HANATSUMI 新花摘 (New Flower Picking)*

The latest date shown in the book is 1784, but it may have been published later.
Illustrated by Matsumura Goshun
One volume, complete
Height: 26.4 cm., width: 26.4 cm.
Probably original covers, dark blue, with crosshatched embossing
Original cover title, printed in black on light brown slip

This work combines Buson's calligraphy with Goshun's illustrations to make it one of the "most aesthetically pleasing books ever produced in Japan."

Matsumura Goshun studied under Yosa Buson and later joined Okyo's studio. As a result, it is not surprising that Goshun's work is considered to combine the styles of Buson and Okyo, thereby creating the techniques of the Shijō school. The Shijō artists are generally associated with flower and bird studies that give less attention to detail than the works of the Maruyama artists. More abstract than the paintings of Buson and Okyo, the school soon merged with the Maruyama school.

The text of *Shin Hanatsumi* is based on Buson's diary. After his mentor's death, Goshun came into possession of the manuscript, a Haiku diary written by Buson. Goshun decided to publish it as a tribute to his teacher, adding his own illustrations to the text. The result is a superior combination of calligraphy and illustration.
Those who do not have eyes keen enough to appreciate the calligraphy, however, may wonder why this work is so highly praised. It is so because the overall effect is created by an interplay between the calligraphy and the illustrations, between Buson and Goshun, which together produce something greater than its separate parts. There are fewer pages of illustrations than of text; therefore, Buson's work may appear to take a subordinate role. However, through the illustrations, his influence is clear. The illustrations are printed in subdued colors which represent the symbolic taste of the Nanga school.

There are only three copies of the 1793 edition in existence. One is in the British Museum, another in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the third in the Spencer Collection at the New York Public Library.

The Research Libraries' Special Collections are open to qualified researchers, advanced scholars, and students engaged in programs of graduate study. Admission is secured by written application to the Office of Special Collections in the Central Research Library, Fifth Avenue at 42d Street, New York, NY 10018, USA.