EXPLAINING *UKIYO-E*

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ABSTRACT

The term *ukiyo-e* refers to a distinctive phenomenon in Japanese art. *Ukiyo-e* can be defined temporally, geographically and socially; most importantly, it developed its own distinctive stylistic character. Most studies of *ukiyo-e* have been founded on a descriptive mode: they have sought to identify its principal characteristics, and to describe the different projects of its various schools and artists. Recent research has shifted into a more explanatory mode, locating explanations of *ukiyo-e*’s distinctive pictorial character in descriptions of the socio-cultural context to which it pertained.

This project seeks to establish richer explanations for the pictorial character of *ukiyo-e*. It argues that appropriate explanations may be found through a critical appraisal of the conditions which constrained and stimulated the enterprises of *ukiyo-e* artists. It finds these conditions to be manifest in the conceptual foundations that informed its artists; in the ways artists learned the knowledge and skills of their craft; in the sorts of function *ukiyo-e* pictures were required to perform; and in two conditions of the artists’ medium: pictorial devices or conventions and the spatial constraints of their media, and the material conditions with which they worked. No matter how closely works of *ukiyo-e* artists conformed to the pictorial character common to the school as a whole, each individual also followed an independent pathway. The final chapter acknowledges the ways individual artists were disposed to work differently within the auspices of the broader enterprise.
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PREFACE

The focus and shape of this project have been prompted by two factors: a long personal acquaintance with ukiyo-e which has insistently posed more questions than I have found answers, and a conviction that explanations can be developed for pictures and picture-making.

Researchers, like artists, rarely work in a vacuum, and throughout this enterprise I have been especially privileged to enjoy the support and cooperation of a range of people and institutions. In the first instance, I would like to acknowledge the support and patience of my family, and particularly that of my partner Helen. Tolerance has also characterized the support of my immediate colleagues at the Department of Art Education at the Dunedin College of Education. I would like to thank also the Research and Professional Development Committees of the College, both for their ongoing support of my postgraduate study, and for the generous provision of leave for the completion of this research. Thanks also are due to the staff in Reprographics, Word Processing and Computer Services at the College. The staffs of the Bill Robertson Library of the College and Otago Polytechnic, and of the Central Library of the University of Otago have been most helpful. Those of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery have allowed me to access the collections and reproduce a number of works here. Thanks also to the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, the Trustees of the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, the Hikone Castle Museum, and the Honolulu Academy of Fine Arts, for permission to reproduce works. The Management Committee of the Asian Studies Research Centre of the University of Otago funded the translation of some material with a research grant, and Mary Mercer and Dr Brian Moloughney facilitated this.

Two colleagues have given informed support. I would like to acknowledge the conversations, clarification and resource sharing of fellow student Richard Bullen. I would also like to thank my professional colleague Kerry Mackay, who has patiently proof-read the drafts for the whole project, and whose advice was generous, perceptive, thorough and honest.

During this project I have been fortunate enough to receive the professional leadership of three supervisors, and the quite different kinds of advice given by each has, each in its own way, contributed a great deal to the shape and flavour of the final presentation. I would like to thank Dr Peter Leech, Dr Brian Moloughney, and Associate Professor Peter Stuples, all of the University of Otago, for their patience, their academic rigour, and their pertinent advice. Douglas Jenkins, Henry Johnson and Sandy Kita all read the manuscript and offered constructive advice. There may be occasions where I have veered from the sound pathways they have provided: all faults are my own.

I would like to dedicate this project to my partner Helen without whose support it may never have seen the light of day.
PROLOGUE

I

In Japanese art the term ukiyo-e (literally, ‘floating world pictures’) refers to an enterprise distinctly different from other earlier or contemporary Japanese fields of painting like the Kanō, Tosa and Yamato-e schools. Where the other institutions had served the interests of small, privileged and elite audiences, for example, ukiyo-e appealed to a much broader spectrum of the public including the newly urbanized samurai-sourced bureaucratic class of Edo, together with members of the large, affluent and increasingly articulate chōnin ‘townsman’ sector of the population. Ukiyo-e became a popular art form. Though many of its artists were well-respected painters, the popularity of ukiyo-e was enhanced through its peculiar commitment to the woodblock print. Printed images could be produced in very large quantities, and circulated at low cost. Ordinary townsfolk could collect art works in quantity as only the very wealthy had been able to do in earlier times. More importantly, ukiyo-e artists developed a distinct pictorial character for their art that ensured its sustained popularity with this broad and diverse audience. They developed a stylistic idiom that was at once markedly different from those of other schools of painting, and at the same time consistent in character with the urbanity of its Edo audiences and their expectations of immediacy and novelty. The stylistic idiom of ukiyo-e favoured polychromatic, often ornately patterned compositions, clear and precisely descriptive linear qualities, and a straightforward, easily accessible representational mode.

The most immediately striking characteristic of ukiyo-e pictures, and that departing most markedly from the misty tonal character of the Kanō school painting or the transparent black ink brushwork of zenga, was the richness, brightness, and finely detailed variety of its colour. This tendency towards the polychromatic was evident in the very earliest works of ukiyo-e. It was present, for example, in the complex genre screen paintings (the Funaki Screens) and the Tōshōgū collection Thirty-six Poets panels of ukiyo-e’s earliest master, Iwasa Matabei, and in the variously coloured and finely patterned costumes of the figures in The Hikone Screen (Plate 2). Though many early prints were monochrome, or more precisely, linear compositions on white paper, printmakers also quickly favoured polychrome. Early single block prints were embellished with colour applied by hand in broad, bright layers. By the later 1760s printmakers had perfected a multi-block polychrome printing process that allowed the most complex of combinations of colour to be printed with near perfect registration to produce what became known as nishiki-e or ‘brocade pictures’. This commitment to a highly decorative polychromatic mode was sustained throughout the history of ukiyo-e and is equally evident in the richly coloured and ornate prints of its latest designers, artists like Chikanobu, Kunichika and Kuniyoshi. Even during the last decade of the Tokugawa period ukiyo-e printers eagerly sought new combinations of increasingly brighter and faster pigments, most obviously in their adoption of the European sourced aniline synthetics.
Though by the late eighteenth century ukiyo-e artists were able to select colours from a rich and varied palette of increasingly finely produced and reliable pigments, it was not just brightness and variety that characterized their works. They were able to use colour with a particular sense of purpose. In the first instance, ukiyo-e colour was more closely consistent with the actual colour qualities of the subjects artists were required to represent than that of other schools. In depictions of theatrical subjects, for example, artists were able to use garish, bright and harshly contrasting combinations that were fair representations of those of the kabuki theatre itself, or to use distinctive emblematic combinations that identified each character on the stage in the same way that kabuki costumes did. In portraying the courtesans and their attendants from the brothel world artists found close equivalents for the fashionable combinations of the day, reproducing the colours of up-to-date couture and the intricacies of pattern or woven texture of the textiles. The ukiyo-e artist’s palette allowed ample opportunity for chromatic invention, allowing artists to use colour in a naturalistic and descriptive manner, as well as in more decorative ways.

While ukiyo-e seems also to have favoured intensely hued colour, the most recognizable characteristic of its idiom was not so much its variety or brightness as its flatness. Ukiyo-e artists generally applied pigment in clearly and precisely defined shapes of flat colour, disposed parallel to and emphasizing the presence of the picture plane, or in shapes of colour relieved by layers of geometric pattern like the popular vertical stripes of kimono fabrics, for example, or layers of repeating tessellated designs. These shapes or surfaces of flat colour were often juxtaposed in sharply contrasting relations, generating strikingly brilliant tensions between warm and cool colours, complementary pairings, or between areas of remarkably intense pigment arranged against surfaces of dilute colour, velvet black, pure white, or the ivory colour of the raw paper itself. Any dissonance generated by such intense chromatic relations was generally tempered by the presence of a moderating colour or colour group. Thus a softening combination, of tea-browns perhaps, or olive greens, earth reds or mineral blues, might be interwoven amongst areas of brighter or more intense colour. Alternatively, flat background planes of a single colour, usually a light mouse-grey, soft yellow or pale brown, provided a simple and temperate counterpoint to the more complex and strident relations of the central figural detail. At a later stage darker backgrounds – especially of charcoal grey – or milky washed layers of ground mica were popular.

This flatness of surfaces or shapes of colour arranged across, or up and down, the picture plane, rather than receding into or beyond it, was sustained in ukiyo-e from its earliest work well into the nineteenth century. At this very late stage a combination of trends towards more realistic representation and demands for increasing novelty in the pictorial relations of colour encouraged the widespread application of effects like bokashi, the simple blending, or fading-out, of bands of intensely applied pigment into zones of more diluted colour, or from one hue into another, though even with these sorts of contrivance the effects of colour shifts were relatively simple, and still implicitly flat band or zone-like arrangements.

Colour combinations favoured by particular artists also changed throughout the Tokugawa period, in ways that related to the complex interactions of personal preferences of artists, shifts in fashion, especially in textile and clothing design, governmental regulation implemented through sumptuary edicts designed to curb the extravagance of the wealthy Edo population, or technical innovations in pigment production. Thus in
Harunobu’s time sweet, but fugitive, rose-pinks and pastel-blues were arranged against areas of rich black and intense red; for earlier artists rose-pink and soft green had been favoured; for Utamaro’s generation tea-browns, mauves and soft greys predominated; later, and recurrently, blue-predominated pictures (aizuri-e) using a variety of different pigments were popular; during the later nineteenth century intense reds and bright, acidic purples were favoured, apparently in defiance of governmental injunctions to moderation.

Whatever combination was popular at any given time, ukiyo-e colour relations were always characterised by precision of placement and relation; the exact position and extension of each area of colour was generally indicated or defined by fine, usually black, contour lines. The pervasive sense of linearity established by the fine networks of linear contours surrounding, defining and separating each area of colour, as well as describing details, gestures, or movements of figures, or articulating spatial dynamics and tensions from purely linear interactions, is a hallmark characteristic of the ukiyo-e pictorial idiom.

The delineation of shapes or areas of colour is possibly the most important function of ukiyo-e line. Though it was used in this way in painting it played an especially important role in woodblock printing, where, as the foundation element of the first-cut key-block, it became the defining technical and structural device, the organizational determinant in the pictorial composition. Its success in performing this function was dependent partly on the precision or exactitude of placement, and also in a fineness and consistency of linear quality that allowed contours to perform their descriptive functions without overpowering or obscuring the values of the colour areas they defined or separated. Only in the very late mannered and weakly expressive ukiyo-e pictures does one find a marked, exaggerated modulation or variation of linear thickness or gesture. Elsewhere consistency of thickness of line was essential to the understated precision that characterized its pictorial function and its relation to the other pictorial elements of the composition.

Though this contour function was the most obviously characteristic pictorial role of linear relations in ukiyo-e, it was not the only one. Line was also required to perform other functions. For example, and especially in woodblock printed broadsheets and book illustrations, the linear qualities of the pictorial composition were required to be consistent with those of the calligraphy, particularly in the description of finer pictorial detail in foliage, hair or textiles. Linear combinations were also required to construct the patterned diversions that were regularly laid over flat surfaces of colour. In some instances linear stripes or tesserae were simply cut into colour blocks to provide straightforward striations, chevrons or positive/negative patterns; in more complex pictures delicate overlays of finely meshed lacing filigrees of linear pattern were printed or painted over colour surfaces, tempering the intensity of, or sometimes (especially where metallic or mica pigments were used) enriching the flat shapes of colour.

Ukiyo-e artists also required the linear relations of their pictures to perform structural functions other than the delineation of areas of colour. Linear divisions defined and positioned the principal structural elements of the composition. Interacting combinations of horizontally, vertically and diagonally disposed lines established the structural skeleton of the pictorial composition, as spatial dividers, or as edges of interlocking planes that established the defining surfaces of architectural spaces, or the stacked zones of landscapes. Thus the precise, zig-zagging geometric interaction of vertical and horizontal lines in Katsukawa Hokusai’s Hangan seppuku (Plate 23)
determines the spatial arrangement of all of the other pictorial components of the composition; similarly it is the linear definition of edges or areas of land and water, mist, mountain or sky that underpins the stacked construction of Hokusai’s *Bushū Tamagawa* (Plate 39).

As in Hokusai’s *Hangan seppuku* the complex network of lines can be used to join, or unify, diverse parts of elaborate compositions, or to separate different parts of a picture within a single arrangement. This function required *ukiyo-e* linear networks to interweave throughout, or right across, the pictorial space. *Ukiyo-e* artists relieved the tight cohesion generated by this linear function by arranging alternating, intersecting networks of enlivening rhythmically interacting lines that introduced a unique spatial dynamism to their compositions. This was evident early on, even in the single-figure compositions of the Kaigetsudō masters, in the sweeping, plunging curved lines that both defined the edges and folds and joins of costumes and cut through them in exaggerated gestural curves and arabesques. It is evident also in the stacked, alternating intersections of curves defined by edges of limbs, garments, sword scabbards or emblematic *mon* that enliven and knit together the complex, dynamic and tense figure compositions of the early Torii masters. It is the defining element, as a closely intersecting sequence of repeated, dancing curves, in both the dynamic character and the taut spatial tension of Shunei’s *Samurai on Horseback* (Plate 9).

In all of these compositions the characteristic tendency of *ukiyo-e* was towards asymmetry. Through the asymmetrical, spatially opposed relations of lines, edges, shapes, planes, curves or colours *ukiyo-e* artists were able to achieve a sense of acute tension or stillness. The effectiveness of this spatial tension was reinforced by three characteristic structural qualities of *ukiyo-e* compositions. In the first place, they were typically small-scale. Prints were viewed as pages in albums or, as single sheet compositions, held in the hand. Paintings were enjoyed in the close spatial environment of the typically small Edo home. *Ukiyo-e* compositions could be viewed, therefore, all at once – rather than section by section, as, for example, scroll paintings or screen assemblages were experienced. Thus complex sets of spatial interactions could be apprehended as the components of a single spatial construction rather than as a sequence of discrete pictorial components. Secondly, *ukiyo-e* artists favoured shallow-space compositions, ones in which the figural interactions appeared to occur across a single plane which might, in turn, be disposed against a simply described ‘backdrop’ setting, or often against a blank, flat coloured surface, a ‘floating field’ of single colour. Alternatively, in representing complex figure groups, *ukiyo-e* artists might arrange them in sub-grouped layers, each arranged parallel to the picture plane, but in a very shallow arrangement from the front of the pictorial space to the rear. In any case, where the spatial disposition of objects and figures of Chinese-style painting was characterized by suggestion, diffusion or spatial indeterminacy, that of *ukiyo-e* was typically precisely, crisply, and coherently defined.

The third, and possibly most self-evident, characteristic of *ukiyo-e* spatial relations lay in their peculiar degree of spatial density, which contributed so much towards the fullness, tightness and cohesion of their compositions. This quality of spatial density was generated in part by the extreme complexity of colour relations in *ukiyo-e* pictures. Even in *ukiyo-e* prints the finely registered juxtaposition of colours from between ten and twenty separate colour blocks was not at all unusual; the overlay of one field of transparent colour over another allowed for even more colours to be generated, in more subtly worked combinations. The overprinting of finely articulated pattern blocks added even more to
this density of detail. This spatial density was emphasized also by other factors, most notably the consistent adoption of shallow-space compositional modes that focused the viewer’s attention on the complex interaction of marks, lines, shapes and patterns across, or up and down, the picture plane. Also the figural interactions of *ukiyo-e* compositions typically stretched right to the edges, sometimes even, implicitly, as in Shunei’s charging *samurai* or explicitly, as with Watanabe Seitei’s doves (Plate 12), extending beyond the boundaries of the support. Both the dynamic structural tension of such compositions, and the intensity of the pictorial interactions that are generated between the pictorial schema and the support contribute to this sense of spatial density.

The final, and perhaps more elusive characteristic of the pictorial idiom of *ukiyo-e* is its tendency to cultivate a sensibility of decadence. This sense of decadence was apprehended, though regularly misinterpreted, as evidence of some kind of degeneration by most early Western observers. Decadence is an elusive concept, resistant to concise definition. In the broadest sense one might explain it as a delight in or preoccupation with decay, founded in a social or cultural disjunction, and a sensibility of eroticism and manifest in a morbid preoccupation with the erotic, the hedonist, and self-indulgent world of pleasure, and as a tension between artifice and nature, refinement and degeneration.

*Ukiyo-e*’s preoccupation with hedonistic gratification was immediately evident to early Western observers. It was most obviously manifest in the *shunga* that were designed by most artists, and in what was interpreted as a morbid obsession with sensual pleasure in Utamaro’s single-minded attention to the women and the activities of the pleasure quarters. In broad terms, and in marked contrast to the lofty preoccupations with the world of nature, of poetry or of aristocratic privilege that occupied the artists of other domains of Japanese painting, one distinguishing characteristic of *ukiyo-e* was its preoccupation with genre subject matter, scenes from daily life. By the mid-eighteenth century however, its attention was more finely focused on the worlds of pleasure than the genre category alone would suggest, though less overtly so than was evident within Utamaro’s oeuvre. The objects of *ukiyo-e* attention became the dual, and related, entertainment worlds of the *kabuki* theatre and the brothel district. Both domains occupied an ambivalent position in Edo society, frowned upon but tolerated and carefully monitored and regulated by the authorities. The theatrical and pleasure quarters constituted a phenomenon that might today be described as an ‘underworld’, a distinct subculture of literary, social and sensual entertainments known as ‘*ukiyo*’, the ‘floating world’ – the domain that gave its name to the pictorial phenomenon. From its earliest days *ukiyo-e* took this world as a central and recurring subject – early artists like Moronobu and Shigemasa occupied themselves in the matter of fact representation of the brothel quarters and their social engagements; the Kaigetsudō painters devoted themselves solely to the representations of courtesans; the early Torii artists were completely committed to the promotion of *kabuki* theatre. By the end of the 1760s, artists like Harunobu not only represented the world of the pleasure quarters, but were able to embrace something of the delicately provocative sensibilities of its manners into their own pictorial idioms through a complex and subtle pictorial reconstruction of a delicately poised feminine sensibility. Later Utagawa artists like Kunisada embodied all the intensity of colour, dynamism and theatricality of *kabuki* in their representations of its actors, characters and narratives.

A sense of tension between artifice and naturalism was also evident in *ukiyo-e*. In one sense, *ukiyo-e* obtained a greater degree of representational naturalism than had ever been achieved in any other domain of Japanese art. The diffuse mountainous landscapes of
the Chinese-inspired traditions, for example, had been founded not so much on the first hand observation of real, identifiable places; as on inventive variations on existing themes. The landscapes of Hiroshige were of real, named and recognizable places. Hiroshige employed a range of perspectival conventions to lend these landscapes a convincing sensation of depth; Hokusai employed elements of both linear and atmospheric perspective to lend his landscapes a greater degree of naturalism. Similarly, ukiyo-e figures were, typically, placed in recognizable and reasonably convincing settings; Moronobu’s figures walk the streets and fill the shop-front verandas of downtown Edo; Harunobu’s women trip delicately through simple but convincing interiors, gateways or river-bank paths; Kunisada’s actors occupy acceptable graphic equivalents to stage constructions. Though the different figures of the earliest ukiyo-e images are represented with almost identical schema, artists were quickly able to differentiate between individuals, by emblematic means – mon, costume or attribute – and later by describing physiognomic differences. By the nineteenth century, ukiyo-e actor and courtesan portraits recorded the recognizably individual appearances of their various subjects. In representations of natural history subjects, birds, flowers, shells and insects, ukiyo-e artists represented every detail with a text-book, almost diagrammatic accuracy.

The pictorial world of ukiyo-e was also, on the other hand, a highly contrived one. In a sense this was partly a characteristic of some of the subjects ukiyo-e artists represented: the worlds of kabuki and mizu shōbai were themselves constructions of great artifice, founded in highly contrived, subtly nuanced and complex sets of conventions. In a similar way, ukiyo-e pictorial means were highly contrived. Artists observed precisely and clearly defined conventions for the application of line, colour or pattern for example. They were constrained to do so through the direction of the various schools or studios within which they worked, and by the expectations of their audiences. However convincing the three-dimensionality of pictorial settings, their realism was always tempered by shallow space conventions that emphasized or conformed to the flatness of the picture plane. However naturalistic the colour that was used to describe flesh, or textiles, or foliage, or water, its application was always subject to a tendency towards decoration or ornate ornament. However finely detailed the linear representation of individual differences in surface quality or texture, this function was always subordinate to that of delineation of colour surface, construction of rhythmic repetitions, or provision of structural foundations. Ukiyo-e artists produced pictures their audiences could recognize as representing ‘reality’ in ways that had not been seen before, but at the same time they sustained an abiding interest in the formal concerns of picture making, particularly those that allowed free reign to decorative invention.

Intimately interwoven into this tension between contrivance and naturalism was a relation between refinement and degeneration. Refinement was the primary characteristic of ukiyo-e artifice: it was the product of a stylistic tendency at once highly decorative and economical; it was evident in the precision and concision of line, in the complex yet delicate and subtly regulated interactions of colour and pattern that typified ukiyo-e compositions. Perhaps a more appropriate sense to apply to ukiyo-e than ‘degeneration’ might be that of ‘urbane resignation’. This sense, which Kuki Shūzō embraces into his explanation of iki, lies at the heart of the frankness, honesty and world-weary acceptance of ukiyo-e artists’ preoccupations with the banal, everyday, familiar, and earthy realities of daily life in the new capital. In one important sense this urbane acceptance facilitated the refinement of ukiyo-e artists’ designs. Unlike their early Western commentators, ukiyo-e artists made no moral judgments on their subjects, no matter how outré they may have
seemed even then. Urbanity informed a degree of cool, unmoved detachment among artists like Harunobu, Utamaro, or Hokusai that allowed them to represent the most humbly common of figures with the same grace as they might portray the most privileged, the most fundamental of human physical interactions with the same dignity and pictorial refinement as the most glamorous.

None of these characteristics of style, subject or sensibility was in itself unique to ukiyo-e. Genre scenes, for example, had been popular well before the Tokugawa period, amongst Momoyama audiences for example, and had even become popular with Kanō school painters. What distinguished the ukiyo-e approach to genre was its urbanity (literally, as well as figuratively – the urban scene of Edo was the primary source for many ukiyo-e compositions), its truth to the dynamic character of the new capital – its scale, its density, its busyness, its apparently infinite variety – and the rarified atmosphere of its entertainment world.

Similarly, ukiyo-e artists were not alone in their taste for the highly decorative, and other schools had used line and colour in similar ways. The stylistic tendency was evident as early as Heian times, in scroll painted illustrations to The Tale of Genji for example, as was the taste for luxury and ornament. What distinguished ukiyo-e in the first instance was the reinvigoration of this taste through the engagement with a new medium, and in the second, the degree to which a close accord could be forged between the taste for the decorative and an urbane sympathy for the ordinary, the everyday and the banal.

It is important to acknowledge also that although this pictorial idiom constituted something of a common ground for ukiyo-e artists, it did not constrain them all to work in exactly the same way. The history of ukiyo-e is characterized by heterogeneity rather than by close similarity. Different artists worked in distinctly different ways, pursued different interests, engaged in different projects. Though their pictures do tend to conform to the character of the broadly constructed mode, works by individual artists also look quite different from one another. Thus Harunobu’s women are short, petite, and dance across the picture plane, where Utamaro’s are tall, and wan, and glide gracefully. Even within artist-schools, though the maintenance of ‘house-styles’ was fundamental to commercial success, similarity was balanced by difference – thus the figures of Utagawa Toyokuni I stand erect and dignified, and the colours are soft and muted, while the characters of his most successful pupil, Toyokuni III (Kunisada I) crouch, lunge, leap, twist and turn in displays of dynamic melodrama, and colours tend to the bright and intensely contrasting. Changes, differences, can also be located within the oeuvres of individual artists whose interests and projects changed direction over time. Early in his career, as a member of the Katsukawa school, Hokusai worked within the constraints of a shallow-space structural principle; after his departure from this school he engaged in a sustained investigation of deep-space constructs based on empirical perspective; in his mature works he was preoccupied with the spatial tension between the representation of depth and the structural flatness of the picture plane; in the final works of his career, he returned, apparently full circle, to the vertically stacked pictorial layers of earlier Chinese schools.
II

This tension between conformity and difference has informed most historical accounts of *ukiyo-e*. All commentators appear to have recognized the character of *ukiyo-e* as a cohesive phenomenon, defined by a particular time period, a specific place, typical subjects and a common stylistic idiom. Most also recognized its differences, its changes and shifts in interest. Historical accounts were able to construct a genealogy for *ukiyo-e* and were generally able to discern finer, sometimes quite discrete, developments within the broader enterprise, in the activities of individual schools for example, or for individuals or small groups of artists with interests in common.

For many observers, the genealogy of *ukiyo-e* was best described as a sequence of ‘periods’ – ‘primitive’, ‘classical’, ‘decadent’, for example. For others a process of change was less obvious – *ukiyo-e* artists worked at a level of aesthetic maturity from the early days of the Tokugawa period to the last. Alternatively a genealogical sequence could be discerned, but was located in the histories of master-artist individuals rather than as a series of periods. To some extent the perception of different patterns is founded in differing perceptions of the institutional structures of the Edo art world at this time. Some, for example, draw parallels between a period model and the birth or demise of artist schools. Others found explanations of a sequence of highly gifted but idiosyncratic artists on particular understandings of the ways artists work – as isolated individuals rather than as members of groups for example.

The different explanations of *ukiyo-e*’s history are the subject of the first chapter of this study. From the complex agreements and differences of opinion of the various historians of *ukiyo-e* something of the complexities and subtleties of its pictorial character may be revealed, and something of the tension between a notion of a common identity for *ukiyo-e* on the one hand, and the more finely definable enterprises of schools, liaisons or individual artists on the other, may be clarified. Most importantly, the evaluation of the histories of *ukiyo-e* in this first chapter provokes the question that the subsequent sections of this project seek to answer: granted that the enterprise of *ukiyo-e* was most obviously evident in its own unique pictorial character, what forces determined, conditioned or shaped the development of that idiom? Broadly speaking, these chapters describe the conditioning factors of *ukiyo-e* in terms of contemporary notions of what pictures should be like, and in the ways these were sustained, and challenged, in the ways artists learned their craft. They find conditioning factors in the functions pictures were required to perform, in the conditions of the artists’ medium, and in the particular dispositions of the individual artists of *ukiyo-e*.

It will become evident through these chapters that the intention of this study is not to construct another, alternative, art historical survey. Although its scope and structure are broad, it does not deal with its material from an historical point of view. This study is, rather, founded in the discipline of critical aesthetics. It deals, more specifically, with the domain that Richard Wollheim refers to as ‘substantive aesthetics’, and which derives from ‘…the interlock of experience and understanding’. A simpler way of describing its task is as ‘explanatory criticism’ – seeking explanations of why certain pictures, in this case *ukiyo-e*, look the way they do.

The discussion of the ways Japanese aesthetic concepts might contribute to explanations for *ukiyo-e* is divided between a consideration of notions like *wabi*, *sabi*,
yūgen, shibui and miyabi which either cannot explain ukiyo-e or which can do so in only a limited way, and those of suki and iki which seem to offer valid and satisfying explanations. The detailed discussion allocated to the former group may seem excessive, but I have felt it important to establish a context for the subsequent explanations of suki and iki in the broader patterns of aesthetic sensibility that preceded and coincided with the Tokugawa era. Because some of these concepts, like wabi and sabi are so well known they are sometimes assumed to constitute a paradigm for Japanese aesthetic experience in general. This is not the case, and illustrating their inapplicability for explaining ukiyo-e clarifies this. The discussion of these concepts is intended to illustrate what ukiyo-e is not, as much as the subsequent discussion of the other notions illustrates what it might be.

Both suki and iki seem far more consistent with the idioms and manners of ukiyo-e and with those of the world its artists were concerned to represent. A close examination of the relation between ukiyo-e and iki goes some way towards clarifying both the consistencies and some of the contradictions evident in the sensibilities of ukiyo-e and its world. Iki can explain, for example, the particular fineness, precision and restraint of ukiyo-e line, the rich but contained variety of its colours, and the provocative erotic charge of its pictorial subjects. At the same time it can provide something of a contrapuntal measure for the excessive ornamental confusions of ukiyo-e’s later years.

This examination of the ways aesthetic sensibilities underpinned and informed ukiyo-e goes some way to explaining its unique pictorial character. It also provokes a new question about the relation between the maintenance of a carefully contrived, broadly observed sensibility on the one hand, and the assertively individual paths forged by the majority of its artists on the other.

This apparently paradoxical relation between conformity to rule and individual invention is the focus of the third chapter of this project. The relation is not exclusive to ukiyo-e – it seems pertinent to practice in the arts in general. What is specific to ukiyo-e is the particular combination of institutional mechanisms through which rules were transmitted and sustained, and the conditions which encouraged or facilitated inventive practice within these institutions. The chapter focuses on the ways artists could learn their craft, and on the organizational structures within which they could apply their skills. The concept of learning by working to example is seen to be fundamental to the development of the distinctive pictorial idiom of ukiyo-e, contributing to explanations for both the unique characteristics of the phenomenon as a whole, and the maintenance by some of its artists of older conventions – those of Chinese painting for example – within the Tokugawa enterprise.

Ukiyo-e compositions were required to perform a range of functions, some of them quite prosaic. Some were used, for example, in a promotional way, advertising new kabuki productions or lionizing the stars of the stage or the leading figures of the brothel world, or extolling the virtues of contemporary fashions in textiles or couture or make-up. Others performed didactic functions. In each instance the pictorial character of the pictures was carefully tailored to the roles they had to perform.

In most instances it was not so much the functions ukiyo-e were required to perform that were unique, as the solutions they employed to this end. Ukiyo-e artists were regularly required to use pictures to tell stories. So had Japanese artists for centuries before. Earlier solutions to the problem of representing narrative in pictorial form had been found in
scroll, and sometimes mural, painting formats. These solutions were poorly suited to the needs of Edo audiences who wanted narrative pictures in large numbers and at low cost. The ukiyo-e solution to the problem was, in the first instance, to favour the medium of woodblock printing as a means of cheaply producing large numbers of pictures. Very quickly, the illustrative mode that had been applied to the production of woodblock printed books was extended into the development of the serial print form as a popular means for representing narrative in pictorial form. The images included here by Utamaro (Plate 1) and Hokusai (Plates 22, 23, 24) are all selected from larger print series of this kind. Such compositions could function discretely, as single compositions, or together, as part of the larger group or sequence. Alternatively, the story-telling function prompted some artists to maintain narrative continuities through the development of single multi-narrative compositions, as in the example included here by Utagawa Fusatane (Plate 25).

This story-telling function also encouraged the development of particular stylistic tendencies in ukiyo-e. In general, ukiyo-e favoured a much more naturalistic mode than other domains of Japanese painting. Though this may not be immediately apparent to Western eyes, ukiyo-e pictures had an immediacy for their Tokugawa public that had rarely been experienced elsewhere. Their tendency towards representational accessibility encouraged the development of particular pictorial forms:  ōkubi-e or ‘big-head picture’ close-up portraits, for example, allowed artists to represent actors or courtesans as recognizable individuals, and encouraged some artists, like Sharaku, to describe individually specific mannerisms, gestures or expressions. Elsewhere ukiyo-e artists developed a range of conventions for the representation of quite specific pictorial subjects – tautly dynamic compositional structures of opposed diagonal planes, for example, for the representation of the theatrical mie pose, or a range of conventions for empirical perspective for the convincing representation of landscape spaces. In each of these, and in many other instances, pictorial devices were developed in response to the requirement that pictures perform certain functions.

The pictorial devices employed by artists belong to the broader range of tools and processes at their disposal for making art – their medium. Thus, for designers of uki-e perspective pictures a range of strategies – converging orthogonals, diminution of scale, overlapping shapes, differentials of detail, tone and colour – were conventionally used to contrive a sense of pictorial depth. The conditions of an artist’s medium might be seen to constitute constraints on the ways they worked, or alternatively to provide opportunities for inventive exploration and innovation. The two principal conditions of medium with which painters and printmakers worked were those of spatial relations and those of material relations – pigments, grounds and technical processes.

Ukiyo-e artists were not unique just because they organized pictorial schema in pictorial spaces – most painters and printmakers are occupied with this issue. But ukiyo-e can be distinguished by particular characteristics of its spatial arrangement. Ukiyo-e artists, for example, employed, or selected from, a much wider and more complex range of spatial conventions than did artists of other schools. Kanô school landscape painters employed the Chinese-sourced convention of arranging landscape masses as vertically stacked layers. This convention favoured a high and removed viewpoint and high horizon. Ukiyo-e landscape artists on the other hand were able to draw on various elements of Chinese, Yamato, or even Western pictorial traditions to deploy, individually or in combination, stacked space, shallow space, isometric projection or perspectival construction in their compositions. They could choose from a broader range of options
than other Japanese artists because they were not constrained to work within the same closely defined parameters throughout their careers. Some later artists, like Hokusai worked with the entire range of conventional options.

Though many of the spatial characteristics of ukiyo-e may be found also in other domains of Chinese and Japanese painting (the tendency to asymmetry in Chinese for example, or the shallow space constructions in some Kanō school painting) the particular combination of devices did favour certain spatial characteristics. Ukiyo-e pictures can be distinguished, particularly from those of the Kanō school, by the precision and crisp clarity of their spatial organization. By and large, the disposition of flat surfaces of colour and pattern seemed best suited to shallow-space constructions, or at least to those in which the nearest and farthest planes were clearly indicated. Most especially, ukiyo-e artists seemed preoccupied with the construction of pictorial tension in unusually cohesive, tautly wrought spatial relationships.

To some extent, the spatial relations of ukiyo-e were determined by pictorial function. The requirement for recognizable portraits generated the development of ōkubi-e; ōkubi-e divorced subject from setting and required a shallow-space construction; shallow-space constructions lent ōkubi-e their peculiar sense of immediacy. Similarly, uki-e deep-space constructions were developed in response to the need to construct naturalistic settings for convincing figural relations. In a different sense however, the issue of spatial relations and the engagement in the innovative development or disposition of spatial devices, was in itself the object of the interest of ukiyo-e. Where Kanō artists, for example, had rarely had to veer from established spatial modes, those of ukiyo-e were far more actively involved in the development of new spatial constructions, either as novel combinations of existing conventions or in the development of new devices for the articulation of pictorial space.

This pro-active, investigative or inventive attitude to spatial organization was one of the factors that encouraged changes in the appearance of ukiyo-e throughout the Tokugawa period. In a similar way, artists’ engagement with the material conditions of their craft engendered changes in the ways their pictures looked.

One reason ukiyo-e developed its own distinctive character was because its artists engaged with the materials and processes of their craft on ways quite different from artists of other schools. In some ways they were able to be more innovative. Rather than being constrained to work with a narrow range of specified materials or colours, ukiyo-e artists were able to choose reasonably freely from an ever-increasing range of ever-improving quality pigments. This led, inevitably, to failures – in the ready adoption of new dyes that proved so fugitive that it is today all but impossible to visualize the original colours for example, or in the adoption of opaque pigments that turned dull and chalky, or metallic powders that tarnished. This range and choice led also, however, to the tendency towards rich and colourful polychrome composition that became the central motif of ukiyo-e style.

To some extent the history of the pictorial character of ukiyo-e is also that of the development of the woodblock print medium. Pictorial innovation and developments in print technology were intimately enmeshed. This was particularly evident in the development throughout the Edo periods of pigment technologies. This development also engendered a potential problem however. The ever-increasing luxuries of ornamental colour ukiyo-e artists could engage with could, and often did, contribute also to a
concomitant development of mannered self-indulgence. Artists’ freedom of engagement with the polychrome affordances of their medium needed to be tempered with some restraint. In some instances such restraint was imposed externally – through the sumptuary edicts that proliferated in the Kansei era for example. More often though, tendencies to extravagance in the pictorial composition of *ukiyo-e* were tempered by a degree of cool detachment or distance engendered partly through the best artists’ articulate control of pictorial relations, and partly through a peculiarity of the woodblock printing production process that divided different facets of the pictorial process between different figures – artist, publisher, block-cutter and printer. The result was a close correspondence of luxury of colour and pattern with cool restraint of design and execution.

In the team partnership that contributed to the production of woodblock prints, the work of each participant determined or conditioned the appearance of each pictorial outcome. This was one of the factors contributing to the development of a common pictorial character for *ukiyo-e*. At the same time, it is in most instances the contribution of each individual artist that is most clearly recognizable in each work. Individual publishers like Tsutaya may have favoured particular types of work or stylistic tendencies, but their decisions impacted over broad ranges of works by various artists, or across schools. Similarly, the skills of cutters and printers were applied consistently across the work of different artists. The work of each individual artist/designer was different however. The dependence of these differences on the contribution of the artist rather than those of the other participants suggests that it was artists who made the crucial pictorial decisions, particularly to do with pictorial content, compositional arrangement, linear qualities or the decoration of surface. This conclusion provokes the question, however, of why different artists worked, apparently so insistently, in different ways. What were the factors that informed Utamaro’s representation of women that were so different from those that informed Harunobu? Why was Hiroshige’s concept of the pictorial representation of landscape so different from that of Hokusai? Why was Kunisada’s linear quality so different from that of Toyokuni I? The individual pathways followed by each of these artists seem so divergent as to challenge any concept of a homogeneous *ukiyo-e* character.

The explanation for patterns of consistency that are visible in *ukiyo-e* lie in the fact that most of its artists were working from a base of common experience – political, social, economic, religious, cultural – that contributed to something of a common ‘cognitive stock’ or knowledge base from which they worked. A rationale for the independent pathways is found in the ways differences between artists’ individual experiences contributed to differing pictorial, or temperamental dispositions and sensibilities. As Walter Pater described the tension between these two kinds of experience:

…if there is always, on one side, the fatal, irresistible, mechanical play of circumstances – the circumstances of a particular age, which may be analysed and explained; there is always also, as if acting from the other side, the comparatively inexplicable force of personality, resistant to, while it is moulded by, them.\(^\text{16}\)

The tension between conformity and independence was broached earlier, in the third chapter of this project. In the final chapter I have sought to acknowledge the differences between different artists’ projects, and to try to find some correspondence between those differences and the individual sensibility of each artist.
1 These two latter qualities in particular were immediately apparent to Western observers. Writing in 1882 for example, Christopher Dresser repeatedly acknowledged the crispness, ‘precision of touch’, ‘simplicity of design’, freeness of movement and ‘sweep of line’ demonstrated by ukiyo-e artists, together with the ‘life-likeness’ and ‘life-like vigour’ of their representational character. Christopher Dresser, Traditional Arts and Crafts of Japan (1882), New York, pp. 286, 317 – 319.

2 Sandy Kita, The Last Tosa: Iwasa Katsumouchi Matabei, Bridge to Ukiyo-e, Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999, pp. 170 – 180, Plates 2, 3. Throughout this project I have observed the traditional Japanese practice of referring to people surname first, given names second. In repeated references I have used surname only. For the better-known artists I have used the name by which they are most commonly known – ‘Utamaro’, ‘Hokusai’ – though many of these artists did use other names at different points in their careers.

3 The temporal span of ukiyo-e can be closely identified with the period of Tokugawa government of Japan centred on the ‘new capital’ in Edo (present day Tōkyō), from 1615 – 1868. Beyond this, though some superficial similarities to ukiyo-e were maintained, Japanese printing changed rapidly after the Meiji Restoration, in accord with the process of ‘modernisation’ that swept the country in almost every domain of life.

4 David Weir carefully distinguished between decadence and degeneration. David Weir, Decadence and the Making of Modernism, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995, p. xi. It would seem that these observers saw, in the frequency and frankness with which ukiyo-e artists represented the activities of the brothel quarters, and even more in the sexually explicit compositions of shunga, evidence of a broader climate of social and moral degeneracy which infected ukiyo-e and hastened its decline. The issue underpinned the judgments that informed a number of the accounts surveyed in Chapter 1 of this study.

5 As Weir acknowledges, many understandings of the notion, both as an aesthetic sensibility and as an historical phenomenon, seem contradictory, or at least paradoxical. Weir himself detects in decadence a delight in ‘...the various processes and manifestations of decay’ (p. xii), a tension between romanticism and realism, artificial and nature, elements of pessimism and misogyny, (‘...love of perversity (however defined) and hatred of woman harmonize with the much larger paradox of decadence that finds a positive value in corruption, negation, pessimism and decay’, pp. xiv – xv), and a tension between refinement and degeneration. Weir, 1995, pp. xii – xvii. Weir summarizes a broad range of understandings of decadence, including those of Camille Paglia (‘...the idea of “decadence” as “a style of excess and extravagance”, p. 2); of Conrad Swart, who ‘...identified decadence with a feeling of pessimism that is usually, though not always, a response to some historical reality, (pp. 2 – 3); Mario Praz, who finds in decadence ‘...an extension of one element of romanticism, the erotic sensibility best typified by Sade’ (p. 3); for A. E. Carter and Phillip Stephan decadence is located in the tensions between romanticism and realism, artificial and nature (p. 4); for Matei Calinesu and Paul Bourget decadence is founded in the cultivation of individualism and ‘...the “individualistic” manifestation of artistic language, which (is) typical of “le style de decadence”’ (p. 5); Noël Richards finds in decadence a certain ‘youthful rebelliousness’ (p. 7); and Ortega y Gasset, sees decadence as founded in a ‘dehumanisation’ which encourages ‘...a distortion of natural forms, an obscuring of recognizable human elements in art, such as straightforward realistic presentations of human situations.’ (pp. 15 – 16).

6 Though ukiyo-e artists did in fact represent a broader range of subjects in their pictures, including still-life, histoire, landscape, literary subjects and images of the natural world; it would be more appropriate to describe genre as a recurrent mainstream preoccupation.

7 Note also the subtle implications of decadence in the traditional Buddhist understanding of the word as ‘this transitory, fleeting world’.


9 Degeneration implies a breakdown or disintegration of refinement that, despite some assertions to the contrary, appears not really to have occurred during the mainstream history of ukiyo-e. It is fairer to say that, between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth, the attentions and interests of ukiyo-e artists shifted to embrace different projects.


11 See, for example, Yamane Yūzō, trs., John Shields, Momoyama Genre Painting, New York, Tōkyō: Weatherhill; Heibonsha, 1973. Timothy Clark also notes that ‘This (the sixteenth century) was the period when genre scenes (fūzoku-ga) were coming to feature in the painted screens of artists working in many


14 Typically, Kanō painters were occupied with the inventive refashioning of existing spatial constructions.

15 Though not exclusively so. As is acknowledged throughout this project, most *ukiyo-e* artists included both print designers and painters.

1 EXPLAINING UKIYO-E: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

I

Ukiyo-e refers, broadly speaking, to a large and diverse body of art works – drawings, paintings, woodblock prints, book illustrations and ephemera like fans or advertising for theatre or sumô – produced in Tokugawa period Edo.1 Ukiyo-e can be described a little more precisely, in terms of the types of pictorial subjects which occupied its artists. These can be classified, broadly, as genre subjects, but within this general domain a diverse range of categories of pictorial subject – bijin-ga, kabuki-e, musha-e, or fiikei-ga, for example – can be identified.2 Ukiyo-e does not, however, conform to any commonly held European notion of genre as the representation of scenes from everyday life, like that found in seventeenth century Dutch painting for example. It embraces a range of subjects, including landscape, historical representation, and the illustration of literary themes. Where it does represent daily life, as in Hokusai’s rural idylls or Hiroshige’s busy urban scenes, it certainly focuses on the life of the populace at large. In the majority of ukiyo-e works however it is not common life that is represented, but the more rarified and remote world of highly refined manners, witty literary repartee, and sexual and theatrical pleasures of ukiyo, the ‘floating world’. This was not a world accessible to the population at large. On the one hand, all but the very privileged were excluded from areas like Yoshiwara – ‘a world set apart from normal Tokugawa society by language, custom and tradition’ and, of course, by the often immense financial costs involved.3 Perhaps even more importantly, ukiyo was not so much a place as a concept, and in particular a concept which ukiyo-e played a key role in generating and maintaining.

Ukiyo-e may be defined also in terms of its pictorial types. These include, on the one hand, clearly categorized stylistic models – uki-e, for example, ōkubi-e, or benizuri-e.4 Alternatively, ukiyo-e can be described, again in easily definable categories, according to the quite specific pictorial functions its images had to perform – hence ōgi-e, mitate, anesama-e.5

These pictorial, stylistic and functional categories can be employed to describe, or to define ukiyo-e. But the distinctive pictorial character of ukiyo-e is at once more complex and more subtle than the sum of its parts, and a classificatory model is less than satisfactory – too simplistic, and too narrow in the individual focus of each category – for explaining that character. Similarly, ukiyo-e can be described, but not explained, through its relations with other schools of painting, or with the broader cultural character of Tokugawa Edo. We might link Moronobu, for example, to the Chinese style Kanô School of painting, Iwasa Matabei to the Tosa School, or Sharaku, whose entire oeuvre was committed to the representation of kabuki theatre, to his own professional world, the austere and esoteric nō theatre.6 But these are connections, not explanations. Like individual categories, they can describe a facet of the character of ukiyo-e, but do not provide a replete explanation of its character. More importantly, the one thing an
understanding of the relation of an artist to an aesthetic sphere outside ukiyo-e cannot be expected to do is to provide an explanation for the unique character of ukiyo-e itself. It is unreasonable to expect an explanation for one entity to stand also as an explanation for a different entity which has a quite different pictorial character and cultural function. And in any case, defining parallels or differences between different schools of painting or spheres of cultural activity, while interesting, and sometimes illuminating, is not the same thing as finding a satisfying explanation for ukiyo-e itself. The world of ukiyo-e can be associated with other domains, but in the focus of its own pictorial attention, and in the development of its own distinctive pictorial character, it is as independent and self-defining as the worlds it represented and helped to define.

Most nineteenth- and twentieth-century explanations, particularly those made from a European point of view, have been framed within historical perspectives. European commentators were certainly not the first, or only, writers to describe or explain ukiyo-e. One of the earliest written accounts was a contemporary view: a set of biographies of the artists of ukiyo-e published towards the end of the eighteenth century by Ōta Nampo. A revision of Ōta Nampo’s work was later published by Santō Kyōden. Santō Kyōden also published contemporary descriptions of life in Tokugawa Edo, a sort of literary equivalent, or ekphrasis, of the pictorial images of ukiyo-e. He also worked as an ukiyo-e print designer under the art name Kitao Masanobu.

These were contemporary views however. The first historical accounts were from Western pens, and these were published in surprisingly large numbers during the later nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. These accounts were popular for a number of reasons. In the first instance, the opening of Japan to the West following Commander Perry’s arrival in 1854 excited immense interest in the country both in Europe and in America. This interest was, inevitably, economically and diplomatically driven, but it reflected also a long-standing European obsession with the exotic that had already been evident, in the British development of universities and libraries in India for example, or in the scientific investigations and collections developed by explorers like Captain James Cook and their entourages.

The popularity of Western accounts of Japanese culture also reflected the rapid generation of a Japanese enthusiasm for things Western during the years following the Meiji Restoration. Again this was not just a matter of improving Japan’s diplomatic relations with the outside world. ‘Westernisation’ was seen to be synonymous with ‘modernization’. The results are evident in ukiyo-e representations of late nineteenth-century Japanese in Western dress (for example, in approved images, the Meiji emperor is usually dressed in Western military uniform) or embracing Western developments such as the steam locomotive. This process extended to the importing of Western minds into the academic arena. One of the major early commentators on Japanese art and culture was Ernest Fenollosa. He gained what insight he did from the unique vantage point afforded by his positions, firstly, from 1878, as Professor of Philosophy at the Imperial University of Tōkyō, later as Commissioner of Fine Arts to the Japanese Government.

II

Of the spate of publications on ukiyo-e from the later nineteenth century, Fenollosa’s Masters of Ukiyo (sic) was particularly important. This work was to establish
something of a paradigm for all subsequent historical surveys of this subject. Several factors underpin the success of Fenollosa’s study, contributing to its popularity and authority, and ensuring its persistence as a model for later works. In the first instance it was comprehensive – the first extensive study of the subject. Other studies were more limited: Samuel Bing’s *Le Japon Artistique* by its scale (it was a magazine); Edmond de Goncourt’s works by their scope (only Utamaro and Hokusai); or Professor Anderson’s by its focus on the craft of the woodblock printing process (see note 9). In the second instance Fenollosa’s work was accessible. Published from the first in the English language, it could be read throughout English-speaking Europe and the United States. Woldemar Von Seidlitz’s 1897 survey, *Geschichte der japonischen Farbenholzschnitte* may well have been comparable in scope, but it was not published in English until the beginning of the following century.

Thirdly, the authority of *Masters of Ukioye* was further enhanced by the number and scale of Fenollosa’s subsequent publications on the subject, particularly the major *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*. In addition, Fenollosa’s status and appointments in Japan gave his work an authority, if not an insight, to which no other writer could aspire. This authority was sustained after his return to North America, through his association with the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and later through his active participation in arranging and cataloguing sale exhibitions of Japanese art treasures (a process in which he seems to have played a role not dissimilar to Bernard Berenson’s engagement in the activities of Lord Duveen).12

Most importantly, both *Masters of Ukioye* and the later *Epochs* were convincing. Not only were they comprehensive, but the history described by Fenollosa seemed entirely consistent with the pictures themselves, especially with what appeared to be a linear stylistic development from a ‘primitive’ period, through a ‘classical’ one, into an age of decline.

Fenollosa’s model was actually a little more complex than this. He identified seven key phases, six of which fall into two main groups:

Reckoning the incipiency of Ukioye (sic) from Matahei (sic), the development of its form from Masanobu, and the foundation of colour handling in Yedo (sic) prints from Kiyonobu, a fourth period, and that one of rapid culmination, now comes in 1765 with the invention by the veteran Harunobu of polychrome printing…The rise of aesthetic power was rapid. We may reckon this culminating period from 1765 to 1806. It can itself be divided into three sub-movements, the growth of the culmination from 1765 – 1780, the culmination of the culmination from 1780 – 1788, and the decay of the culmination from 1788 – 1806.13

In other words, two major phases, one of the emergence of the form, the other of its culmination embracing also its inevitable decay. Fenollosa later identifies the seventh brief period of revival from 1830 with the re-invigoration of the form through the landscape/genre combinations of Hokusai and Hiroshige.14

More specifically, Fenollosa defines *ukiyo-e* in relation to plebian culture in Edo. He establishes its roots both in the late Ashikaga Kanō school painting and in the subjects of the Tosa school. He does, in fact, define *ukiyo-e* precisely in terms of its subject matter:
Ukiyoye (sic) is peculiarly a study of contemporary life, and that, too, of the more fashionable or pleasurable side of popular life. The very name ‘Picture of, or the Art of, the Floating World’ means that it deals with transitory or trivial phases, contrasted in Buddhist phrase with the permanent life of moral idealism.\footnote{15}

Thus for Fenollosa ukiyo-e is not simply genre painting, but, much more specifically, the representation of a specific sphere of life, popular entertainments, manners and ideals in Edo throughout this period. He argues that the development of the form moves a step closer with the Kanō painter Iwasa Matahei’s (Matabei) sole focus on this genre subject, and the development of a more distinctly identifiable ukiyo-e style.\footnote{16}

Fenollosa then notes the development of identifiably ukiyo-e idioms in book illustration from around 1650. This development was most clearly defined, in terms of subject, stylistic character and accessibility, from around 1670 in the book illustrations, paintings and single sheet prints of Hishikawa Moronobu.

For the first time he adopted the composition of the Tosa panorama, giving gay scenes and picnics, street festivals and groups of girls in the fashionable quarter, more or less continuous laterally, and crowded with figures. For the second he enlarged the figures of previous Ukiyoye books, and in very vigorous outline (purely Tanyuish) placed them in complicated groups, like the paintings of his makimono. For the third…in books…he tried for larger and cheaper editions in which the outline should be printed in black.\footnote{17}

\textit{Ukiyo-e} really became an independent form from the beginning of the eighteenth century:

…from about the year 1700 the art of Ukiyoye took on a third and decisive form, in which it soon cut itself away from class relation to any Kanō canons, and produced new forms suited to its own self-expression.\footnote{18}

This ‘foundation’ for \textit{ukiyo-e} as an independent entity is first clearly evident in the focus on genre subject in the work of the Torii School artists, and in the development within this school, between 1715 and 1720, of hand colouring, \textit{urushi-e} and multi-block (triptych) compositions. The development of colour printing, and particularly of the pink and green \textit{benizuri-e} prints of Torii Kiyonobu, took place between 1740 and 1745. A third colour block was introduced from about 1758, and the available colour range was extended to include a bright yellow. This in turn allowed the production of secondary colours by laying one colour block over another.\footnote{19}

The final step in the development of the polychrome print lay in the perfection of multi-block printing by Suzuki Harunobu during the last six years of his life, from 1765:

Harunobu…effected a four-fold revolution…He used as many blocks as he wanted tints; he chose them from very soft tones; he filled every part of the paper except the human faces with tone, selecting separate tints for sky, earth and parts of buildings; and he changed his subjects from actors and street belles to domestic scenes, mostly romantic interludes of youth.\footnote{20}

Fenollosa then describes the development of three contemporaneous but distinct schools that remained active between 1765 and 1780. The first was that of Toyoharu. The second was the stylistically distinct school of Shigemasa,
… whose drawing is more powerful and accurate (than that of Toyoharu) using wedge-shaped brushstrokes in outline, and whose colouring tends towards soft dove greys…

In the third, that of Shunshō, the pictorial focus was narrowed to the representation of the actors of the kabuki theatre.

‘The culmination of the culmination’ in the stylistic development of ukiyo-e occurs in the work of Torii Kiyonaga, who…

introduced a far greater flexibility of brushstroke in outlining his figures, and a greater breadth of handling his colours and patterns. Peculiarly fond of out-of-door groups, he inaugurated a new balance between the tones of his figures and the background by leaving out of the latter most of the sky and earth tones which Harunobu had introduced.

For Fenollosa, the dignity, atmosphere and graceful motion evident in Kiyonaga’s figure groups mark the very apex of the ukiyo-e achievement. He sees this quality sustained, for a period, by Kiyonaga’s followers – Shunchô, Kitao Shigemasa, and Shunman. The decay of ukiyo-e is, for Fenollosa, rapid and dramatic, and follows immediately after Kiyonaga’s withdrawal from practice between 1788 and 1790. The three key protagonists in this slide into decadence were Eishi, Utamaro and Toyokuni.

With Utamaro the decline was manifest in ‘…a gradual elongation of the figure, and an adoption of violent emotion and extravagant attitudes’ and was clearly evident also in habits of fashion depicted in Utamaro’s pictures – expanded coiffures, or baggy garments for example, and in the elongation of heads and limbs.

While Utamaro’s work at least had the virtue of focusing on Edo subjects, rendered in ways that reflected the fashions of the day, Toyokuni’s path was compromised through contact with Dutch models for the articulation of pictorial space. In his later works, ‘a violent, false perspective was built out of foreign half-teaching.’

A descent into the complete disintegration of ukiyo-e followed, which encompassed the works of Eizan, Eisen, Kunisada and Kuniyoshi:

The real degeneration, and the beginning of a fifth and last movement of Ukiyo-e, came in with 1807. The pupils of Utamaro carried the extravagances of their teacher to a point of ugliness…The new artist who expressed frankly all the hideousness of drawing and proportion between 1807 and 1820 was Yeizan. The figures become short and dumpy, sometimes only about six heads high.

The exception to this process of decline was the short-lived revival between 1830 and 1840 evident in the work of Hokusai and Hiroshige. This is explained to have been partly a process of re-invigoration of ukiyo-e through the development of a new subject – landscape. It seems also to have been founded in the stylistic consistency, particularly of linear quality, of both artists with earlier schools of ukiyo-e.

Given the vulgar qualities Fenollosa identifies, in Hokusai’s work in particular, this eleventh hour revival in the fortunes of ukiyo-e may seem to be quite inconsistent with his view of its earlier glories. In fact it is entirely consistent with his whole concept of history in general, and of Japanese cultural history in particular. Underpinning all of Fenollosa’s written accounts lay an unshakeable faith in Hegel’s concept of historical
change. He describes, for example, the demise of Japan’s feudal culture as a sort of historical proof of Hegel’s paradigm for the passage from despotic into democratic government:

If Hegel’s theory that all forms of existence tend to pass into their opposites needed historic confirmation, a better example could not be found than what happened to Japanese society in the twelfth century. It was as if a cataclysm had suddenly set a new Japan at the antipodes of the old.

Later, and referring even more specifically to Hegel’s example, in describing the Shijō School of modern plebian art in Kyōto, Fenollosa suggests that the common people

...were imbibing through those very condemned popular prints, and through the novels and plays built upon samurai life, some universal conception, however rude, of Spartan morals.

Fenollosa founds his description of historical change or development in the concept of periodisation. Where Hegel describes periods defined according to their political character however, Fenollosa describes ‘creative periods’. (See Appendix 1) Where Hegel sees the catalyst for historical change in the thoughtful acts of political and military figures, Fenollosa sees that for cultural development in the thoughtful acts of particular masters of the arts. The result is a profound development on a period model, evident even in the title, for example of *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, and implicit also in that of *Masters of Ukioye*.

And of course, quite explicitly, this period model forms the foundation for Fenollosa’s concept of *ukiyo-e*. Two major epochs, each composed of three sub-periods or creative phases. The first epoch describing the inevitable rise of the form; the second describing its culmination and its inevitable decay. And this decay is necessary. It prepares the ground for a potential renaissance, evident in its first stages in the revival of *ukiyo-e* in the works of Hokusai and Hiroshige.

There are problems inherent in Fenollosa’s application of this model to his explanation of Japanese art. These will form the focus of the later section of this chapter. In the meantime, I would like to examine two specific themes. The first is the peculiar and persistent degree to which Fenollosa’s explanation formed a paradigm for contemporary and subsequent surveys. The second problem is the degree to which the accounts of each writer, working from the same ‘factual’ evidence (the pictures, their knowledge of Japanese history) conform to or differ from one another. Laurence Binyon, for example, writing in England at exactly the same time, employs a similar model, but finds a subtly different, and more generously considered, course of events.

III

Like Fenollosa, Laurence Binyon viewed *ukiyo-e* from a vantage point of some privilege, as Keeper of Oriental Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. Binyon’s account is also framed within a model for historical change, but it is built upon a more direct and deeply personal response to the art itself. There is something of a Paterian thread of aestheticism running throughout Binyon’s poetic descriptions of Oriental art. In his
description of Harunobu’s images for example, he constructs his own verbal equivalents for the pictorial subjects that convey all of the subtle delicacy of the originals:

He has a passion for the shyness, the sweetness, the slimness of adolescence; for fragile figures sensitive to the finger-tips of little hands on wrists as slender as stalks of autumn crocus, and even when swaying and bent with emotion, showing hardly more in their soft small faces than flowers do in the wind. We seem to hear the delicate clatter of their patterns as they walk among the irises or the lespedeza bushes, or cross some snow-covered garden bridge, the close skirts clinging round their knees as they take their short, tripping steps. Young lovers, too, Harunobu understands, and is intimate with their moods. Many of his prints bear verses inscribed at the top, which interpret them. We see the teahouse girl, pausing in her work to think of the youth who has come once or twice and captured her heart, but has no thought of her (she fears) – gone like the cuckoo’s cry, one moment near and the next far away. We see the maid blowing soap-bubbles for the delight of her dancing baby brother; and though her will be set to withstand the magic of love (says the verse), yet the wind from the blossoming plum-boughs will not suffer her to be at peace, and her white thoughts are flushed and perfumed…

Like Fenollosa, Binyon sees *ukiyo-e* as essentially a school of genre painting, notes its antecedents in both Tosa and Kanō schools, and identifies Matabei as its originator. He describes Hishikawa Moronobu as the second founder, and then describes a second period of development of *ukiyo-e* subjects and technique through Torii Kiyonobu and his successors to Okumura Masanobu. He then describes a ‘classical’ phase, the age of the polychrome print. Harunobu and Kiyonaga are the giants of this period, followed closely by Koryūsai, Shunshō, Shunchō and Shunman.

It is in the following period that Binyon finds a path different from Fenollosa. It identifies a short period dominated by what he calls the ‘independent’ artists. This group includes Eishi, Utamaro and Toyokuni, and the outsider Sharaku. Binyon’s appraisals of Utamaro and Sharaku show his greatest variance from the judgments made by Fenollosa. While acknowledging Utamaro’s temporal coincidence with a period of decay, he praises him as one of *ukiyo-e*’s greatest artists:

…judged as one of the world’s artists for the intrinsic qualities of his genius, he stands out as the greatest of all the figure-designers of the school…he introduces an intensity that seems at times almost sinister, he has a stronger sense for the dynamic in figure drawing, and far greater resource of composition. His felicities of unexpected invention are endless.

His judgment of Sharaku, whom he describes as the first clearly realistic *ukiyo-e* artist, is similar:

No actor-portraits are so incisive, so big in design, as Sharaku’s, and he was a most original colourist, ranking with the greatest in the school.

With the Utagawa school however, Binyon agrees with Fenollosa on the passage into decay, granting certain successes, but describing, in sum, a process of mannered decline. And also like Fenollosa, he sees something of a rebirth, through the diversion into landscape, in the work of Hokusai and Hiroshige. Hokusai is ‘…the greatest, most various, and most puissant spirit of them all.’ In Hiroshige he sees
…a symptom of the thirst for facts, the knowledge of actualities, pervading the people, which was preparing the way for the overthrow of the Tokugawa policy of isolation, for the era of Meiji and the acceptance of Western science.

In acclamation both the superiority of Western systems over Eastern and the positive benefits of the Meiji restoration, Binyon is confirming the conformity of the passage of events of *ukiyo-e* to the Hegelian model of an historical movement towards a ‘better’ state of being.

Arthur Davison Ficke’s modestly titled *Chats on Japanese Prints*, published in 1915, was arguably the most comprehensive survey to that date. Ficke acknowledges his debts to both Fenollosa and Binyon. If the character of his prose is more similar to that of Binyon it may be because both men were poets – indeed, Ficke illustrates his text throughout with his own verse.

Ficke describes a development for *ukiyo-e* through five periods, followed by a late renaissance. The first period he calls ‘The Primitives’. It extends from 1660 to 1764 and is the period of the development of the stylistic character and technical parameters of *ukiyo-e*. Hishikawa Moronobu was the first great primitive master, followed by Nishikawa Sukenobu, the artists of Kaigetsudō, and the early Torii masters. The art of this phase was purely decorative, bearing ‘no relation to observed fact or to an exact rendering of Nature’.

The second period, that of the early polychrome masters, is traced from the invention of polychrome printing to the retirement of Shunshō – 1764 to 1780. Ficke identifies two mainstreams of activity. The first begins with Harunobu’s perfection of *nishiki-e* technique from 1765, and includes his followers Koryūsai, Harushige (Shiba Kōkan), Komai Yoshinobu, Masanobu II and others. The second is the Katsukawa School founded by Katsukawa Shunshō, and including his followers Ippitsusai Bunchō, Shunei and Shunkō, and Utagawa Toyoharu and Kitaō Shigemasa. The works of this phase represent things that do have a humanist foundation, but are still highly idealized – ‘...it is all symbolistic, all fictional, and nothing real is portrayed.’

The third short period, from 1780 – 1790, is the period of the culmination of *ukiyo-e*, that of Torii Kiyonaga and his followers Katsukawa Shunchō, Shunzan and Shunman. Their work is described by Ficke as both naturalistic and interpretive:

By naturalistic and interpretive, I mean the attempt to seize a number of detached elements of observed life and weave them into a design that reports not only the idiosyncrasies of the artist, but also some sense of the deep nature of the elements themselves.

Ficke’s fourth period, ‘The Decadence’, extends from the retirement of Kiyonaga to the death of Utamaro, 1790 – 1806. The works of this period are marked by their mannerisms, their exaggeration, their ‘phantasies’. The period includes Eishi and Eishō, in whose work we can see something of the passage from elegance to ‘debasement’. The roots of decay are perhaps more firmly implanted in Utamaro than in any other figure:

He who this living portrait wrought,
Outlasting time’s control,
A dark and bitter nectar sought
Welling from poisoned streams that roll
Through deserts of the soul.  

...wearied of every pleasure, (Utamaro) created these visions in whose disembodied, morbid loveliness his overwrought desires found consolation.

Ficke finds far greater satisfaction on the other hand in the work of Sharaku:

Sharaku stands on the highest level of genius, in a greatness unique, sublime, and appalling.

Similarly the figures of Eishōsai Chōki

...rise into the world of the miraculous; they are pure incantations.

Utagawa Toyokuni follows Utamaro into rapid decline however.

The fifth period – ‘this wearying period of degenerate production’ is described by Ficke as ‘The Downfall’. It extends from the death of Utamaro to the death of Hiroshige (1806 – 1858), and includes the work of Utagawa school artists, the later followers of the Torii school, and artists from outside Edo, particularly those of Ōsaka. The complete decay of *ukiyo-e* during this period is relieved by only one thing – the development of landscape prints. The later works of Hokusai are described as: ‘…primarily magnificent studies in linear composition’ and those of Hiroshige are characterized by ‘strikingly effective composition’, and ‘subtle renderings of distance, aerial perspective, atmosphere and light.’

Though each of these views traces a slightly different path, they are founded in the same model: a sequence of periods, through which we can follow the passage of *ukiyo-e*, from its origins, through its growth, its culmination, and its decline. James A. Michener’s account was published almost forty years after that of Ficke, in 1954. The story of *ukiyo-e* described in *The Floating World* resembles the earlier ones in only the broadest sense: it describes the process of its development through a sequence of masters, into a period of decline, with a glimmer of hope at the eleventh hour. Otherwise, his account is radically different. In the first instance, he identifies no early ‘primitive’ or ‘developmental’ phase; *ukiyo-e* is born, fully fledged and mature, with Moronobu. In the second, Michener does not divide his account into separate periods. Instead, he describes the lives and achievements of an almost seamless sequence of master artists:

Ukiyo-e began with Moronobu, who was not a primitive but a sophisticated artist, well versed in classical traditions; it received enormous impacts of vitality from Kiyonobu and grace from Sukenobu, the former of whom established the Torii tradition, the latter of whom made Harunobu possible. With Kiyonaga vitality and grace were united but in the culminating years of *ukiyo-e*, say 1795, Utamaro brought the grace of Sukenobu to its apex while Sharaku did the same for the strength of Kiyonobu. Decline came because no new ideas reached the art, no new exemplars of vitality or grace appeared; two authentic talents, Hokusai and Hiroshige, dignified the last years but they lacked sufficient force to revive the art.

A seamless narrative, in which the achievement of each master gently shapes, and is in its turn gently reshaped in, those of his successors. Structurally, Michener is not so much interested in establishing a sequential narrative as he is in describing a sort of tidal
rise and fall, ebb and flow, of masters of greater or lesser importance. In a curious sense his writing forms a sort of literary metaphor for the nebulous character of the floating world itself, a twentieth-century equivalent of the well-known seventeenth-century description of Asai Ryōi. It is also a much more generous view than those of earlier writers. He acknowledges the earlier accounts of Utamaro for example, and challenges their validity. He does, however, agree to the role played by Toyokuni and his successors in hastening the decline:

The Utagawa school, as run by Toyokuni, was a source of positive infection in which every skill calculated to destroy an art was taught.

Richard Lane’s Masters of the Japanese Print was published only eight years after The Floating World. In several ways Lane had already acknowledged the debt ukiyo-e scholarship owed to Michener; Lane had in fact collaborated with Michener in Japanese Prints, and dedicated his own text to the novelist. Though Lane admires Michener, he does not fashion his own account on the same model as The Floating World. He turns instead back to the earlier framework of a periodised sequence from primitive, through classical, to decline and conditional revival. For Lane, however, ukiyo-e itself constitutes something of a period or era of the larger development of Japanese art. It is the end of an historical sequence of artistic eras:

The ukiyo-e masters mark a fitting conclusion to the long and glowing tradition of classical Japanese art.

Lane’s account is, in several ways, more satisfying than Michener’s. It is more detailed, more comprehensive; it is a more measured account, and one less flawed by factual error; and it is more formal, less anecdotal in style. He finds that ukiyo-e defines itself through its attention to genre subjects. Its own character is tempered by its debts to its classical painting antecedents, and the expectations of its popular audience. And he notes also that the nature of the expectations of that audience, and indeed the identity of the audience itself, changed throughout the Tokugawa period. This changing climate of reception for ukiyo-e was a key factor in determining the changes in its character through five broad phases.

The first of these phases was the ‘Primitive’ period, the age of the ‘flowering’ of ukiyo-e. Like other writers he acknowledges the role of Moronobu as the founder of ukiyo-e. Lane also includes the works of anonymous artists of the same period however, and those of then lesser known masters like Sugimura Jihei. He then traces a sequential development, through the Kaitetsudō painters, the Torii school, Okamura Masanobu, and Nishimura Shigenaga. Unusually, he acknowledges parallel developments in Kyōto (Yoshida Hambei, Ōmori Yoshikiyo, Nishikawa Sukenobu), and in ukiyo-e painting (Ōoka Michinobu, Miyagawa Choshun, Tsukioka Settei).

Lane then describes a first ‘Golden’ period, the ‘Highest Pinnacle’ of ukiyo-e. This age is born out of Harunobu’s development of nishiki-e – ‘...one of the most perfect realizations of an ideal that the world has seen...’ Harunobu’s achievement was sustained by Isoda Korōysai, Ippitsusai Bunchō, Katsukawa Shunshō and, interestingly, Sharaku.

This ‘pinnacle’ of ukiyo-e was followed by its ‘Golden Age’ proper in the 1780s. The key artists of this short period of fertile and sophisticated industry included Kitao Shigemasa, Kitao Masanobu (Santo Kyōden), Torii Kiyonaga, Katsukawa Shunshō, Kubo
Shunman and Ieshōsai Chōki. The subsequent period, that of ‘The Final Glory’, extended through the 1790s, and included Kitagawa Utamaro, Chōbunsai Eishi and Chōkōsai Eishō, and the early Utagawa school masters Toyoharu, Toyokuni I and Toyohiro. In the work of the latter group Lane does acknowledge a sharp decline; in Toyokuni for example he describes ‘...sound and fury, repetitious posturing’ and ‘...a certain coarseness and vapid horror.’ For Utamaro, Eishi and Eishō however, Lane insists on a place firmly within the classical canon of ukiyo-e.

Like other writers, Lane describes a final period of revival, notable in the work of Hokusai and Hiroshige. He also notes that several of the other later Utagawa artists occupy an historical position within the period of that revival, but do not contribute to it. Unusually again, he describes Yoshitoshi, Kyōsai and Kobayashi Kiyochika as the final masters of ukiyo-e.

The subtle differences in the ways the later artists could be evaluated in Lane’s survey are more clearly evident in later Japanese summaries. Like his European antecedents Takahashi Seichiro (hereafter, Takahashi) adopts a teleological model, divided into three broad periods: an early period, a golden age, and the ‘closing years’. The composition and timeframe of each of Takahashi’s phases are quite different from those of earlier accounts.

Takahashi’s ‘Early Period’ extends ‘From the Primitives to the Early Polychrome Masters’, and his evaluation of the individual artists of this phase is more conservative than in the European views. Moronobu’s prints are ‘naïve and charming’, but ‘we must view them as minor works of arts’. Ukiyo-e experienced some development of an aragoto style in the yamato-e revival of the Torii school, but was less fortunate at the hands of the Kaigetsudō. As in some other accounts this first period included also Masanobu and Ishikawa Toyonobu, Miyagawa Chōshun and Nishikawa Sukenobu. Atypically however, it also includes Suzuki Harunobu and his followers, the early Katsukawa masters (Shunshō, Shunei and Shunkō) and the Kitao school masters Shigemasa and Masanobu.

Takahashi’s second key phase, his ‘Golden Age’, begins in Temmei (1781 – 1789) and extends through the Kansei period (1789 – 1801). This golden age includes Torii Kiyonaga, Utamaro, Chōki, Eishi and his followers Eishō, Eiri and others, and Sharaku.

In the third period of the development of ukiyo-e, Takahashi discusses the work of the ‘luminaries of the closing years’. Certainly he agrees here with other writers that this is a period of decline, but his description of events differs in two significant ways. Firstly, earlier writers see the decline as a slide from a world of elegance and modesty into one of extravagant and exaggerated mannerism. Takahashi on the other hand describes the decline as one into increasingly conservative practice. He argues that this is an inevitable consequence of increasing government intervention and regulation from late Kansei on; the suppression of extravagance in every aspect of life and arts evident, for example, in the sumptuary edicts of 1790, 1793, 1796 and 1799 and throughout the first half of the nineteenth century conditioned the pictorial character of the prints produced throughout the same period.

Secondly, Takahashi’s is a more generous appraisal, in which he is more willing to accept the achievement of a broader range of individual masters. Takahashi’s later phase is largely a history of the Utagawa school. It opens with Utagawa Toyoharu, whose
achievement includes the mastery of *uki-e*. It includes Toyokuni I, and Toyohiro, Toyokuni II, Kunisada I and his followers, including not only Kunisada II, but also specifying Ichijusai Kunimasa, Kuninao, Kuniyasu and Kunimaru. Kuniyoshi is included, despite the fact that his genius was compromised – ‘…the absence of elegance in his work is a major flaw.’ Hiroshige extends on Toyoharu’s earlier ventures with landscape, as does Hokusai. Takahashi includes Hiroshige II and Hiroshige III and the Kikukawa school artists Eizan and Eisen. He rounds his survey out with a description of later post-Meiji Restoration artists including Yoshitoshi Tsukioka, Yoshiiku Ochiai and Kunichika Toyohar. Takahashi’s generous view of these later masters is not unconditional – he notes, for example, that after 1805 Toyokuni’s works ‘…degenerate into complete decadence’ – but he seems more willing to accept their strengths, happier to accept artists like Kunisada, Eizan or Eisen on the merits of their own endeavours rather than by comparison with their predecessors, than any of the earlier writers.

In a later survey Kobayashi Tadashi (hereafter, Kobayashi) adopts Takahashi’s evolutionary model, and positions and evaluates the major figures, especially Hokusai, Eisen, Kuniyoshi and Hiroshige, in similar fashion, though he is less rigid in his division of the history into three separate phases. He founds the phase of decline in the breakdown of feudal societal structure and the increasingly draconian and unsuccessful Kansei reforms during the period 1804 – 1830. The complete breakdown occurred with the social upheaval that followed the Meiji Restoration. This social turmoil was reflected in the adoption in *ukiyo-e* of:

- Styles that emphasized unbalance and intense, striking effects…anticlassicism and an aesthetics of decadence (which had) permeated every aspect of townsman culture.

The later major exhibitions of *ukiyo-e* curated in Japan have tended to employ the same model as that which had originated with Fenollosa but as tempered with the greater tolerance of later artists evident in Takahashi and Kobayashi. The Tōkyō National Museum’s 1984 blockbuster *Special Exhibition: Ukiyo-e* comprised almost seven hundred works. As presented in this exhibition *ukiyo-e* is founded in seventeenth-century Edo genre painting of beautiful women, *kabuki* subjects, teahouse entertainments, Yoshiwara, and games and street scenes. In this narrative however, the place of printed book illustrations is given a very low profile. The development of *ukiyo-e* painting on the other hand is inextricably enmeshed with that of the *ukiyo-e* print. The direction of the development, and the sequence of individual masters, follows that established in earlier accounts, but the relative status afforded each master is more equitable; Utamaro’s place in the genealogy is as valid as that of the Torii masters, or of Harunobu. This equity is evident also in the representation of a range of later Utagawa artists (Kuninaga, Kunisada, Kuninao, Kuniyasu, Kunitora, for example), those of Ōsaka-e (Shōtei, Hokuju, Toyota Kokkei), and of Meiji artists including Taiso Yoshitoshi, Ogata Gekkō and Hashimoto Chikanobu.

These are not the only ways of writing about *ukiyo-e*. Writers of recent years have increasingly tended to avoid using an historical model. In some instances, capitalizing on existing Japanese categories of pictorial subjects, they have classified, arranged and discussed images according to their pictorial subject. Some writers have used the range of subjects to structure surveys of the range of *ukiyo-e* enterprise; others have focused their study on a single subject category – *sumō-e*, for example, or *yakusha-e*. In other models writers have discussed works in relation to some particular thematic continuity or
commonality – gender interests for example, or sexuality. In others they focus on the character of artists of a particular school, and in still others they discuss ukiyo-e paintings or prints in relation to the particular social or cultural milieu in which they were made and used. Together with these broader surveys, an increasing number of monographs deal specifically with the works of single artists, or even with specific groups of works within the greater oeuvre of one artist.

These later surveys tend to be quite different, both in character and in scope, from their historical antecedents. This does not make these alternative views a-historical. These kinds of studies can still encompass or be characterized by notions of change, and even of development. The difference is that here the force for change is not founded in a teleological principle. Change can still occur, but we need to look elsewhere for the impulse for change – into biographical contexts for example, or those of social forces. There are differences, most obviously, in structure. These new accounts tend to be more inclusive than earlier views. Most, for example, embrace into the canon the work of artists working outside Edo – Ōsaka-e, for example, or Nagasaki-e. Most also include the work of later artists, particularly those of the later Utagawa school, and artists working after the Meiji Restoration. Historical accounts, insistent on the necessity for a decline, had dismissed these artists as mannered, stereotypical or decadent. Now artists like Kunisada, Kuniyoshi or Yoshitoshi are described as major figures, and Yoshiiku, Yoshitaki, Chikanobu and Kunichi -ka – artists not even mentioned by most of the earlier writers – are included. It is worth noting that many of these artists, including the last group, were still working in Tōkyō when Fenollosa was living there, and when he was writing *Masters of Ukiyo-e*. Yoshitoshi died in 1892, only shortly before the publication of this work. Their works were all popular at the time.

At first glance, perhaps, single artist monographs may seem to occupy a position outside the parameters established by historical perspectives – their scope seems too narrowly focused for historical frameworks to be appropriate. In fact, historical models are still clearly in evidence in two ways. Jack Hillier, as an example of the first, employs both a teleological model, and the device of periodisation, in his biography-based survey of Hokusai. For the second, most single artist studies have in some way attempted to place the key focus of their attention on establishing the place of the artist within the context of broader historical changes. Hillier does this, for example, by placing Hokusai’s life in the context of Tokugawa Edo, of family, of the ukiyo-e genealogy, and of his apprenticeship under Shunshō.

In fact, the same fluctuating standards or contradictions of judgment that are evident in the broader historical surveys of ukiyo-e are also evident in single artist studies. Tsuji Nobuo, for example, summarises the changing fortunes of Utamaro at the hands of the monograph writers. He notes the Eurocentric character evident in Edmond de Goncourt’s 1891 *Outamaro*, in his descriptions of the Yamauba and Kintaro print, for example, as ‘…a portrait of loving motherhood similar to the Holy Mother Mary.’ For Koechlin (1912) Utamaro is the essence of decadence because ‘Koechlin demonstrates the fallacy of regarding him simply as an artist who dealt only with the degenerate public morals of the period.’ Fenollosa, in *Epochs*, simply dismisses Utamaro with a scathing intolerance: ‘The extravagances of Utamaro appealed to a degenerating taste, as they appeal today to many modern French aesthetes.’ While de Goncourt identified the essential character of Utamaro’s work as located in (and enervated by) the tension between idealism and naturalism, Arthur Davison Ficke sees it as degenerate because it veers too
far in the direction of realism. Jack Hillier (1961) on the other hand, radically revises both the standpoint of the Western viewer of Eastern art, and the conditions upon which our judgments of *ukiyo-e* might be made. As a result, his own valuation is far more generous than those of his predecessors:

...The man who designed the lovely plates of the *Insect Book* and the *Shell Book*, and other albums that claim the very highest place among the beautiful books in the world,...this man Utamaro was a great artist by any standards.

The curators of the exhibition for which Tsuji’s essay was written are unequivocal about Utamaro’s status:

> He injected passion, immediacy and a degree of psychological nuance to add to the genre’s habitual elegant sophistication, and created compositions that literally seduce us into the world of his female subjects.

This degree of disagreement, and the later reappraisals, of Utamaro have only been possible, of course, because he has always been included within the genealogy. Other artists, particularly those of the later Utagawa school, had either been marginalized, or excluded completely. Utagawa Kunisada had earlier been considered a highly prolific but most uneven artist; Kuniyoshi’s endeavours in landscape gained him some conditional acceptance. Even as late as 1962 Tsukioka Yoshitoshi merited only three lines in an *ukiyo-e* survey. The status of each of these artists has been re-evaluated in monograph studies during the last decade, and in each case the artist has been restored to a position more fairly aligned with that they enjoyed during the nineteenth century.

Shindo Shigeru, for example, acknowledges the contemporary status enjoyed by Utagawa Kunisada:

> ...acclaimed as Master Toyokuni, the supreme technician of his age. The popular esteem in which he was held exceeded even that of Hokusai and Hiroshige. His talent overwhelmed his contemporaries. The absence of his name in Japanese history textbooks is, considering all of this, nothing short of remarkable.

Kuniyoshi has fared the best of the Utagawa artists. Robert Schaap asks how

> ...difficult it would be to imagine what course aspects of nineteenth-century *ukiyo-e* would have taken in Kuniyoshi’s absence. Indeed in the areas of warrior prints, comic pictures, historical, ghost stories, and in the depiction of Edo popular culture not to mention *inter alia*, his contribution to prints of actors, beautiful women and landscape, Kuniyoshi was instrumental in moulding existing conventions and style into his own brand of individualism, thereby enriching the *ukiyo-e* tradition. He was, in the end, a figure ‘characterised by immense vigour and versatility, mastery of draughtsmanship and originality of composition, and in particular, a warm humanity and a deep love and understanding of his country’s history and legends.’

The opening sentence of one of John Stevenson’s books on the prints of Yoshitoshi establishes the esteem in which he holds the artist: ‘Yoshitoshi was the last creative genius of *ukiyo-e*.’ Stevenson’s rationale was that the subjects represented in Yoshitoshi’s images were consistent with those of established *ukiyo-e* themes, and that his focus on concepts like *fūryū* and *mitate* is consistent with *ukiyo-e* concerns. He cites also the lavish print quality evident in Yoshitoshi’s works, in which the crafts of the draughtsman, block
cutter and printer are perfectly integrated in a manner consistent with the collaborative character of ukiyo-e since Harunobu.

There are at least three reasons for the new climate of tolerance evident on these recent monographs, and these reasons may suggest some ways of identifying some underlying problems with historicist models. In the first instance, these later writers do not need to describe a decline, because a period of decay is not a necessary part of the narrative with which they are working. A period of decadence is a necessary component of the cyclic construct often adopted in historical models: if there is no decline, then there can be no rebirth. Such a phase is unnecessary however where a writer is simply describing the subjects represented in images, in terms, perhaps, of meanings that might attach to them, of their foundations in history, literature or cultural belief, custom or manners, or even their stylistic character. Where no narrative thread underpins the writer’s structure, a period model of any kind is inappropriate.

A second reason for this climate of tolerance is that its authors cannot make judgments of high achievement or low, of high standard or poor, of growth, culmination or decadence, because their own structural models do not equip them to make judgments of quality – they are uncritical. Timothy Clark and Ueda Osama, for example, can only describe the Katsukawa school works they catalogue in relation to the plays with which they were associated. This provides a foundation for explanations of the works in terms of pictorial function, but not for making evaluative judgments about them. Roger Keyes, in describing representations of gender-ascribed roles, comments only about their relation to their social settings, or to literary, historical or mythical themes. He makes no evaluative statement on the works at all, other than of their fittingness to his theme.

Thirdly, these writers do not seem to want to describe a decline. They are looking for things of interest that are other than, and which are not dependent on, aesthetic quality. For many, ukiyo-e is essentially secondary to, albeit providing the evidence for, their focus on other aspects of life in Tokugawa Edo. For Cecilia Segawa Seigle, for example, the ukiyo-e prints of eighteenth and nineteenth century courtesans and their attendants simply provide evidence, visual evidence, to enhance the already considerable documentary evidence upon which she founds her comprehensive descriptions of Yoshiwara.

IV

Clearly then, there is frequent disagreement between the various narratives that have been devised for ukiyo-e. In some cases the differences between accounts are subtle; in others they are marked. Some interesting patterns do emerge, particularly about the beginnings, the culminations, and the endings of each account. These patterns provoke a range of questions. Take, for example, disagreements about the genesis of ukiyo-e. For some writers (Fenollosa, Binyon, Ficke) it begins with Iwasa Matabei; for others (Michener, Lane) it begins with Moronobu.

The difference is significant. If ukiyo-e begins with Matabei, then its stylistic character is founded in the idioms of both Kanō and Tosa school painting, particularly the latter, and its distinguishing feature is its focus on a particular subject area: genre. This view provides a legitimate rationale for including Hokusai within the ukiyo-e canon, even though his works, in their pictorial subjects at least, seem so frequently to lie outside the
preoccupations of the ‘floating world’ itself. If, on the other hand, it begins with Moronobu, its genesis is out of book illustration. This source defines ukiyo-e in terms of its technical enterprise (woodblock printing), its stylistic idioms (linearity, monochromatic, flat shapes of plain or patterned surface), and its pictorial function (the illustration of pictorial narrative, as illustration, and as pictorial sequence).

There tends to be broad agreement about the development of ukiyo-e, through the perfection of nishiki-e to a classical period of maturity exemplified in the works of Kiyonaga. The period immediately following this is the next major point of disagreement however. Does the deterioration of ukiyo-e date from Utamaro, as Fenollosa and Ficke argued? Alternatively, was Utamaro one of the great ukiyo-e artists, as Binyon stated early on, and as Lane and his successors were later to confirm?

Again, there tends to be broad agreement about one aspect of the latter phase of ukiyo-e’s development: it experienced something of a revival of fortunes at the hands of Hokusai and Hiroshige. Other later artists fare differently however. The downfall of ukiyo-e is contained in the sub-narrative of Utagawa school designers, from Toyokuni onwards (Fenollosa); the decline experienced by Utagawa school artists was conditional – they produced some fine, and some poor, works (Ficke, Lane); the Utagawa artists sustained ukiyo-e through another two generations (Takahashi).

As with the differing views on the beginnings of ukiyo-e, different opinions of its ends are dependent on differing concepts of what actually constitutes ukiyo-e. If, like Fenollosa or Ficke, ukiyo-e is expected to occupy itself with, and to represent, some ideal form of Japanese life, founded equally in observations of popular cultural experience and in the loftier cultural values of Kanō school painting, and tailored to some sort of oriental equivalent of the Greek notion of kalokagathia, then Kiyonaga has to be its last great master, marking its end as well as its culmination, and Utamaro its corrupter. If, on the other hand, one’s starting point lay in the linear lyricism and articulate surface pattern of Moronobu, and if this stylistic beginning established a trend that later legitimized itself in Harunobu’s nishiki-e, then the ornately decorated surfaces of Kunichika and Chikanobu make a perfectly legitimate zenith, and ukiyo-e’s ends can be located in the straightforward reportage prints of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. Again, if one sees the illustration of dramatic narrative established as a key function for ukiyo-e by Moronobu, developed as the key preoccupation of the Torii masters, and perfected by Shunshō and his Katsukawa followers, then the graphic histrionics of Yoshitoshi form a perfectly legitimate end point.

Besides these interesting broader patterns, there are some other coincidences and divergences of view. While not agreeing completely, two writers do challenge, to a greater or lesser extent, the concept of a periodically structured teleological model. James A. Michener describes not so much a phased development from conception, through growth, to a culminating maturity and subsequent decline, as an entity mature from its beginnings. Ukiyo-e did experience stylistic changes, but these were generated by the differing creative preoccupations of its sequence of masters. It did, eventually, experience, not so much a decline as a demise; an almost total loss of interest, relieved only by the fortunate contributions of Hokusai and Hiroshige. Timothy Clark suggests that any stylistic evolution evident in woodblock printing was generated only by advantages engendered by the development of its techniques. Elsewhere, in ukiyo-e painting, Clark allows for differences, but denies the existence of a changing standard:
…it is hoped that there is no sense that the early paintings are ‘primitive’ or the later ones ‘decadent’, following the misguided way in which the history of Ukiyo-e prints used to be written. Early prints were simpler, in the sense that they were black and white woodblocks with hand colouring, but there was little about their aesthetic or their execution that was ‘primitive’. Similarly, later artists certainly moved away from the idealized canons of beauty practiced by masters of the eighteenth century, not because they suddenly all became in some way artistically incompetent, but because those ideal canons of beauty were outmoded and a hindrance to further growth.\textsuperscript{98}

There is a range of reasons for the coincidences, and especially for the differences in views of ukiyo-e established in historical perspectives. The simplest explanations for these patterns are those founded in differentials of evidence, or in idiosyncrasies of interpretation of the same evidence, by different writers. As an instance of the latter for example, Howard Link describes James Michener’s dependence on narrative techniques founded in his primary vocation, that of novelist. Michener, Link suggests, employs a fiction in his attempts to devise a causal relationship between Ōtsu-e and ukiyo-e.\textsuperscript{99}

In the same post-script article, Link offers an example of differences in explanation founded in differences in available evidence, or in different understandings of evidence. Michener, for example, argues Moronobu as the founder of the ‘Sovereign Line’. As Link explains, later scholarship has “rediscovered” the existence of Sigimura Jihei (active 1681 – 1697) and other distinctly different, but still anonymous hands. Many of Jihei’s unsigned prints, previously consigned to Moronobu’s oeuvre, can now be positively identified as being from the hand of Jihei – by signatures hidden in the patterned surface or pictorial design for example. More sophisticated scholarship yields different, more comprehensive, and more satisfying explanations. Link offers a similar re-evaluation, founded in more comprehensive, more valid, evidence, for a redefinition of the origins of the Torii school of designers of theatrical subjects; as Link explains, at least two Torii masters preceded the school’s previously accepted Genroku period founder Torii Shôbei Kiyonobu.\textsuperscript{100}

A straightforward example of the founding of better and more comprehensive explanations in more replete evidence is presented in Clark and Ueda’s The Actor’s Image.\textsuperscript{101} Early explanations for kabuki-e and yakusha-e identified the theatrical scenes or performances or actors illustrated from the print titles, - these were sometimes included in each print in a sequence or composite group, but equally, sometimes included only in the first or last print of a series, or in a cover sheet or wrapper. They identified the actors represented in such prints from the inscribed names included in some, but in most cases by the distinctive identifying emblem or mon, sometimes inscribed beside each actor, sometimes subtly concealed in the designs of his costume.\textsuperscript{102} But these details failed to identify precisely enough which performance of a play was being presented (some, like Kanadehon Chûshingura, were performed year after year, with different actors, though often ones from the same actor ‘family’, who used the same mon as their namesakes). Actor’s crests employed by different generations of actors with the same name could distinguish between the different generations, but rarely did so. Clark and Ueda, however, go to other, non-pictorial sources for their evidence. More comprehensive biographical data of actors gives them some advantage over their predecessors, but a detailed study of contemporary documents – illustrated playbills, publicity handouts, programmes, and diaries of kabuki fans – helps them to identify actors, performances, dates (and thereby the dates of the prints themselves, and their place within the oeuvre of their artist) with far greater precision. More comprehensive evidence generates more satisfying explanations.
Problems like these disagreements between Michener and Link are of a specific, straightforward type: different evidence engenders different explanations. The disagreements between the other writers cited here are, however, of a quite different order. The pictorial evidence upon which they found their contradictory explanations is the same for each writer. So why are their explanations different? The reasons for this are deeper and more complex than those that generated the differing explanations of Michener and Link, and fall into two groups. The first set comprises problems inherent in historical explanations in general. In the second are problems founded in the differing understandings of *ukiyo-e*, or with pictorial art in general, that underpinned each explanation and generated such contradictory outcomes.

It is easy to see the particular attraction of Hegel’s historicist model of thinking for Fenollosa in particular. Fenollosa was able to construct a fit between the Hegelian historicist model and the pictorial fact of Japanese art with apparent ease. For both the larger overview of the whole of Japanese art history, and for the micro-study of *ukiyo-e* in Tokugawa Edo, Fenollosa was able to find, or to devise, both genealogies and easily constructed periods fitting against the succession of ‘schools’ or artistic ‘dynasties’ that were apparent within the broader developments. The Japanese picture seemed easily to fit the Hegelian model. In fact, a period structure for Japan’s history existed prior to Fenollosa’s arrival. Historical periods had already been defined on both a major ‘period’ and minor ‘era’ level. For the former, for example, note the sequence from the Muromachi (1333 – 1573), through Momoyama (1573 – 1615) into Tokugawa (1615 – 1868). And within Tokugawa, note the transition from Genroku (1688 – 1704), through Hōie (1704 – 1711) into Shōtoku (1711 – 1716) and so on (see Appendix I). Changes of period or era conformed to changes in government at national, provincial or civic level.

Perhaps more precisely, Fenollosa’s application of Hegelian wisdom to the Japanese situation fitted with the nature of governmental change that had led up to the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and with the model of government he encountered when he arrived there. In the case of the development leading up to the Restoration, its sequence of events could be easily framed in terms of Hegel’s inevitable development from oriental despotism, through a process of change fuelled by dialectic conflict, through military totalitarianism, and into an ideal state of monarchical totalitarianism.103

Not all of the historical accounts for *ukiyo-e* are founded in or argued against a teleological model. Even as early as Binyon observations about *ukiyo-e* were being built on alternative foundations. What other historical accounts do have in common however is a preoccupation with organizing their subject into patterns, groups and sequences. This is most clearly evident in their efforts to distinguish periodic patterns within the broader narrative of *ukiyo-e*. This is what Ficke is doing when he attempts to describe five periods, each distinguishable by the stylistic affinities of the artists it embraces, hence: ‘The Primitives’, ‘The Early Polychrome Masters’, ‘Kiyonaga and His Followers’, ‘The Decadence’, and ‘The Downfall’. A similar motive underlies Michener’s occupation with what he would find as the ‘house-styles’ of a sequence of schools – Kaigetsudō, Torii, Utagawa and so forth. This arrangement of material into periodic groups has clear precedents in European writing, particularly that adopted in Heinrich Wölfflin’s concept of stylistic change. Wölfflin’s cyclic model was not just one of growth, fruition and decline. He describes more precisely and more comprehensively a process of change in
which the decline is one from a state of elegance into one of mannerism or over-elaborate decoration.

(A) cyclic view of art history, according to which a classic style is followed by a baroque elaboration, and then the whole thing starts again.\(^{104}\)

The impetus for this process of artistic change had been described earlier by Goller:

…artistic change occurs through a style or convention becoming so familiar that our sensibilities become numbed to it and artists have to seek new forms which they do by elaborating inherited ones.\(^{105}\)

So for Goller boredom becomes the force that drives change; novelty is an aesthetic virtue. Harunobu elaborates on the monochrome illustrations of Moronobu, Kiyonaga elaborates on Harunobu. Utamaro embellishes Kiyonaga, and Toyokuni reinvigorates Utamaro with even more ornate decoration. When *ukiyo-e* audiences were finally and fully bored with the mannered, exaggerated, elaborately garnished figure images of Utagawa school artists, the form was reinvigorated by the development of a new form, landscape, by Hokusai and Hiroshige. Goller’s simplistic explanation of change in art seemed to satisfy Fenollosa and his successors, as did Wölfflin’s more elaborate reasoning. Michael Podro describes

…two fundamental features of his later theories: first, the assumption of an autonomous visual tradition with its own principle of development; second, the sense that the achievement of each group of works is understood by the way it transforms and transcends its antecedents.\(^{106}\)

There are problems with this kind of thinking. In the first place, if one assumes a period model for change through a cyclic sequence of events, can one also assume that each artist that participates in that process and during that particular period of time shares the same concept or sense of purpose?\(^{107}\) Or is this sense of purposiveness imposed from outside the artist? The problem is that most of the writers cited, and most art writers in general, concentrate not on a commonality of purpose between artists, or across groups and generations of artist, but on the uniquely different character of the achievement of each. We value the ‘uniqueness’ of each artist’s individual enterprise, and we classify, arrange, or explain artists in relation to that concept of individual achievement. It is implicit in Fenollosa or Ficke’s classification of Kiyonaga as the classic artist of *ukiyo-e*, and Utamaro as its corrupter, that each artist was working according to a different, and intensely personal, creative agenda.

This explanation is problematic. There is, in the first instance, no legitimate foundation for locating Japanese aesthetic periods within the governmentally determined periods and eras, of the Tokugawa period at least (see Appendix 1). In the second instance, such a model can assume or imply a range of unlikely partnerships. It might assume an affinity of style and temperament, between artists as unalike as Harunobu and Kiyonaga, for example. Similarly it can separate into different categories or periods artists between whom we can locate some affinity – Kiyonaga and Utamaro for example. Locating artists within schools generates similar problems: Toyokuni I and Yoshitoshi are both Utagawa school artists, but there is no aesthetic characteristic common to the work of both.

One might, of course, be able to identify something approaching a common sense in terms of a broader ‘Edo spirit’ shared by all Edokko, and throughout the Tokugawa
period. This might be generated by broad changes accompanying the process of urbanization, the increasing urbanity of its citizens, changes in its economic infrastructure, changes in habits, manners, fashions and social behaviour. The processes of change, in other words, that affected all, or the majority of, Edo citizens. To simply assume some kind of causal relationship between broad social trends and the diverse enterprises of five generations of artists spread over two hundred years is to ask too much of, and to oversimplify, the relationship between social force and artistic production. The relationship such an explanation depends on is too clumsy, and there is no visible causal mechanism for such a connection. In order to succeed such an explanation would need to be able to assume that societal change has its own aesthetic dimension: that like can therefore affect like, but there is no legitimate reason to assume this common character.

In any case, with hindsight, and with an additional view of later artistic events to which the early writers were not privy, it is easier for us to see that really the fundamental problem with a cyclic model is that though the facts may be selectively arranged to fit the model, the model does not really fit all of the facts. A real cyclic model would oblige the phase that followed the major decline, be it situated in Utamaro, the Utagawa school, or the enterprises of post-Meiji artists, with a new period of ‘primitivism’, another ‘growth’ phase, a new ‘classical’ period, followed by a new ‘baroque’. What happened in ukiyo-e can be read quite differently however. One can as easily describe the genealogy of ukiyo-e as a long process of development, from a period that might be described as one of ‘classical elegance’, from Harunobu, through Utamaro into early Utagawa. One might then see this developing further into images of greater visual complexity, of richer colour and more varied pattern and a greater level of technical accomplishment than ever before in the works of the later Utagawa artists Kunisada and his followers, Kunyoshi, Kunichika, Chikanobu. This new era of richly decorative style can be seen to be motivated by precisely the same impetus towards the decorative that inspired the earlier development of nishiki-e. The post-Meiji experiments with aniline dyes and western representational conventions can be seen to have been motivated by the same impetus to technical adventure and perfection that had inspired the later prints of Harunobu. And the development from the later Meiji print into the technical tours de force, the highly stylized and immaculately crafted images of shin-hanga, evident in works by Yoshikawa Kanpō, for example, or Kawase Hasui, Itō Shinsui or Hashiguchi, simply sustain the pictorial character of their predecessors. Not a cyclic model, in other words, but a linear or plateau one – similar, in many ways to Michener’s and later Clark’s assumptions of the birth of ukiyo-e in a fully mature state.

Similar criticism can be made of the emphasis on periodisation adopted by most commentators. That they do so is understandable. It provides some kind of structural model around which, or into which, we can classify, arrange, or inter-relate the achievements of each artist. It also conforms to Japanese conventions for describing historical eras according to governmental identity, or artist achievements according to school. But do periods as distinctly different as these really exist? Are they visible in the works themselves? The difficulty various writers have experienced in agreeing on precisely when each period started or ended, on who belonged to each, and whether it was a phase of positive achievement or one of decline, would suggest otherwise. Certainly, most writers agree on the very broadest of phases – all are agreed that the years of the Tokugawa government for example, characterized as they were by peace, a process of urbanization, a change in the relative fortunes of Japan’s citizens, and a change in its cultural achievements, can be defined as a period clearly different in character from those
that preceded and succeeded it. It is the finer divisions that are more difficult. The achievements of a bewildering range of artists, working in a time of rapid shifts in fashion, manners and mores, and in a wide range of stylistic idioms, is just too complex to divide into the a simple sequence of events.

In a sense, Michener’s account of a continuous state of flux can offer a more constructive explanation. It was useful, for example, for explaining a continuity into modern Japanese printmaking, as he later did. Alternatively, we might, with as much validity as dividing ukiyo-e into temporal components, make a case for classifying and explaining it in terms of its subjects (bijin-ga; yakusha-e; uki-e...) or according to artistic school – Torii, Kaigetsudō, Katsukawa or Utagawa. At least one advantage of the latter might be its ability to recognize that the events of ukiyo-e did not occur simply, in a linear, serial fashion. The active life of one artist overlapped with that of other, stylistically different ones. Differing schools might precede or succeed one another; they might as easily run concurrently, or overlap. The fortunes of the Torii school extend from amongst the earliest days of ukiyo-e right to the last – and the stylistic character of its artists changed radically throughout.

The surveys of ukiyo-e cited earlier are not simply historical summaries of a sequence of events: they are critical histories. In each instance the writer makes judgments about the works (sometimes about the artists), and in each case that judgment determines where the works are placed within the genealogy. If each writer had made their judgments according to the same criteria then the accounts would be the same. But this was not the case. These writers founded their judgments on differing notions of what constitutes art, taste, or quality in art, and this is why their outcomes are inconsistent. Examining the arguments they make for their respective decisions can tell us why their accounts differ.

Both Fenollosa and Ficke judge Utamaro to mark the downfall of ukiyo-e. There is a clear signal of the criteria Fenollosa is employing when he first broaches the subject of a decline:

But whatever the cause, there was indeed, about 1800, and after, a very real lowering of both the moral and aesthetic standards of the streets. Men and women went to the extravagances of frank vulgarity...The extravagances of Utamaro appealed to a degenerating taste, as they appeal today to many modern French aesthetes. 109

Fenollosa is conflating two pairs of concepts here: that of making moral judgments with that of making aesthetic judgments; and observations about the coincidence of broad patterns of social behaviour with aesthetic experiences. Arthur Ficke elaborates on this:

We find the sound and classic figures of Kiyonaga gradually replaced by new and fascinating types – slender drooping bodies, wonderfully piled coiffures, elaborately brocaded robes; and the virile drawing of the earlier master gives way to the sinuous curves and arresting plasticity of the new designers...in their curious perverted way, they are far more realistic than the Primitives ever dreamed of being; and on the other hand, they seem the products of minds weary of reality, who turn to the phantasies of the not wholly normal spirit for their ideals and their consolations. 110

Ficke begins by describing a stylistic shift to a more mannered idiom, but the description becomes increasingly judgmental, not of the aesthetic qualities of the works, but of the psychological and moral state of the artist and of his public – ‘their curious
perverted way...minds weary of reality...phantasies of the not wholly normal spirit.” Later he describes how

...the unending search for novelty led in due time to strained efforts, perverted mannerisms, and distorted outlooks on life... (And by 1800) ...genuine artistic weakness had appeared, sensationalism took the place of vigour, garishness supplanted harmony, and crude emotions, crude drawing, crude colour become the common feature.\footnote{111}

These are Ficke’s descriptions of the decline of \textit{ukiyo-e} in general. His descriptions of Utamaro’s works, and of the characteristic feminine types he employed, focus on their ‘strange and languid beauty’; they are the ‘emanations of Utamaro’s feverish mind’ and his ‘overwrought desires’.\footnote{112}

The language employed by Fenollosa and Ficke to describe and explain the decline, in \textit{ukiyo-e} and in Utamaro, makes more sense if we know just a little more about his life and work. Utamaro was employed, from an early age, by the publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō, actually living in his home for a number of years. Jūzaburō’s home was situated directly opposite the entrance to Yoshiwara, and a central component of his business activities lay in the publication of illustrated guides to the brothel district and its inhabitants. Utamaro illustrated many of these guides himself. Throughout his career Utamaro occupied himself with the representation of women – in domestic scenes, or \textit{mitate-e}, as prostitutes and their attendants, in \textit{shunga-e} pornographic prints, and in erotic books.

Utamaro was obsessive in his portrayal of women of various types and in various mood, often to the exclusion, quite literally, of everything else.\footnote{113}

When Fenollosa and Ficke refer to Utamaro as ‘feverish’ or ‘perverted’, and when they describe his ‘overwrought desires’ and ‘extravagance of vulgarity’ they are judging not the strengths or weaknesses of his designs so much as the decadent state of his moral character. Beyond Utamaro himself the apparent public acceptability of Yoshiwara and prostitution was incomprehensible to them. It represented perversions of sexual behaviour quite foreign to them, and was clear evidence of the moral degradation of the Japanese, or at least Edo, populace after 1800. Much of \textit{ukiyo-e} was dedicated to its representation, so, \textit{ipso facto}, \textit{ukiyo-e} must also become morally degenerate, and therefore bad. Ficke’s conviction of the morally degenerate state of the Yoshiwara in general, and Utamaro in particular, are in no doubt:

\begin{quote}
Now Death thy ruined city’s streets
Walketh a grisly queen.
And there her sacred horror greets
Him who invades these waste retreats,
Her sacrosanct demesne –…\footnote{114}
\end{quote}

In making judgments of this kind both writers were re-inventing the Greek notion of \textit{kalokagathia}. In making judgments of this kind, Fenollosa and Ficke were drawing on a particular instance of evaluative art writing, that of moral evaluation. This tradition had its origins in the Greek notion, but had been sustained through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by writers like Reynolds who rejected the sensual in art, and an embracing of those things that appealed to our ‘best and noblest faculties’.\footnote{115} Reynolds’ rejection of the sensual and respect for the ennobling character of art was later refined by John Ruskin into
concepts of *aesthesia* (responsiveness to the sensuous), and *theoria* (the superior state of moral grace).

Despite its attraction however, this construct did have its problems. One problem with judgments founded in moral standards is that those standards are usually found to be in a state of flux: mores change over time, so moral standards cannot constitute a consistent measure. The problem here seems to have been precisely the opposite. There is no evidence to suggest that there was any moral degeneration in Edo after 1800. The sumptuary edicts of the first half of the nineteenth century can as easily have been a response to pressures of the economy as to any perception of excessive moral laxity. Furthermore, in making judgments that are really of or about the particular social practices of the time, Ficke and Fenollosa are shifting the object of their attention away from the art works, and on to something else – the degeneration they trace is not that of *ukiyo-e* art works, but that of Utamaro and Utamaro’s world. In doing so they are making an assumption of a simple causal relationship between the artist and the works the artist might produce. This assumption is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it is a gross simplification of the much more complex interaction of processes that constitute the creative process. In the second, it assumes a relationship that is not logical. Temperate artists may produce temperate works; they may as easily produce intemperate ones, and on the same day.

At least one contemporary of Fenollosa and Ficke disagrees with their judgment on Utamaro. For Laurence Binyon, the painter of the green houses

stands out as the greatest of all the figure designers of the school…he introduces an intensity that seems at times almost sinister, he has a stronger sense of the dynamic in figure drawing, and far greater resource of composition. His felicities of unexpected invention are endless.\(^1\)

The reason for Binyon’s greater generosity lies partly in his avoidance of moral judgment. It is also because his view of *ukiyo-e* is different, and broader, than those of his contemporaries, defining it not only through its concentration on genre subjects but also through its particular stylistic character:

The Ukiyoye (sic) artists were picturing a time with all the manners, occupations, and amusements of its men and women. The value of their work, as art, lies not in this, but in the infinite harmonies of line and colour they created; yet their conscious motive, as I have said, was not to make decorative arrangements so much as to picture the life around them.\(^2\)

Binyon’s explanation of the stylistic character of *ukiyo-e* dominates the introduction to his survey. He acknowledges that mimesis is unimportant for *ukiyo-e*, stressing instead the importance of rhythm:

In this theory every work of art is thought of as an incarnation of the genius of rhythm, manifesting the living spirit of things with a clearer beauty and intenser power than the gross impediments of complex matter allow to be transmitted to our senses in the visible world around us. A picture is conceived as a sort of apparition from a more real world of essential life...The spaces to be coloured are flat spaces, and the instinct of the artist is to invent a harmony of colours which intensifies and gives added charm to the harmony of line. Such an art never loses sight of the primary condition of a picture as a decoration on a flat wall.\(^2\)
Interestingly, Ficke also tries to find a particular stylistic idiom for ukiyo-e, with similar results. He describes, for example:

…the seeking out of subtle and invisible relations in things, the perception of harmonies and rhythms not heard by the common ear.\textsuperscript{119}

Later, and more specifically in relation to the ‘primitives’, he describes:

…broad decorative effects combined with vigorous movement. A certain unique simplicity and grandeur in the special (sic) and linear conceptions of these men gives to the whole Primitive Period a Titanic character that distinguishes it.

Developing his analysis of ukiyo-e style further Ficke describes ‘sweeping calligraphic lines’, the ‘poise and balance of severe black and white masses’, and the ‘rhythmic flow of the composition’ -

A profound formalism dominates these works. The figures are purely one-dimensional the picture is a flat pattern of lights and darks bounded by the sharp outline of great curves.\textsuperscript{120}

In describing the stylistic character of ukiyo-e in this way both Binyon and Ficke also acknowledge the importance of the development of the woodblock print technique. In one sense this is problematic. Ficke in particular assumes the woodblock print and ukiyo-e to be synonymous. This is not so: ukiyo-e was as much the occupation of Tokugawa painters as it was of its printmakers, and in fact many of its principal masters worked in both media. What is important though is that both writers recognize the importance of medium, both as technical process and as formal relations of pictorial elements, for explaining ukiyo-e.

In this sense both writers are introducing a sort of ‘proto-formalism’ into their arguments. Their observations should not be confused with the formalism of their contemporaries Roger Fry and Clive Bell however. Though they shared a common interest in the way pictures were constructed, composed, coloured, patterned, Ficke and Binyon were not interested in locating anything like ‘significant form.’ They were interested in describing how ukiyo-e images looked however; how they were designed, what made them uniquely different from any other pictorial enterprise. They found the best way to explain this unique character to be in describing the particular qualities of formal relations that distinguishes them from images from other pictorial domains. Their arguments are essentialist in character.

An essentialist argument does have one real advantage. It allows the writers to focus their attention on visual qualities that are distinctly characteristic of ukiyo-e, in a way that the moralist observations alone had not been able to do. Their own observations were, moreover, consistent with the way ukiyo-e images looked. This view also had its limitations. Focusing on how pictures look provides only a partial explanation for them. While successfully locating one area of difference between ukiyo-e and European conventions, it ignores others. It fails to explain, for example, what the images represented in ukiyo-e are about; where they come from; what (or who) they relate to; how their original audience might have engaged with them. Equally, it fails to explain the relation of ukiyo-e to the complex contexts – social, cultural, literary – in which it was made and employed. In this sense a formalist explanation is unsatisfying – it provides only part of an explanation. Being essentialist in character it is also an exclusive view. Binyon’s formalist
descriptions can usefully embrace a certain range of stylistic idioms into what it defines as ukiyo-e – from the monochrome prints of the primitives through the development of nishiki-e, and through Utamaro to the landscapes of Hokusai and Hiroshige for example. The standard of stylistic relations that Binyon describes as typical of ukiyo-e fails to find any accord with mannered excess, and it cannot usefully explain works that conform more closely to the idioms and conventions of European art. Consequently the later stages of ukiyo-e, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, or its manifestations in Nagasaki or Osaka, are omitted entirely from Binyon’s account.

The key limitation of a formalist description was that it only provided part of an explanation for ukiyo-e. It was not replete enough. More recent accounts, particularly those of the past decade, have sought to construct fuller accounts by investigating in depth the social environment in which ukiyo-e were produced and used, describing life in Tokugawa Edo, and explaining the particular character of the ‘floating world’ itself. This is what Timothy Clark does in his introductory essay for Ukiyo-e Paintings in the British Museum. For Clark ukiyo is a hedonistic world, one of the ‘pursuit of pleasure’, and in particular the pleasures of the flesh. He describes the general preoccupation of ukiyo-e artists with the ‘fashionable’, with the self-indulgent, and the erotic. He then describes ukiyo more specifically in terms of Shin Yoshiwara - the ‘hub of the “floating world”’ – and its habits, manners and inhabitants. He provides a case study of the Segawa myōseki, explaining in some detail the infrastructures of Yoshiwara and the intricacies of an engagement there. He extends his survey to embrace the representations of courtesans in mitate-e, patterns of patronage for ukiyo-e, and even details of what paintings or prints would have cost to buy.

A similar type of survey is presented in Donald Jenkins’ The Floating World Revisited. Jenkins defines ukiyo-e through the derivation of the word from its original Buddhist context, in which it referred to the transience of life, and its transference to Tokugawa Edo, in which:

Instead of ‘this (transient) world of sorrows,’ it became ‘this (transient) world of pleasures’. And the pleasures referred to were not just any pleasures but, rather, those associated with a certain extravagance and high living.

He then describes the social, literary and artistic phenomenon of the floating world in some detail. He explains the genesis of townsman culture in Tokugawa, the shifting fortunes of class groups, and the reconstruction of relations of power. Next, while acknowledging the difficulty of defining the floating world simply as geographic location, (‘…the Floating World was not a place but a way of life’), he notes its key locations in Yoshiwara and the kabuki theatre district. The succeeding essays illustrate the complexities of social relations in Edo, the subtle pleasures of literary engagement, the theatre, and theatrical heroes, and the concepts of the ‘fashionable’, the ‘up-to-date’ as manifested in mitate-e.

One major advantage of the perspective adopted by Clark and Jenkins is its focus on information which can illuminate our understanding of the Tokugawa Period, and its ukiyo-e audiences. It helps to explain the ways in which those audiences engaged, not just with its art works, but in the pleasures of the floating world itself: in Yoshiwara, in kabuki, in kyōka competitions, in teahouse drinking parties and so forth. To this extent, sociological perspectives have endless potential to engage us, to fascinate us by
illuminating a lost world from an alien culture, and they can give us some sort of insight into the ways in which contemporary audiences might have engaged with ukiyo-e.

Like the earlier constructs, however, sociological views also have their problems. In the first instance, the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social culture in Edo is not the same thing as the study of its art. These two things are related, certainly, and probably intimately, but they are not the same thing. The first key problem for sociological explanations is the ease with which they may tend to move the focus of our attention away from the art work, or from our aesthetic response to it, and on to something quite different. The second problem is that, focusing on something other than the art works, sociological explanations are unable to usefully analyse the art; they offer no foundation for evaluating art works or art experiences. This is why, in Clark’s account, no development of any kind is described for ukiyo-e – ‘No primitives, no decadents’. Clark does acknowledge the technical developments underpinning changes in the appearance of ukiyo-e prints, from monochrome illustration through urushi-e into multi-block polychrome prints for example, but he effectively denies any stylistic development beyond this.

Essentially then, historically framed explanations for ukiyo-e have been built on one of three conceptual foundations: moralist; formalist; or sociological. Each of these foundations is problematic in its own way. They all, however, fail to satisfy two straightforward tests for legitimacy or validity: these are tests of sufficiency and of consistency.

To be valid, for example, an explanation for ukiyo-e must be sufficient for explaining all of ukiyo-e, not just some of it. In excluding almost the whole Utagawa school enterprise from their accounts Fenollosa, Ficke or Binyon are providing insufficient explanations. Note also that much of ukiyo-e was occupied with the representation of pictorial subjects that existed outside the ‘floating world’ itself. To achieve sufficiency a replete account needs to be able to embrace and explain the peasant genre scenes of Hokusai, the highway series of Hiroshige, or Utamaro’s studies from nature as adequately as it provides explanations for scenes from kabuki or Yoshiwara. In embracing more late or minor artists into their accounts later writers like Clark or Jenkins might appear to be devising more replete, or sufficient, accounts; but these accounts focus too narrowly on issues of socio-cultural context, and avoid a direct confrontation with pictorial issues. They illuminate implicitly, but fail to explain explicitly. In doing so they engender partial explanations for pictures rather than satisfyingly complete ones.

To be legitimate, explanations for ukiyo-e need to be consistent with our knowledge of how its artists explained their works, the expectations and cultural character of its audiences, and, most obviously, with pictorial fact – the way the works look. It is difficult today to find any explicit artist statements for any but a handful of ukiyo-e artists. We do have some contemporary evidence, in the form of Ōta Nampo’s Vasari-like biographical descriptions, or Santō Kyōden’s detailed observations of contemporary life (see notes 7, 8). We are also able to document, with reasonable accuracy and detail, the lives of key artists like Hokusai or Utamaro. From these two types of evidence we can infer something approaching a concept of intention, and something of a picture of patterns of professional practice. We can divine something of Utamaro’s evident obsession with sexuality for example, or Hokusai’s preoccupation with rural genre or poetical or literary themes, that are consistent with both the pictorial subjects and the pictorial character of the images they
designed. Thus Hokusai’s repeated sequences of illustrations for *Chūshingura* can be explained, in part, by his claim of descent from one of the forty-seven rōnin.\(^\text{127}\)

Similarly, the observations of de Goncourt, Fenollosa or Ficke on Utamaro’s preoccupation with the ‘green houses’ would certainly seem to be consistent with the facts of Utamaro’s life; he lived directly opposite the main entrance of Yoshiwara for most of his life, and is known to have indulged whole-heartedly in the pleasures it offered.\(^\text{128}\) The assertion of these writers of the immorality of Utamaro’s behaviour is, on the other hand, quite inconsistent with the social and moral mores of Utamaro’s time. Prostitution may well have been frowned upon in Edo, but it was officially sanctioned: the location of Yoshiwara and many of the principles upon which it was organized were stipulated by government. What the Europeans saw as degenerate behaviour was, at least for the privileged population of Edo, simply normal.

Most importantly, the explanations of many of these writers are inconsistent with the pictorial fact of the images themselves. This might not be immediately evident. Superficially, Utamaro’s pictorial obsession with women – in one way or another they occupy almost his entire oeuvre – is consistent with the assertion of a morally questionable character. There is little in the *way* Utamaro represents women to distinguish his works from those of his contemporary – the man lionized by Fenollosa and Ficke as the doyen of *ukiyo-e* artists – Torii Kiyonaga. Indeed, both artists represent the same pictorial subjects, occupy themselves with the description of the same fashions in dress and manners, and elongate the figures they portray in precisely the same way. Judging one oeuvre to be classically perfect, and the other closely matched enterprise to be decadent and mannered, points to an inconsistency of aesthetic judgment with pictorial fact. Certainly Utamaro occupied himself with the production of *shunga*, indeed it was a central component of his contracted work for the publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō. Utamaro’s *shunga*, while explicit in a way that can still shock Western audiences (and for which it is today censored by Japanese authorities) was no more extreme than that of any of his contemporaries, and was arguably more conservative than the later excesses in the same genre by Hokusai.

The types of judgment that have generated the inconsistencies between historical accounts do provoke a new question. If the issue for the historical writers lay in the introduction of aesthetic judgments into their enterprise (granting that their status as aesthetic judgments is questionable), what are the implications, in turn, for evaluating *ukiyo-e* simply on aesthetic grounds? Clearly, European aesthetic concepts failed the historians, but what of Japanese notions of aesthetic measure? How successfully can they be employed to generate more valid explanations of *ukiyo-e*?

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1 The specific timeframe for this Edo period is concurrent with that of the Tokugawa government, i.e. 1615 – 1868, but the really vigorous development of *ukiyo-e* dates from a little later in the mid-seventeenth century, and its decline is usually accepted as beginning well before the Meiji Restoration.

2 *Bijin-ga* – images of beautiful women; *kabuki-e* – images of the theatre (*kabuki* actor portraits were known as *yakusha-e*); *musha-e* – pictures of warriors; *fūkei-ga* – landscape subjects. Other subject categories included *sensō-e* – war pictures; *sumō-e* – wrestlers; *kachō-ga* – bird and flower pictures; *ezo-e* – pictures of Ainu people; *oyama-e* – prostitutes; and *rekishi-ga* images of historical subjects.


4 *Uki-e* – lit. ‘floating pictures’, perspectival landscapes; *ōkubi-e* – lit. ‘big head pictures’, close up portraits; *benizuri-e* – pictures with a rose pink colour predominant, often in combination with a soft green (in *beni-e* prints the rose colour was applied by hand, and in *benigirai-e*, or ‘pink-avoiding prints’, no reds were used.)
prints for making into fans; mitate-e – parody images, often in the form of historic or literary themes re-presented in modern guise; anasema-e – cut out toy prints (known also, in subtly varying forms, as kiriiko-e or omocha-e).

Ernest Fenollosa, for example, explains the ‘aesthetic value’ of Moronobu’s work as being high ‘...because it was in the popular Kanō technique.’ (Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art, London: Heimneman; New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1912, rev. ed., 1921, Vol. II, p. 187) Sandy Kita describes Matabei as both the ‘last of the line of Tosa Mitsunobu’ and as epitomizing ‘...the devil-may-care attitude now properly identified with the Floating World (ukiyo), the milieu of lowlifes and high livers, the courtesans, actors, playboys, rich merchants and panderers of Edo depicted in the woodblock prints called Ukiyo-e (literally, Floating World art).’ (Sandy Kita, The Last Tosa: Iwasa Katsumochi Matabei, Bridge to Ukiyo-e, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999, p. 1). Distinct links like these are by no means straightforward however. Fenollosa, for example, clearly describes Matabei as an adherent of the Eitoku Kanō School (Fenollosa, 1912, Vol II, p. 184), but his distinction between an older Kanō School Matabei, and a younger Tosa School Matabei, seem really to be describing inconsistent pictorial characteristics in different works by the same master (pp. 184 – 185). Though Sharaku’s life is enshrouded in mystery, it is generally accepted that he was a nō dancer by profession, using the name Saitō Jurobei, or possibly Jrōbei. The evidence is discussed in Harold G. Henderson and Louis V. Ledoux, Sharaku’s Japanese Theatre Prints: An Illustrated Guide to His Complete Work, New York: E. Weyhe on behalf of the Society for Japanese Studies, 1939, pp. 13 – 15.


Santō Kyōdō’s enlarged version of Ōta Nampo’s work was published in 1802 as Tsuiko (‘Additional Thoughts’). His descriptions of Edo life were published as Kinsei kinsei kō (‘Thoughts on Unusual Relics of the Recent Past’, 1804), and Kottō shō (‘A Collection of Curiosities’, 1814 – 15), Clark, p. 29.

Arthur Davison Ficke, for example, cites a whole spate of European accounts from the last decade of the nineteenth century. He includes the magazine Le Japon Artistique published by S. Bing in Paris between 1889 and 1891; Edmond de Goncourt, Outamaro; Le Pientre des Maisons Vertes, 1891; Prof. Anderson, Japanese Woodengraving, 1895; Ernest Fenollosa, Masters of Ukiyo-e, 1896; de Goncourt, Hokusai, 1896; Strange, Japanese Colour Prints, 1897; Woldemar von Seidlitz, Geschichte des japanischen Farbenholzschnitts, 1897 (reprinted in England as A History of Japanese Colour Prints); Ficke, A. D., Chats on Japanese Prints, Rutland, Vermont and Tōkyō: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1915, pp. 31 – 32.

Some European commentators were even earlier than those of Bing, de Goncourt, Fenollosa et al, witness John Leighton’s essay ‘On Japanese Art: A Discourse’, London: pvt, 1863, repr., Elizabeth Holt, The Art of All Nations: 1850 – 1873, Princeton, 1982, pp. 364 – 377. Many of the early Western visitors to Japan, both before and after the opening of international relations following Perry’s arrival, recorded their experiences by assembling small collections of ukiyo-e as records of their own experience of the country’s cultural character. A significant number of oriental works were in Europe prior to 1858, for example. The gradual absorption of these into European public collections, from the Bibliothèque Nationale’s acquisition of three prints by Koryūsai sometime between 1825 and 1849, through to the acquisition of collections from Isaac Titsingh (1775 – 1812) prior to 1827, through the collections of Philipp Franz von Siebold in 1873, W. L. de Sturler in 1855, of Samuel Bing in 1892; of the Musée des Arts Decoratifs (Union Centrale des Beaux-Arts Appliques à l’Industrie) from 1887; the Musée Guimet from late 1870; in the British Museum from as early as 1860; the Victoria and Albert (then the South Kensington Museum) from at least as early as 1872, is described in Phylis Floyd, ‘Documentary Evidence for the Availability of Japanese Imagery in Europe in Nineteenth-Century Public Collections’, The Art Bulletin, March, 1986, Volume LXVIII, Number 1, pp. 105 – 141. The implication being that the material acquired was in Europe well before it was absorbed into the collections.

Ernest Fenollosa, 1912. Fenollosa assembled, and later sold, one of the first significant Western collections of Japanese art, to form what became the core of the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He also published a large number of works on the subject, including: Special Exhibition of the Pictorial Art of Japan and China No. 1: Hokusai and His School, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1893; The Masters of Ukiyo-e (sic): A Complete Historical Description of Japanese Paintings and Colour Prints of the Genre School as Shown in Exhibition at the Fine Arts Building, New York, 1896; Catalogue of the Exhibition of Ukiyo-e Paintings and Prints Held at Ikaō Onsen, Ūyeno Shinzaka from April 15 – May 15, Tōkyō, Kobayashi Bunshichi, 1898; An Outline of the History of Ukiyo-e, Tōkyō: Kobayashi Bunshichi, 1901; Catalogue of the exhibition of Ukiyo-e paintings and prints at Yamanaka Galleries, New York: Yamanaka Galleries, 1908. See also Julia Meech,'Frank Lloyd Wright and the Art Institute of Chicago’, Orientations, June 1992, pp. 64 – 76.
pest interest was soon fixed is letters." (p. 22); "in his characterization of Gonse’s study as a “Hokusai e USA during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”, l. II, p. 186. Here again Fenollosa is insistent on Moronobu’s links with the Kanō school: ‘The aesthetic value of Moronobu’s work is high…This was both because it was in the popular Kanō technique, and also the samurai (with whom it was most popular) were Genroku samurai. Thus the art was not yet pure Ukiyoe.’ Vol. II, p. 187.


Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. II, p. 197. This elongation of the figure is, on the other hand, the very quality seized upon by Fenollosa as evidence of Kiyonaga’s greatness.

Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. II, p. 198. In fact, it was Toyokuni’s predecessor, Utagawa Toyoharu, who had made a sustained investigation into the pictorial possibilities for uki-e using Western-style perspective.

Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. II, p. 199. Again there is an inconsistency here with Fenollosa’s earlier judgments. If the problem with Utamaro’s figures is their excessive height, and if we accept that in any case the heights of the figures conform to some kind of ideal, aesthetic or fashionable, rather than to the measure of realism, then why should shorter figures also be inappropriate?

Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. II, pp. 200 – 204. Fenollosa’s view of Hokusai was not always a positive one. An alternative view was clearly evident in his 1884 review of Louis Gonse’s L’Art Japonaise: ‘Fenollosa’s review achieved a certain notoriety for its characterization of Gonse’s study as a “Hokusai-crowned pagoda of generalizations”, a withering indictment which sought to castigate the author simultaneously for his dilettantism and his orientalism while also revealing a second primary target of Fenollosa’s criticism: Hokusai. Fenollosa insists that he wishes to give Hokusai his due – “I appreciate Hokusai up to the very last limit of his legitimate worth. It is not that I love Hokusai less, but that I love the old, great and nobler masters more” (Review, p. 51). …And yet it is clear that at this early stage in his career Fenollosa detested Hokusai. He is plainly more than carried away by rhetoric when he states: “If a man in the East were to write as Hokusai painted, he would be sent back to school to learn his letters.’ (p. 22); “in his paintings, Hokusai falls very low indeed” (p. 46); “so in the case of Hokusai and the Ukiyoe, we miss all that indefatigable something which is implied in the word “taste”, and we hear only the clever talk of the barber and the bar-tender, or the unpoetical song of the rural poet, or the absurd masquerading of a second class actor who is not at heart a gentleman” (p. 33). Timothy Clark, ‘The Intuition and the Genius of Decoration: Critical Reactions to Rimpa Art in Europe and the USA during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’, in Yūzō Yamane, Masato Naitō and Timothy Clark, Rimpa Art From the Idenitsu Collection, Tōkyō, London: British Museum Press, 1998, p. 71. The inconsistency evident between Fenollosa’s early and later evaluations of Hokusai is significant. It implies not so much a re-evaluation in the light of new information or experience, or even a later crystallisation of Fenollosa’s views on history or aesthetic, but a ‘dishonesty of taste’ that generates some suspicion for Fenollosa’s judgments in general. Clark, for example, notes the coincidence of Fenollosa’s reappraisal with his intimate collaboration in the marketing of Japanese prints in North America. (Clark, 1998, p. 71).

Hegel’s view of history was a teleological one. Human interests were held to be in a constant and purposive condition of change, from one state towards another. Mary Fenollosa notes that these Hegelian principles were instilled early, during his time at Harvard: ‘Intellectually his deepest interest was soon fixed upon philosophy, and the influence of Hegel especially remained with him a vital and constructive factor throughout his life.’ Mary Fenollosa, preface to 1921 edition of Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. I, p. xiii.

Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. I, p. 169. It is fair to say that Fenollosa’s understanding of the realities of daily life in post-feudal Japan were limited, and unrealistic, conditioned by his understanding of broader historical trends through the evidence of the cultural activities of the minority ruling class.


Fenollosa’s inclusion of notions of moral idealism here is significant. It was this concept that was to form the foundation of his assertion of the decadence of the form from Utamaro onwards.

Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. II, p. 184. Interestingly, where Fenollosa is insistent on Matabei’s Kanō origins, writers today see him as the last great exponent of Tosa School painting (Kita, The Last Tosa).

Fenollosa 1912, Vol. II, p. 186. Here again Fenollosa is insistent on Moronobu’s links with the Kanō school: ‘The aesthetic value of Moronobu’s work is high…This was both because it was in the popular Kanō technique, and also the samurai (with whom it was most popular) were Genroku samurai. Thus the art was not yet pure Ukiyoe.’ Vol. II, p. 187.


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Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. II, p. 160. Note that, at a later stage, the notion of morality as an aesthetic measure will be evaluated.

30 ‘Heretofore most books on Japanese Art (sic) have dealt rather with the technique of industries than with the aesthetic motive of schools of design, thus producing a false classification by materials instead of by creative periods. This book conceives of the art of each epoch as a partial beauty of line, spacing, and colour which could have been produced at no other time, and which permeates all the industries of its day.’ Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. I, p. xxiii. See Appendix 1 for a clarification of the specific issues pertaining to periodisation of Japanese history.

31 ‘Thus classification should be epochal, and in attempting thus to treat it for the first time it becomes possible partially to trace style back to its social and spiritual roots.’ Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. I, p. xxvii.

32 With hindsight, it is not difficult to see that Fenollosa saw himself, as an academic and as an advisor to the Japanese government, as playing a role in this renaissance, in a similar way, and as immodestly perhaps, as Hegel saw his own role in what he considered the culminating period of world history.


34 Binyon, 1908, pp. 254 – 255. This sense of aestheticism is established in Binyon’s introductory explanation of the concept that underpins his understanding of Oriental art: ‘The continuity of the universe, the perpetual stream of change through its matter, are accepted as things of Nature, felt in the heart and not merely learnt as the conclusions of delving science. And these ways of thought are reflected in Eastern art. Not the glory of the human form, to Western art the noblest and most expressive of symbols; not the proud and conscious assertion of human personality; but, instead of these, all thoughts that lead us out from ourselves into the universal life, hints of the infinite, whispers from secret sources – mountains, waters, mists, flowering trees, whatever tells of powers and presences mightier than ourselves: these are the themes dwelt upon, cherished, and preferred.’ (p. 24)

35 Binyon, 1908, p. 258.
36 Binyon, 1908, p. 259.
37 Binyon, 1908, pp. 259 – 261.
38 Binyon, 1908, p. 261.
39 Binyon, 1908, p. 269.
41 Ficke, 1915, pp. 207 – 208.
43 Ficke, 1915, p. 208.
46 ‘We find the sound and classic figures of Kiyonaga gradually replaced by new and fascinating types – slender, drooping bodies, wonderfully piled coiffures, elaborately brocaded robes; and the virile drawing of the earlier master gives way to the sinuous curves and arresting plasticity of the new designers…in their curious and perverted way, they are far more realistic than the Primitives ever dreamed of being; and on the other hand, they seem the products of minds weary of reality, who turn to the phantasies of the not wholly normal spirit for their ideals and their consolations.’ Ficke, 1915, p. 257.
48 Ficke, 1915, p. 280.
50 Ficke, 1915, p. 300.
51 Ficke, 1915, p. 324.
52 Ficke, 1915, p. 369.
53 Ficke, 1915, p. 381.
56 ‘…Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves; singing songs, drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, floating; caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call the floating world.’ Asai Ryōi, *Ukiyo monogatarai* (“Tales of the Floating World”), c. 1661, in Timothy Clark, *Ukiyo-e Paintings*, p. 9.
There really were three theories of development that were available to Wölfflin: that the development of art was a reflection of a cultural change; that it had a teleological character of its own, as suggested by Schnaase; and that it developed by a process of enriching and elaborating and then transcending those modes of formulation which had become familiar and dull, in the way Goller had suggested.’ Michael Podro, The Critical Historians of Art, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 99 – 100. Podro continues to explain that all three occupied Wölfflin at different stages of his career. Wölfflin and Fenollosa were contemporaries, and Wölfflin the most widely read art writer of their generation. There were, in fact,
other similarities in their views – witness for example their assumption of a mutual dualistic process of change in social circumstances and in visual traditions as a fundamental condition for aesthetic development. Podro, 1982, p. 115.


Tsuji Nobuo, 1995, p. 16.


Jack Hillier, Utamaro, London: Phaidon, 1961, pp. 7 – 8, cited in Tsuji Nobuo, ‘Utamaro’s Art’, p. 19. Tsuji then expands his own evaluation of previous views in relation to the peculiar tension evident in Utamaro’s art between idealism and realism, or, more precisely for Tsuji, between the refined (ga) and the vulgar (zoku).


Robert Schaap acknowledges that Kuniyoshi received more positive appraisal than most of his contemporaries – even from Ficke for example – and suggests that this has been because of the landscape images. Robert Schaap, ed., Heroes and Ghosts: Japanese Prints by Kuniyoshi, 1797 – 1861, Leiden: Hotel Publishing/Society For Japanese Arts, 1998, p. 9. There is some legitimacy for this observation. The same acceptance was accorded Eisen for his landscapes. A new canonical framework for ukiyo-e, or at least a new extension on the existing one, was seen to have been established by Hokusai and Hiroshige. Most earlier writers acclaim this as a reinvigoration of ukiyo-e, but as long as this evaluation was founded only in the development of a new subject, they were bound to tolerate other artists who also represented landscapes in their prints.

The one sentence is, at least congratulatory: ‘Perhaps the finest print designer of the period was Yoshitoshi (1839 – 1892), a Kuniyoshi pupil who stands almost alone in preserving ukiyo-e vigor during these years of social, political and artistic upheaval.’ Lane, 1962, p. 291.

Shindō Shigero, Kunisada: The Kabuki Actor Portraits, Tōkyō: Graphic-sha Publishing Co., Ltd., 1993. Shindō Shigero suggests that earlier judgments of Kunisada might have been compromised by a broad oversight of, and ignorance about, actor prints after Sharaku, following the dismissal of later eras of kabuki itself (the day-long productions, complex plots and lack of written libretto or script made kabuki notoriously difficult for Western audiences). Shindō also points to a particular problem of authorship with Kunisada, citing difficulties of identifying precisely Kunisada’s own input in his own workshop.

Schaap, 1998, p. 31. The sub-quote is from Basil Robinson, Kuniyoshi: The Warrior Prints, Oxford: Phaidon, 1982, p. 120. Inagaki Shin’ichi extends the same high praise to Kuniyoshi, even for his caricature prints: ‘Kuniyoshi was unrivalled in his depiction of animals in a manner that was full of laughter and feeling…The artist’s genius also extended to the creation of shadow and composite pictures.’ Inagaki Shin’ichi, ‘Kuniyoshi’s caricatures and Edo society’, in Schaap, ed., Heroes and Ghosts, p. 244.


Kalokagathia is a conflation of the Greek kalos kai agathos, beauty in goodness. The concept was simple: what was beautiful was morally good. What was morally good was also, ipso facto beautiful. The converse was also held to be true: what was ugly was morally bereft; what was morally repugnant was ugly.

Clark, 1992, p. 27.
‘Despite the employment of certain fictional techniques, Michener has produced an account which remains for the most part unbiassed and his chapters come to life without being parodies of the facts. One unfortunate exception occurs at the beginning of the book with a fictional account of a daimyo procession passing through the little town of Ōtsu outside of Kyōto. It is in this town that primitive pictures called Ōtsu-e were made, and, according to Michener, the true origins of ukiyo-e may also be sought there.’ Howard A. Link, ‘The Floating World Thirty Years Later’, in Michener, The Floating World, 1983 edition, p. 380.

Torii Shōbei I (1664 – 1729) is traditionally regarded as the founder of the school, but research in recent years has shown at least two artists using the Torii name preceded him. Torii Kiemono, Kiyonobu’s father, is designated in the Torii ga Keifu, a family record written down in the Meiji era, as an Osaka actor-artist who moved to Edo with his family in 1687. He set up residence in Namba-cho and in 1692 began to sign kamban-e (theatrical posters) for one of the three officially licensed kabuki theatres in Edo.

‘Recent research has also uncovered the artist Torii Kiyotaka. This recondite master, although not listed in the Torii ga Keifu, is mentioned in Furyu Kagami ga Ike (1709) as being a teacher of Shōbei Kiyonobu I and the “veteran artist” of the Torii school. Recent speculation suggests that this second artist may have been part of an independent branch of the Torii family at work in Edo before Torii Kiemono and his son Torii Kiemonbo I came to Edo from Osaka.’ Link, 1983, p. 387. Link continues to elaborate on the genealogy of the Torii school, his particular area of expertise, at some length and in some detail. As the final sentence suggests however, even Link’s well-informed view still contains an element of conjecture.

Timothy T. Clark and Ueda Osamu, with Donald Jenkins; Naomi Noble Richards, editor, 1994.

Many of the early European texts on ukiyo-e not only went to considerable lengths to identify the specific drama, or dramatic episode, that was being represented, but included comprehensive compilations of these crests (or mon) by which actors could be identified. Witness, for example, Basil Stewart, A Guide to Japanese Prints and Their Subject Matter, New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1922; republished New York: Dover, 1979.


Podro, 1982, p. 98. Wölfflin proposes a theory for stylistic change, and explains his periodic model of stylistic development from states of classical character towards those of baroque in Principles of Art History. There he describes the ‘expression of the temperament of an age and a nation, as well as expression of individual temperament’ in the interaction of ‘individual style, national style, and period style.’ (p. 10) Later he finds his model for change more explicitly on five pairs of concepts: (1) The development from the linear to the painterly; (2) The development from plane to recession; (3) The development from closed to open form; (4) The development from multiplicity to unity; (5) The absolute and relative clarity of the subject.’ (pp. 14 – 15. Later Wölfflin does admit the problem of finding a clear correspondence between on the one hand the necessary ‘fact of a cessation and recommencement of developments’ (p. 233) with, on the other hand, the often unclear or overlapping nature of beginnings and endings. Heinrich Wölfflin, Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art, 7th ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1950.


Podro, 1982, p. 138. Note that Podro describes a specific character for this kind of change, and it is one that finds some accord with the general trend of the history of ukiyo-e: ‘If the sequence is one which has a sense of purpose, that purpose is presumably of producing more compendious, more complex and more elusive relations both to the visible world and between the elements within the particular work.’

Though shin-hanga and subsequent developments were not, of course, ukiyo-e. All commentators agree that ukiyo-e ended, if not with Meiji, shortly after. The persistence of some of its visual (iconographic, stylistic, and technical) character in shin-hanga does, however, confirm the continuity of elements of a tradition rather than its rebirth in more primitive state. See Kendall H. Brown and Hollis Goodall-Cristante, Shin-hanga: New Prints in Modern Japan, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/ University of Washington Press, 1996.

Fenollosa, 1912, pp. 197 – 198. Note that there seems to be no documentary evidence for any broad patterns of change in social behaviours or mores after 1800 – where sexual license appeared to be loose, for Fenollosa at least, it was really little different from earlier years.

Ficke, 1915, p. 257.


Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seventh Discourse*. This thread of a commitment in the arts to a higher purpose recurs throughout the *Discourses*; witness: ‘It is allowed on all hands, that facts, and events, however they may bind the Historian, have no dominion over the Poet or the Painter. With us, History is made to bend and conform to this great idea of Art. And why? Because these gross senses, but to the desires of the mind, to that spark of divinity which we have within, impatient of being circumscribed and pent up by the world which is about us. Just so much as our Art has of this, just so much of dignity, I had almost said of divinity, it exhibits; and those of our artists who possessed this mark of distinction to the highest degree, acquired from hence the glorious appellation of DIVINE’. Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourse XIII, in Elizabeth Holt, *A documentary History of Art, Vol II: Michelangelo and the Mannerists: The Baroque and the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Doubleday, 1958, pp. 279–280.

By coincidence the moral decadence of *ukiyo-e* also occupied contemporary Japanese scholars, witness Dazai Shundai (Confucian scholar and advisor to the Tokugawa government, 1680–1747) on *kabuki*:


Hokusai, for example, on the occasion of a change of name coincidental with the publication of *One Hundred Views of Mt Fuji* at age seventy-five, explained his oeuvre, past and future, thus: ‘From the age of six I had a penchant for copying the form of things, and from about fifty, my pictures were frequently published; but until the age of seventy, nothing that I drew was worthy of notice. At seventy-three years, I was somewhat able to fathom the growth of plants and trees, and the structure of birds, animals, insects and fish. Thus when I reach eighty years, I hope to have made increasing progress, and at ninety to see further into the underlying principles of things, so that at one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art, and at one hundred and ten, every dot and every stroke will be as though alive. Those of you who live long enough, bear witness that these words of mine prove not false. Told by Gakyō Rōjin Manji.’ In Henry Smith, *Hokusai: One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 7.


2 EXPLAINING UKIYO-E: AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

I

Visitors to Japan often observe a broadly held and profound sense of aestheticism that seems to permeate most aspects of Japanese life: immaculately choreographed (or drunkenly chaotic) festivals; carefully assembled shop window displays (which run the gamut from restrained elegance to cutesy kitsch); layers of carefully tailored wrapping on the humblest of purchases.1 This sensibility seems to have been sustained consistently since Heian times.2 It underpins the Japanese passion for traditional bathing as much as it does their reverence for national shrines; it is as evident in the most humble of hand-made folk crafts as it is in the rarest of art treasures – indeed, these two may be the one and the same.3

Though this phenomenon has been widespread and persistent, it is not always easy to define or explain. This is not just a problem for western observers – Japanese writers have long debated the true character of aesthetic experience in every sphere of arts and letters.4 It was a matter of particular concern for those who inhabited the ‘floating world’. Albeit in a work of fiction, Ishiguro Kazuo faithfully describes the preoccupation of the participants of the floating world with questions about what should properly occupy artists and their audiences.5

This preoccupation with explaining or defining the enterprise was understandable. Since ukiyo-e constituted a field of interest distinctly different from other arts in Japan, aesthetic concepts associated with those other fields were of little use for explaining it. It is my claim in this chapter that since with ukiyo-e we are confronted by a set of aesthetic conditions completely different from those attaching to other art forms, we need to locate explanations for it in concepts that accord more closely with its own character and concerns – for ukiyo-e, it will be argued, the most appropriate vehicle for this lies in the peculiar instance of aesthetic consciousness known as iki.6

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find precise English language equivalents or explanations for Japanese aesthetic concepts like wabi, sabi, suki or iki. These words embrace complex and subtle ideas; they are richly, deeply allusive. In some instances the words can also have meanings other than their aesthetic ones.6 In others only some selected facet of their meaning may be present in the works they are used to explain.7 In many instances we can trace changes in taste, over time or geographically.8 In some objects or experiences we may be able to identify characteristics of a single aesthetic value; in others we might find qualities of several, not just co-existing, but interconnected and interdependent.9

What makes understanding the ways aesthetic concepts might be pertinent to the visual arts in general, and to ukiyo-e in particular, even more difficult is the fact that their origins lie outside these domains, in literature and in court manners.10 In fact, most Japanese commentators ‘…conceived their aesthetic ideas, such as yūgen, sabi, wabi,
mono no aware, to be the basis for all the arts’, not just painting, drawing, printmaking or calligraphy. Indeed, many of these arts were interdependent, composite, or at the least, complementary.\textsuperscript{11}

Wabi, sabi, yūgen and suki are arguably the best known, though possibly not the best understood, of Japanese aesthetic concepts. Wabi is the central principle. It can be defined as:

Tranquil Simplicity. The refined and elegant simplicity achieved by bringing out the natural colours, forms, and textures inherent in materials such as wood, straw, bamboo, clay…eschewing decoration, contrivance, or showiness, wabi treads the fine and precarious line between beauty and shabbiness.\textsuperscript{12}

This seems straightforward, but wabi is more complex than it may seem. Haga Koshiro likens the wabi aesthetic to a three-sided pyramid, in which one facet is characterized by ‘simple, unpretentious beauty’, a second by ‘imperfect, irregular beauty’, and a third by ‘austere, stark beauty’.\textsuperscript{13} Others define even more complex layers of wabi character; Hisamatsu Shin’ichi describes seven characteristics:

irregularity, simplicity, austerity, naturalness, mystery (yūgen), ethereality, and tranquility.\textsuperscript{14}

Finding wabi character in folk crafts – in a simple ceramic slab-constructed vase, in coarsely woven and hand dyed textiles, or in a spare and esoteric flower arrangement is reasonably straightforward; finding it in ukiyo-e is more challenging. Whether as paintings or as woodblock prints ukiyo-e images seem to be founded on ideals quite opposed to those of wabi. Their colours, from Harunobu onwards, were rich and velvet-like; surfaces were decorated with layers of rich pattern; in later prints the vegetable dyes were enhanced by the addition of gold, silver, bronze or minute specks of mica; later still the vegetable dyes were replaced by intensely bright aniline dyes were quickly adopted; and the subjects celebrated in ukiyo-e, the courtesans of Yoshiwara, the actors and characters of kabuki, the tragic or glorious heroes of Japanese history and mythology, were regularly represented in extremes of action that challenge any character of tranquility. Where

...the wabi ideal of beauty sets simple and unpretentious expression above the complex and striking. It abhors excess; it admires restraint...\textsuperscript{15}

ukiyo-e seemed, on the surface at least, to celebrate the complex and striking, in colour, pictorial structure and dynamic tension; far from abhorring excess it seemed to be founded on it; rather than restraint, it preferred passion.

The concept of sabi is closely associated with that of wabi – so much so that the two are often conflated to ‘wabi-sabi’. Sabi can be described as:

(th) The Patina of Age. Beauty that treasures the passage of time is sabi, echoing the original meaning of the word: rust or patina…the aesthetic value of things is not diminished by time, but enhanced. The wear and tear of daily use, lovingly repaired and attended to, does not detract, but adds new beauty and aesthetic depth.\textsuperscript{16}

Again the rich complexity of suggestions generated by the concept can be divined from many of the words employed, each in its own way, to describe different facets of sabi, words
...like ‘cold’ (hieru), ‘emaciated’ (yaseru), ‘frigid’ (samushi), ‘withered’ (kareru), ‘dried out’ (karabiru), ‘spent’ (karekajikeru), and ‘aged and worn’ (fuksabiru).\textsuperscript{17} A withered bloom holds greater potential of aesthetic absorption than a fresh one, in that while a fresh petal holds the promise of life, a withered one embraces the wholeness of it, representing the essence of the life that has been.\textsuperscript{18} There is also a sense of loneliness in sabi, a

Tone of sadness and desolation...primarily used to describe a mood, but also associated with images of a withered monochrome nature.\textsuperscript{19} A monochromatic nature that found an appropriate medium in the linear and tonal subtleties of sumi-e. Some characteristics of this monochrome character are evident in early ukiyo-e book illustration, but elsewhere, even in the earliest phases of the development of ukiyo-e paintings and single-sheet prints, a commitment to colour is manifest.

It is equally difficult to find any close accord between sabi and ukiyo-e. The whole concept of sabi is founded on the notion that in the evidence of the passage of time lies the essence of what has occurred during that time. For sabi the focus of the present should be on the essence of what has passed. The attentions of Edo audiences were focused not on the old, however, but on the new. They wanted to know about the newest play on the kabuki stage, the newest teahouse game or entertainment, or the newest face half-hidden behind the railings of a Yoshiwara brothel. There was a certain irony in the latter. A woman’s professional life in Yoshiwara was necessarily short – say, fifteen years – before her place, and often her identity, were assumed by a younger successor. In this sense, Yoshiwara, as a world of eternal youth, constituted something of a metaphor for the suspension of reality contrived by the ‘floating world’ in general. Edo society was driven be a thirst for novelty and change, and ukiyo-e artists responded to those needs by presenting a constantly changing sequence of actors, courtesans or social habits.

Closely associated with sabi, but narrower and more specific in its scope, is the concept of yūgen. Yūgen is most easily defined as ‘mystery and depth’, and is ‘expressive of desolation and rich mysterious beauty coupled with sadness’.\textsuperscript{20} The ideal of yūgen had originally been developed as a poetic aesthetic by Fujiwara Shunzei (1114 – 1204), but, as a notion that was consistent with so many of the tragic literary, historical and mythological themes that were represented in Japanese pictorial art, it corresponds easily with many of the themes selected for representation in ukiyo-e.\textsuperscript{21}

It may be relatively easy to locate a straightforward explanation of yūgen as ‘mystery and depth’, but it is a concept not without its subtleties, and through its implications of austerity and sublimity it has much in common with wabi-sabi:

When refinement is combined with pathos, there emerges another peculiarly Japanese beauty – yūgen. It would be infinitely more pathetic and moving to see a refined court noble, rather than a lowly rustic, suffering the kind of disaster no human being can escape. There is indeed unique beauty in the sight of a handsome, intelligent prince or a lovely, accomplished court lady going through intense grief as a result of human imperfectability; that beauty is yūgen. Thus Zeami, as we recall, defined yūgen as ‘elegance, calm, profundity, mixed with the feeling of mutability’.
When the element of calm grows larger in yūgen, there forms another type of beauty – austerity. The beauty of yūgen emerges when a graceful person, too sophisticated to have barbaric vigour for fighting, sadly resigns himself to fate; if the person resigns calmly and without sadness, the result would be Zeami’s austere beauty, sublimity. Austerity is a sensory effect felt by one who faces the dignity of a divine being, or of a man who has approached the essence of the universe by sublimating the human elements in himself. It is also the effect of Bassho’s sabi, which emerges when the personal is transformed into the impersonal. Both sublimity and sabi, being inhuman, have an overall effect of chilliness. One might add a bit of warmth to it by allowing a minimum of humanity; if one does, there springs up the beauty of wabi. Wabi can be seen as a moderate type of austerity.  

For Ueda Makōto then, yūgen is not just a discrete aesthetic value; it contributes to and shares in the character of wabi and sabi. Running through the concept of yūgen is a recurrent thread of pathos, and of sensitivity to pathos, or the sadness of beauty, that becomes manifest in the concept of aware, or mono no aware, literally, a sense of ‘the suffering in things’. From as early as the writing of The Tale of Genji right through to the Tokugawa period of ukiyo-e, the word aware had been used…to suggest the pathos inherent in the beauty of the outer world, a beauty that is inexorably fated to disappear together with the observer…Often the word appears in the phrase mono no aware, which roughly corresponds to lacrimae rerum, the pathos of things. It is when people perceive the connexion between beauty and sadness of the world that they most poignantly sense mono no aware.  

The Japanese viewer of a work imbued with a sense of aware could sense the pathos underlying the events represented in the work, but could feel it the more deeply for the implications it held of the ephemeral nature of his own life. Though yūgen and aware are compatible, they are quite different in character; the former is difficult to define precisely, the latter easier, since it generates an immediate emotional response in the viewer:  

The connection between the ideal of yūgen and that of aware is obvious, but there was a difference. The Heian poet felt aware when he saw wrinkles reflected in the mirror and realized that time was passing by and the years of his youth vanished. But this realization was in a sense the end of the emotion: it did not extend to the dark and mysterious regions of yūgen.  

A picture like the Chinese-style painted screen included in the Hikone Screen (Plate 2) could readily engender a sense of yūgen for its viewers. The soft, subtle tonal changes, the monochromatic mistiness of both Chinese and later Japanese Kanō school examples of this type of painting were deeply suggestive. Ukiyo-e images tended not to work in this way; they were more explicit in character. Lines and edges in ukiyo-e images were crisp and precise, fields of colour and pattern were flat, bold and sharply defined. Where ukiyo-e images were required to convey a sense of yūgen or of aware, they did so not through the suggestive nature of their stylistic character, but by making pictorial allusions to well-known narratives, ideas or historical events. Katsukawa Shuntei’s print of Tomomori and the Anchor (Plate 4), for example, would evoke, for its contemporary Japanese audience, both the tragic end of the historical person of Taira-no-Tomomori, and, by implication, the larger narrative, in its heavily and fancifully embellished theatrical form, of Yoshitsune senbonzakura – Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees.
Taira-no-Tomomori was one of the three leaders of the Heike clan against whom the young Minamoto-no-Yoshitsune had led a sequence of military victories culminating in the defeat of Tomomori and his Taira troops in the sea battle of Dan-no-Ura. Honourable in defeat, Tomomori seized a huge anchor, wound its rope about him, and leapt into the sea. Shuntei’s ukiyo-e illustration could clearly refer to the sense of aware generated by Tomomori’s end, but it can only hint at a more poetic sense of yūgen that might accompany deeper questions of life and death.

Yūgen and aware can be associated, in the most general sense, with themes of desolation and sadness, of the inevitability of tragic outcomes, the fragile and fleeting nature of life, and the nobility of defeat that are referred to in musha-e, like the Tomomori picture, and in kabuki-e or historical pictures. They might also be referred to, distantly, as evocative emblems, like the fragile sakura or cherry blossom, or themes like snow, moon and flowers. It may even be implied in images of the brothel district, in the wan and pensive demeanour of an Utamaro courtesan, or even in the virginal self-absorbed young girls of Harunobu. In both instances the implication is of the fleeting brevity and beauty of youth, and this is a very yūgen notion.

Elsewhere however it is difficult to locate any sense of yūgen in ukiyo-e. It does not relate in any way to the themes of frivolity, luxury or self-indulgence, or to representations of the mundane experiences of everyday life that were the mainstream preoccupations of ukiyo-e. And any reference to yūgen is compromised by the stylistic habits of ukiyo-e: its medium was altogether too direct, too explicit, too clear and precise to convey anything meaningful of the intuitive, dark, mysterious suggestion of yūgen.

Intimately enmeshed with the notion of wabi-sabi is that of shibui. Shibui is every bit as complex and subtly suggestive as wabi:

Many words were invented to describe the beauty that was to be the final criterion (in Tea), and of them all perhaps the most suggestive is the adjective shibui (with the noun shibusa), for which there is no exact English counterpart. Nearest to it, perhaps, are such adjectives as ‘austere’, ‘subdued’, and ‘restrained’, but to the Japanese the word is more complex, suggesting quietness, depth, simplicity and purity. The beauty it describes is introversive, the beauty of inner radiance. Another way of approaching its meanings is to consider its antonyms: ‘showy’, ‘gaudy’, ‘boastful’, and ‘vulgar’. Shibui suggests astringency and reticence, it recommends the quiet of monochrome, and it values poverty over wealth.

Shibui suggests equally difficult to relate to ukiyo-e. Particularly during the nineteenth century, qualities of austerity or quiet restraint seem almost impossible to locate in the theatrical and colourful images of the Utagawa school designers for example. On the contrary, the antonyms Yanagi Soetsu suggests for shibui – ‘showy’, ‘gaudy’, ‘boastful’, and even ‘vulgar’ seem entirely more in sympathy with ukiyo-e.

Running apparently counter to the restraint and understatement of wabi-sabi and their associated values was the notion of miyabi. Miyabi can be described as:

Courtliness, elegance, refinement. ‘The aesthetic ideal of life during the court tradition and particularly in the early classical period. In poetry, it meant the avoidance of the ugly and a tradition of glorious diction and good taste’.
Despite its associations with the Heian court, *miyabi* does not imply notions of indulgence or of the richness of elaborate ornament or luxury. It refers rather to values of understatement and reticence, to a sense of stylishness founded in a ‘rejection of society (that) was already being advocated in Japan by the Heian period.’\(^{29}\) It encouraged the adoption of carefully framed precision, spareness of means, lightness of touch, and restrained, dignified elegance. It is in this character of lightness and restraint that *miyabi* finds some accord with *wabi-sabi*. Its refinement was one of the ‘quiet pleasure’ of court manners.\(^{30}\)

The origins of *miyabi* in Heian court life may imply something of the luxury of *ukiyo-e*, but it is difficult to establish any really valid accord between the refined sensibility that underpinned the one and the self-indulgence of the other. Where *miyabi* favoured the highly stylized but apparently impenetrable movements of the *nō* theatre patronized by the privileged members of the court, *ukiyo-e* artists occupied themselves with the flamboyance, colour and noise of the popular *kabuki* theatre. Where the court women of Heian literature lived in elegant seclusion, the identities and activities of even the highest of Yoshiwara courtesans were made public knowledge through *ukiyo-e* prints. Where Heian lovemaking was a private (if habitually extra-marital) affair, the engagements of *shunga* were earthily, often crassly, detailed and explicit; frenetic rather than refined, often violent rather than gently polite and mutually considerate.

There were, of course, instances in which *ukiyo-e* artists represented courtly scenes in which elegant social interactions were described in appropriately refined ways. This occurred, for example, where *ukiyo-e* illustrated the literary classics or appropriated the poems, and often the personages, of the great poets.\(^{31}\) Even these references to court manners or habits were represented in the stylistic idiom of *ukiyo-e*. It was an idiom characterized by elaborate decoration and ornament, patterned complexity and linear flourish which the aesthetic of *miyabi* could never have tolerated.\(^{32}\) Similarly a little of the exclusivity of earlier court life was maintained by the ruling classes of Edo – evident in the socially constructed opposition of *tsū* and *yabo* for example. Life in the new capital was altogether more urbane and earthy than that of Nara or Kyōto. Such an opposition could never even have been conceived of in the earlier capitals, where the life of the privileged was so far removed from that of the rest of the population that the respective members of these two worlds would have been simply unable to have formed opinions of any sort about one another.\(^{33}\)

Why is there such an inconsistency between what appear to be broadly accepted aesthetic values like *wabi-sabi*, and the altogether more hedonistic aesthetic evident in *ukiyo-e*? Some would argue that tastes change, and that the concepts that underlay aesthetic judgment in 1650 had changed considerably by 1850.\(^{34}\) This is not quite so. The *wabi-sabi* ethos lasted well through the Tokugawa period, and does indeed survive today. It was perpetuated in architecture, in *sumi-e*, in *nō* and in verse, as well as in manners of austerity and restraint. A seed of this ethos survived also in the etymology of the word *ukiyo*, whose original Buddhist meaning denoted a ‘sorrowful, fleeting world’.

The problem really lies in the difficulty of applying concepts developed in relation to one set of practices – *nō*, *waka*, *zen*, *sumi-e*, calligraphy or *chanoyu* – to a different set of habits and practices. The floating world of Tokugawa Edo was almost alien to the entertainment worlds of the earlier capitals. The *kabuki* theatre, the brothel quarters, the teahouses, all encouraged a degree of self-indulgence and excess, for some citizens at least,
that had never been experienced before in Japan. This was reflected in the repeated attempts of government to control excessive behaviours through the regular publication of sumptuary edicts. This was the world that was represented in ukiyo-e and which generated a demand in its art works, not for the artless, the restrained, or the aged, but for novelty, flair, change, and slick, rich decoration.

There are other ways of describing broad or generalist models of aesthetic value. Sen Soshitsu XV for example describes four conditions: wa (harmony), kei (respect), sei (purity), and jaku (tranquility). He suggests that harmony can be achieved through rules, rituals and manners; respect is engendered through reverence and humility; purity leads to roji – ‘…the place for abandoning the entanglements of this world’; and through tranquility art can provide an antidote to the ‘bustle of life.’

Again, while apparently confirming popularly held notions about Japanese aesthetic ideals, these principles offer little in the way of explanation for ukiyo-e. Sen was referring here quite explicitly to chanoyu, and in doing so he was describing the aesthetic character of a highly contrived sequence of human interactions – a sequence of manners. The concepts of escape from the ‘entanglements’ and ‘bustle’ of the real world may seem to find some superficial accord with the notion of the floating world as an escape from the pressures of daily life – which indeed it was, for some at least. Where states of tranquility or purity were achieved through chanoyu it was because at its heart the pure aesthetic of Tea represented a complete negation of the worldly; in ukiyo, on the other hand, one achieved escape through one’s engagement with the world, an abandonment to the self-indulgent, hedonistic pleasures it offered.

Donald Keene describes a set of principles that might hold more promise for explaining Japanese art in general, and ukiyo-e in particular. He describes, and illustrates with readings from Kenko’s Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness) four aesthetic qualities: suggestion, irregularity, simplicity and perishability. Of these, suggestion seems particularly attractive for explaining ukiyo-e. Keene sees suggestion as the power to generate meaning; most ukiyo-e are meaning-loaded, and some carry complex layers of meaning. This is particularly the case with mitate-e, so-called ‘parody pictures’.

In Utamaro’s mitate-e series Komei bijin mitate Chūshingura, junimai Tsuzuki (The Chūshingura Drama Parodied by Famous Beauties, Plate 1) from c. 1795, we can find three levels of meaning. In the first print of the series, The Courtesan Tomimoto Toyohina as Kaoyo, we can see, in the first instance, two well-known courtesans from Yoshiwara. The key figures are not named (though those of the later works in this series are), but we can identify them:

The kneeling figure can be identified as Tomimoto Toyohina by the small crest of primulas on her shoulder and on her sleeve. A contemporary identity for the standing figure is difficult to locate precisely, but the character ‘Taka’ on the robe she holds suggests a reference to the myōseki Takao, one of the most prestigious in Yoshiwara, though the line had died out perhaps seventy years before this Utamaro series was published.

In the foreground and behind the two main figures we can identify emblems of their particular teahouse expertise – a samisen, a sake warmer, and a bonsai display. Behind them a third anonymous woman serves two tipsy male clients. On the first level then, Utamaro’s image is a representation of brothel life in Yoshiwara; music and talk, art and drunkenness, and, implicitly at least, sexual congress.
On a different level however, the print represents the Kabuto aratame scene of Act I, Tsurugaoka shinzen, of the popular kabuki drama Kanadehon Chūshingura. The mon on the curtain above the scene is that of the Ashikaga shōgun and in stage representations of the drama would be visible on the canvas pavilions erected to provide shelter during the celebrations attending the completion of the building of the shrine at Tsurugaoka. The kneeling figure represents Lady Kaoyo; the sake cup she holds represents the helmet of Nitta Yoshisada which she has been brought in to identify. The standing figure appears to be Ko no Moronao – the ‘taka’ character now a reference to the shōgun Ashikaga Takauji, for whom Moronao was chief councilor. The bonsai refers to the ‘Great Pine at Kamakura’ adjacent to which the new shrine had been built. The group in the rear is Lord Ashikaga Tadayoshi, younger brother of the shōgun Ashikaga Takauji, and his attendants. The landscape behind them represents the Kamakura coast which is the backdrop for the first act of the play.

On the third level the picture refers to the ‘Akō affair’, the historical events of the fourteenth day of the third month of 1701. The setting is now that of the court of the Tokugawa shōgun Tsunayoshi, and the standing figure is Kira Yoshinaka, the shōgun’s court official. It was the attack on Kira Yoshinaka by Asano Naganori, Lord of Akō in the province of Harima, that provoked the extraordinary sequence of events that led up to the killing of Kira and the mass seppuku of Asano Naganori’s forty-seven retainers at Senjakuji on the fourth day of the second month of 1703.

Ukiyo-e pictures were usually meaning-laden. In many instances their meanings were quite explicit, conveyed through particular signs, and Edo audiences knew the meanings for these signs. Every theatre-goer knew that a mon of concentric squares indicated that the actor represented was Ichikawa Danjūrō – the inscription of his name simply confirmed this, and elaborated on which particular generation of Danjūrō they were looking at. One did not have to engage actively in the pleasures of Shin Yoshiwara to know who its most famous beauties were. The mon of primulas, delicately interwoven into the pattern of the kimono fabric, was sufficient to indicate that one was looking at Tomimoto Toyohina in Utagara’s mitate-e representation. Elsewhere in the series a brocade pattern of flowers and fans indicates that the figure represented is the courtesan Hanaogi. A fan (obi), together with a flower (hana) was an alternative way of indicating her own name, and also ‘Ogiya’, that of the establishment for which she worked, and on which the word play of her professional name was founded.

These models could be more subtly suggestive - the word used here for flower, hana, refers more specifically, to reproductive parts of flora, and so alludes quite explicitly to her occupation in prostitution. Thus for a Japanese viewer at the end of the eighteenth century, the identity of Hanaogi conjured up whole layers of allusive meaning, about this woman, this establishment, or the habits and manners of the brothel quarters in general. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century audiences for ukiyo-e delighted in these rebus-like complexes, and could read their way through them with some ease.

The qualities of irregularity and simplicity described by Keene are really elaborations on the notions of imperfection and austerity that pertain to wabi and which are subject to the same objections as foundations for understanding ukiyo-e. We may find irregularity in ukiyo-e; less frequently, we may find something approaching simplicity. The former is apparent in asymmetrical compositions almost universally adopted in
representations of actors, historical heroes or courtesans. The problem is that the irregularity described by Keene is not quite the same thing as the asymmetry apparent in *ukiyo-e*. He is describing an irregularity born of carelessness: the asymmetry generated by the casual gesture of the potter’s hand, or the intuitive flick of the calligrapher’s brush. In *ukiyo-e* the irregularity of asymmetrical compositions, juxtapositions of figures of differing size, or the interaction of blocks of text and image is generated not through artlessness, but through artifice. *Ukiyo-e* compositions were carefully contrived, both in their reproduction of theatrical habit or devices like the *mie* pose, and in the development of their own distinctive graphic conventions.

The notion that perishability constitutes an aesthetic concept may seem odd to Western audiences for whom permanence seems to be central to the value and function of most art forms. *Ukiyo-e* prints were perishable: they faded easily, became rubbed or torn through constant handling, were burnt, discarded or just lost. They were treated as ephemera. This was not really what Keene meant by perishability however. In the first instance, prints could be replaced; more prints could be pulled off old blocks, blocks could be bought and sold, or re-cut, as they are even today. Secondly, *ukiyo-e* were not just woodblock prints. They included, in particular, paintings which, highly valued and treated with great care, were conceived as permanent, rather than temporary, art works. Most importantly however, for the aesthetes of *wabi-sabi*, the notion of perishability was founded in the notion of impermanence established in *sabi*. Implicit in the notion of perishability was an awareness of the passage of time and the impermanence of all things that provoked a sense of *aware*, of the pathos of life, in the same way that a vanitas painting might act as a *memento mori* for a seventeenth-century Dutch viewer. Though *ukiyo-e* images were much occupied with the representation, through the aesthetic of *yūgen*, of states of *aware*, the print itself was unrelated to this notion of the perishable. The throwaway status of an *ukiyo-e* print is not related to the Japanese notion of perishability.

II

Two other Japanese aesthetic concepts do appear to hold more promise for providing satisfactory explanations for *ukiyo-e*. These are *suki* and *iki*. Like *wabi* and *sabi*, *suki* is something of a portmanteau concept. It is an aesthetic of ‘subtle elegance’, of ‘aesthetic adventure beyond conventional standards, delight in the unusual, curious, or idiosyncratic’. An alternative explanation of *suki* describes it as ‘…taste or refinement but with a touch of eccentricity thrown in’; the notion of eccentricity is defined more precisely in terms of asymmetry or imbalance. Haga Koshiro then describes the notion of eccentricity more precisely both in the explicitly spatial terms of asymmetry or imbalance, and in terms of the idiosyncratic, or non-conformist character of *suki* behaviour or art. *Suki* also has a further dimension, a sort of artlessness - ‘…carrying things out in a relaxed, easy manner demonstrates good taste.’ The central character of *suki* is thus to be found in an interaction of the qualities of artlessness, subtle and refined elegance, and eccentricity, either as asymmetry or as idiosyncrasy.

Itō Teiji suggests that in practice *suki* could be embodied in an art work not only by the subtle interaction of all of these qualities, but when a single facet of this complex is evident. He detects in the *Hikone Screen* (Plate 2), for example, only one dimension of *suki*: ‘…only love of pleasure and creative freedom. All other meanings of the word were ignored.’ Two aspects of Itō Teiji’s (hereafter Itō) appraisal of the *Hikone Screen* seem
quite reasonable. His claim that the work marks a significant break with one tradition, and a starting point for a new one, which we might now identify as *ukiyo-e*, confirms a view that has been held, consistently, since Fenollosa’s time.\(^4\) Also, his acknowledgement of the screen’s pictorial focus on the various activities of the participants of the pleasure quarters certainly does hold true.

Ito’s claim that the work embodies only one aspect of *suki* is less tenable however. The painting is, rather, remarkable for embracing, even at such an early stage in the development of *ukiyo-e*, every aspect of the *suki* aesthetic. The quality that is most immediately evident is that of restraint, or restrained elegance. This quality is displayed not so much in the stylistic idioms in which the artist has couched this scene – the artist’s hand has certainly been exercised with restraint, but this has been tempered by the rich ground-field of gold and the elaborately decorative costumes – as in the activities and gestures of the figures he has represented. Each figure is quite self-contained, self-absorbed. The artist of the *Hikone Screen* has drawn upon a wide range of pictorial devices in order to establish and maintain an air of self-absorption for each. In pictorial terms, each figure is simply self-involved, each focused solely on what he or she is doing: tuning or playing the *samisen*, walking the dog, letter writing; even the three figures grouped closely around the *sugoroku* table fail to establish any visual or gestural intercourse. This separation of the individual figures is reinforced by the divergent paths of lines of sight – no figure engages the glance of any other – and by the directional disposition of the bodies. Every figure of the *Hikone Screen* is facing in a different direction, its axis established by that of the shoulders or the edge where the legs and buttocks contact with what we imagine to be the ground, and no figure is disposed in a direction that directly faces any other. The separation of the figures is further emphasized by the emptiness of the spaces between them, and by the meticulous brushwork which renders each figure quite inexpressive. The silence this contrives between the figures is emphasized still further, with the exception of the one pointing figure leaning on his sword at right, by the dignified composure maintained in each figure, by the artist’s minimalisation of gesture or gestural interaction, and the set, inexpressive faces of each figure. He has avoided the concomitant problem, that of the composition fracturing into an assemblage of smaller, self-contained ‘sub-pictures’, by situating all of the figures on the same plane, established by an expansive, unifying field of gold. He has generated a spatial tension by using repeated, but opposed and alternating, rhythmic curves sustained through the robes of each, and by introducing an increasing degree of pictorial complexity and intensity as the viewer scans the picture from lower right across to upper left.

The second key characteristic of *suki* is eccentricity – evident in the unusual, the idiosyncratic, that which broke new ground. The *Hikone Screen* exhibits this in four different ways, each of which was of particular significance for fixing, at this very early stage, the pictorial focus, and the literary and stylistic conventions that were to be sustained in *ukiyo-e* through the next two centuries.

In the first instance, the painter of the *Hikone Screen* established genre subjects as a valid pictorial focus for Japanese painters and draughtsmen. He turned away from traditionally important subjects – landscape, for example, or historical or virtuous Chinese themes – and trained his attention on the everyday activities of the pleasure quarters. The place itself is indeterminate – there is little even to suggest whether it is an inside or an outside scene. The artist is occupied only with representing the mundane activities of the figures: tuning and playing the *samisen*, playing *sugoroku*, serving tea, reading and writing.
letters, promenading, or making introductions. This was not the everyday urban world – not everyone was able to engage in pleasures like these. It does represent the more mundane and everyday aspects of life in that environment however, and in doing so establishes a precedent for subjects represented in book illustration, painting and printmaking, decorative illustrations in *kimono* patterns, lacquer-ware and metal-ware, that came to be accepted as typical of *ukiyo-e* style.

In the second instance, the artist establishes a stylistic habit that constituted a radical departure from the soft tonal veils of transparent ink of the earlier scroll and screen painters. Novel though this approach was, it was rapidly adopted by *ukiyo-e* artists and came to typify *ukiyo-e* design throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. This idiom is founded in the pictorial tension that is generated between the plain, featureless ground of gold, unrelieved by anything except the horizontal and vertical overlapping edges of the gold-leaf sheets, and the intensely patterned and coloured rich decoration of the figures. Running through each of these figures, and tying them together, implicitly at least, are a series of dancing, inter-weaving, rhythmic arabesques, contrived through the graceful folds of clothing, the softly directional limb or gesture, or the opposition of props like the sword and the dog-leash.

One of the unusual features of the *Hikone Screen* is the inclusion within its own composition of an image of a further six-fold screen, in the upper left-hand area. The inclusion of a screen picture within a screen painting was not new – it had been a common practice in Chinese painting for many years prior to the painting of the *Hikone Screen*. The device of a picture-within-a-picture in various other guises – as multi-narrative compositions, as composite diptych and triptych compositions, drawn in cartouches, or even in cartoon-like speech or thought ‘bubbles’ – was to become a typical, rather than an exceptional feature of *ukiyo-e* compositions in the future, and was to play a key role in facilitating the ways *ukiyo-e* images could convey complex and subtly allusive meanings.

The image of a screen within a screen-painting here is not just incidental. In it lies the clue to the key function of this painting: it is a *mitate-e*. *Mitate* pictures, sometimes referred to rather erroneously as ‘parody’ pictures, are pictures in which persons, events, or habits of an earlier time were re-presented in contemporary guise, or where contemporary events were reframed in the guise of earlier, historical precedents. The Utamaro *Chūshingura* series cited earlier is an example of *mitate-e*, and this pictorial type became one of the most popular in *ukiyo-e*.

The clue provided in the representation of the screen lies in its Chinese stylistic idiom – it may well be of Chinese origin, or it may be a Japanese Kanō school painting in the monochromatic and highly stylized Chinese manner; it does not really matter which, the reference is to Chinese painting, and through this to a particular theme of Chinese landscape painting:

The screen within the screen may be read as an abridged version of the Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers, a classic theme in Chinese and then Japanese painting, one commonly borrowed by Kanō artists. The mountainous landscape, misty and nebulous, represents a symbolic realm of intellectual escape for a samurai literatus.

Beyond this specific reference of the screen, the allusion of both it and the figures below it is to another specifically Chinese theme, that of the ‘Four Accomplishments’:
The activities of the figures in the left three panels of the screen allude to the elements of the Chinese painting theme of the Four Accomplishments or the Four Leisurably Pursuits: the koto or zither (Chinese qin), go, calligraphy, and painting. Here, instead of the traditional Chinese references, we discover men and women enjoying the shamisen, sugoroku (a backgammon-like game...), love letters, and a painting within a painting. This restatement of classic or age-old themes in the guise of up-to-date contemporary entertainments was later developed by ukiyo-e artists as a convention for the pictorial form of mitate-e. The Hikone Screen is thus a novel, complex and subtly allusive picture, and it anticipates much of the flavour of future ukiyo-e art, as genre painting, as a particular set of pictorial conventions, or as a picture with a particular function. Perhaps the most striking thing about the Hikone Screen however is a peculiarity of its pictorial character. For all the pleasurable hedonism that might attach to the roles of its characters, as entertainers in the pleasure quarters of Shimabara, none of them exhibit anything approaching pleasure: indeed, the figures represented here are remarkable for their impassivity, their complete lack of expression. For all the complexity of the flow of rhythmic arabesque line through the folds and patterns of each figure, and the pictorial tensions generated between them, they, and the composition as a whole, are remarkably undemonstrative; the picture is quite still. The later prints of the Utagawa school, and particularly those following the Meiji Restoration, tended towards the theatrical; figures were engaged in demonstrative gestures, compositions were tensely dynamic. During its earlier development however, ukiyo-e conformed to the precedents in Kyōto painting established in the Hikone Screen, in subject, idiom and function, but most markedly in this underlying pictorial character of impassivity and stillness.

In this respect the Hikone Screen is a radical artistic statement, cutting to the core of the aesthetics of Japanese figural representation. It anticipates the entire genre of ukiyo-e, where images tease the viewer by evocations of beauty, sensuality, and poetic mood while betraying little or no deeply felt individual emotion. The subtleties of the Hikone Screen are not always evident in ukiyo-e, but they are usually a characteristic of surimono prints. Surimono (literally: ‘printed thing’) were limited edition prints, produced in very small numbers, by the finest of craftsmen, using the very best of pigments and papers. Their designs often included kyōka or haiku, and they were usually published in conjunction with poetry competitions or recitals, or to commemorate special occasions such as birthdays, special meetings, or the arrival of important guests.

Ryūryūkyo Shinsai’s print of a woman, two children and a basket of seafood (Plate 3) demonstrates the subtleties of fine surimono in two ways, through its stylistic conventions, and through its iconographic references. In the broadest of terms the stylistic character of this work is little different from that of ukiyo-e prints in general – a clearly linear idiom, with surfaces of rich colour and pattern. Shinsai’s use of line is more delicate than might normally be found in ukiyo-zoshi illustrations or single sheet prints however. He weaves a softly, gently rhythmic skein through all three figures and the basket and seaweed, that is restrained rather than theatrical. His linear subtlety has been sustained by the block-cutter in the brushed-like variations of thickness and direction of the limbs and garments of the figures in particular, and by the printer, who has used a transparent dark grey rather than an intense black for the printing of the master or key-block. This has reproduced something of the delicate subtlety of sumi-e brushstroke in the lines of this print and has melded the linear qualities of the image quite nicely into the subtle softness
of its colour-surfaces, particularly in the soft pinks that inter-relate the figure at left, the seafood basket and the woman’s nipple, and the soft grey of the ground.

This image is also subtle in its allusions. The shellfish are awabi – abalone. The ama or diving women represented here were, for twentieth century European eyes, to become stereotyped emblems of sexual provocation – they dived almost naked, and this, combined with the exotic nature of one key aspect of their trade (pearl fishing) excited European imaginations. In Japan the reputation of ama girls was equally doubtful; from as early as the late thirteenth century ama were placed in the same class as yūjo and shirabyōshi – ‘singing girls’. For Japanese audiences the reference was even more subtle, and more romantic – the abalone was a reference, quite specifically, to unrequited love. The exposed breast serves as an ironic emphasis of this notion, rather than simply as a display of sexuality.

Elsewhere in ukiyo-e however, the elegance of the Hikone Screen or the subtlety of Shinsai’s eroticism is clearly absent; indeed, many later ukiyo-e seem to be characterized by the very opposite of subtlety. For most shunga prints for example, sexual acts are represented explicitly, in harsh detail, and often violently theatrical gesture. In kabuki prints actors are typically represented in melodramatic rather than delicately allusive pose. In courtesan images the luxury of the floating world is represented in richly contrasting colours and complex fields of pattern. In the delicate precision of Harunobu, the refined sensuality of Utamaro, or the artless evocation of Hokusai’s landscapes, suki is very much in evidence.

The second aesthetic concept of special interest for explaining ukiyo-e is iki. Iki was an experience of aesthetic consciousness that was almost contemporary with the development of ukiyo-e. It was born in Tokugawa period Edo and flourished, interdependently with the floating world, from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Iki provided Tokugawa aesthetes with an evaluative standard, intuited by sensibility, particularly the visual, and premised on wealth, pleasure and experience of life. Iki was urbane, (in Edo, tsū, in Kyōto and Ōsaka, sui, refer to the sense of urbane sophistication demonstrated by the male participants in iki relations), and characterized by a relational ‘dyadic’ quality.

Kuki Shūzō (hereafter Kuki) explains that the experience of iki is historically and ethnically specific, and acknowledges both the impossibility for outsiders in sharing in any comprehensive or satisfying way in what is essentially an intuitive and intangible experience, and the difficulty of locating iki in western languages. He suggests that the closest equivalents may be located in the French notions of ‘coquette’, ‘raffiné’, and, especially, ‘chic’:

…chic equally denotes iki and refined (jōhin) as essential elements and, in antithesis to conventional (yabo) and unrefined (gehin), it expresses the excellent (takuetsu) and the clever (senkō) of taste.

French words and concepts provided Kuki with a reasonably close approximation to the experience he was describing through the notion of iki – his own experience of the
French gay life during the early twentieth century constituted a sort of parallel world to that of *ukiyo*. It is more difficult to find synonyms in English. ‘Stylish’, ‘fashionable’, ‘tasteful’ or ‘dashing’ each conjure something of the essential flavour of *iki*, but fail to convey quite the hint of provocation located in the French equivalents. ‘Rakish’ might conjure something of the flavour of an *iki* countenance or posture, for example, alluding to notions of ‘fashionable’, ‘glittering’, or ‘gay’ that we commonly associate with the floating world. The same word, however, might equally allude to notions of ‘showy’, ‘dressy’, or ‘foppish’ and these concepts are quite inconsistent with the quiet, self-contained urbanity of *iki* behaviour.

More precisely, Kuki described three central and interdependent characteristics of *iki*. The first was *bitai*, or coquetry, the erotic tension generated from the potential of sexual relations between members of the opposite sex. *Bitai* is distinguished by its ‘playfulness’, ‘voluptuousness’, ‘raciness’ and ‘passion’, but could not be sustained after sexual congress had been achieved. The antithesis of *bitai*, associated with the achievement of sexual relations, is contained in the word *derori* that had been coined by Kishida Ryūsei in 1927:

No one can say precisely what it means but *derori* can evoke a flock of images. It has overtones of the abject, suggesting the sweet smell of decay – at once fascinating but repelling. Like the word *torori*, it refers to the glutinous stickiness of certain semiliquid foods and suggests a certain languid heaviness in people. Darkness and decadence are evoked as well...the coarse yet powerful sexuality of the(se) cheapest of prostitutes does capture well the feel of this complex and subtle term.

This notion of decadence seems quite consistent with the character and behaviours of the floating world, particularly to the attachment to the pleasures of drink and food and sexual indulgence. This decadence was equally present in *ukiyo-e* images, both in the subjects represented in them, and in pictorial characteristics, of languid sensuality in Utamaro’s pictures or light-hearted playfulness in those of Harunobu, or in the self-indulgent decorativeness of the later Utagawa prints that had been described, disparagingly, as decadent by most commentators since the later nineteenth century.

The second condition for *iki* was *ikiji*, the sense of ‘brave composure’ characterized by an ‘unimpeachable refinement’ and dignity in common between ‘smartness’, ‘dash’, and ‘affected bravado’ in behaviour, and also by the Edokko’s casually dismissive attitude towards thrift or monetary value. The third condition was *akirame*, that sense of urbane resignation, or:

…indifference which has renounced attachment and is based on a knowledge of fate. *Iki* must be urbane. It must be a well-formed and elegant disposition with good grace.

Underpinning these three conditions for *iki* are a sense of playfulness and purposelessness evident in characteristics of caprice, flirtatiousness or light-hearted disinterest, and a depth of experience of life that enables one to rise above the prosaic or mundane:

In other words, *iki* has its origin in the ‘world of suffering’ where ‘one’s body drifts in the light swirl of things, without floating free’.

Nishiyama Matsunosuke agrees on this tri-faceted character for *iki* but describes it in subtly different terms. Like Kuki he includes the quality of *bitai*, but for *ikiji* he
substitutes hari, and for akirame he refers to akanuke. Hari suggests strength of character, ‘a sharp, straightforward, coolly gallant manner that resisted all compromise, conciliation, and undue adroitness or tact.’ Hari had its origins in the samurai ethos of bushidō. Bitai

...implied a kind of eroticism; but more important was the maintenance of a sense of charm...Flirtatious allure and a light coquettishness were allowed so long as they remained untainted by any vulgar or wanton feeling. The quality of akanuke demanded an unpretentious air, a thorough familiarity with all aspects of life, and an unconcerned, unassuming character.

Like Kuki, Nishiyama Matsunosuke sees iki generated from the potentials and ‘subtle tensions in human relationships’, and locates it in the urbane, playful, metropolitan environment of Edo, and more specifically in Yoshiwara.

Central to Kuki’s explanation of iki is its relational character – consciousness or experience of iki is generated from the subtle tensions between its essential components rather than by the clear but simplistic demonstration of any one of them, or by tensions that occur in the playful and coquettish, but unconsummated, interaction between individuals. This relational model forms the foundation for Kuki’s expansion of his explanation of iki in which he clarifies the concept by comparing it to related concepts of ‘refined’, ‘showy’, ‘astringent’, and their opposites. Thus the refined (jōhin) is related to the unrefined (gehin); showy (hade) is contrasted with subdued (jimi) (here Kuki acknowledges the correspondence between jimi and the ‘resignation’ of iki and the ‘mellowed austerity’ of sabi); chic (iki) is contrasted with conventional (yabo); sweet (anami) is related to astringent (shibumi). Even conditions of taste such as anami and shibumi can be evident as characteristics of behaviour (and specifically of opposite states encountered in heterosexual relations) or represented in art works. Kuki sees astringency in colour, for example, in terms of sobriety or mellowness, particularly evident where pigments have been affected over time by tarnishing, or by fading; the latter is an instance of particular relevance for the delicate and fugitive vegetable dyes used in ukiyo-e prints.

Iki is distinctly different from each of these values but can be illuminated more satisfactorily by its relation to them. Thus, ‘...we can comprehend iki as one element in a system of taste with relations to other elements of that system.’ To facilitate the process of tracing these relations Kuki has devised a three-dimensional diagram which describes, in graphic form, the relations between all of these values. Using this graph we can find both the relations of opposing elements, and those which are related through some similarity or sympathy of character - hade (showy) and gehin (unrefined) for example. Thus the relation between iki and each of these elements can also be located. Perhaps even more usefully, Kuki’s graphic provides something of a foundation for relating iki to more ‘conventional’ Japanese aesthetic concepts. Sabi, or ‘mellowed austerity’ for example, can be located in the prismatic relation formed between ‘chic’, ‘refined’ and ‘subdued’; miyabi can be found within the relations between ‘refined’, ‘subdued’, and ‘astringent’. Kuki expands on the explanation to elucidate the relations between iki and ‘flavour’ (aji), ‘smart’ (otsu), ‘affectation’ (kiza), ‘amorousness’ (irropposa = coquette) and the concept of ‘raffiné’, or refinement.

Iki is, in the first instance, located in the tensions generated in heterosexual human relations, and so it can be observed in the characteristics of those relations. Thus it is evident in the subtly erotic intonations of voice. It is mainly evident through our sense of sight however, and can be observed in the gesture, posture or countenance of the figure –
particularly in subtly asymmetrical pose, restrained but moderately provocative gesture or passivity of response. Exaggeration, obviousness, lewdness fail to elicit a sense of *iki*; rather ‘...for the whole body the *iki* expression is that which lightly disorders posture’ – as is evident for example in the subtle sensibilities of Torii Kiyonaga’s figures.  

*iki* is evident also in quite specific situations – where the body is glimpsed through diaphanous silk for example. Here Kuki suggests the example of images of women who have just left the bath:

Carrying the recollection of recent nudity, and having just casually dressed in a simple bath robe, this pose completes the expression of coquetry and its formal cause.  

It may be located also in particular characteristics of physiognomy – particularly ‘the slender and willow-waisted pose’ so favoured by Utamaro, and so disliked by Fenollosa.

Although Kuki offers examples of the representation of these elements of *iki* in *ukiyo-e* prints, referring specifically to Torii Kiyonaga, Suzuki Harunobu and Kitagawa Utamaro, he acknowledges that this phenomenon is not a straightforward matter of realistic representation. ‘The formal cause of *iki* is a-realistic identity’: *ukiyo-e* images are constructions of ideals – the slim facial physiognomy of Bunka and Bunsei for example, or in the predilection for the sidelong and the down-cast glance in three-quarter portrait formats – rather than individual representations. A sense of *iki* is most evident in the subtleties of personal presentation and dress. *iki* is evident, for example, in light, rather than thick, make-up; in informal hairstyles, or in slightly wet hair, particularly where a little hangs loose at the back of the neck. It is evident in states of dress in, for example, ‘...the kimono décolletage which reveals the nape of the neck’ or in ‘lifting a kimono skirt by the left hand’, or in the casual exposure of feet, shins or calves.

Asō Isoji sees the evidence of this manifestation of *iki* in the quality of *tsū*:

The aesthetic consciousness of *iki* is part of a refined culture of sensation; *tsū* is this aesthetic consciousness put into practice. In other words, *tsū* is the behaviour brought forth by *iki*. Asō, however, interprets the relation of *iki* and *tsū* as the inside and outside of the same thing or the relation of waves to water. He claims that if something is to be *iki* it must also be *tsū* and up-to-date. *Tsū* thus becomes a condition for *iki*.  

*Tsū* meant ‘knowledgeable person’. Closely related was *daitsu*, ‘grand connoisseur’. Both *tsū* and *daitsu* were closely associated with the amateur, but highly literate and refined and highly sensible participants of the world of Yoshiwara, the theatre, and the teahouses. Their opposite was *yabo*, or *hankatsu* (the phony).  

Kuki extends his explanation into a description of how *iki* might take artistic form, particularly in what he refers to as the ‘free arts’ – design, architecture and music. Kuki seems to define these domains as ‘free arts’ because they are not bound to functions of pictorial representation or narrative exposition. In painting, sculpture and poetry some quality of *iki* may be evident – in the patterned dress or the gesture of the subject represented for example – but in Kuki’s non-representational ‘free arts’ it could more readily and more comprehensively be a property of the formal relations of design. His explanation of the presence of *iki* in design is of particular interest for *ukiyo-e*. Kuki refers specifically to fabric design, and in doing so alludes, implicitly, to the close relation between *iki* and *fūryū*, or fashionability. Here the ‘relational quality of coquetry’ and the qualities of ‘brave composure’ and ‘resignation’ find their most perfect expression in
designs founded in parallel lines. In general the vertical stripe expresses *iki* more clearly and more satisfactorily than the horizontal stripe, through its qualities of lightness (‘in the vertical stripe there is the lightness of “willow branches” and the light rain which gravitates’) and because a greater sense of the relational and of ‘intricate precision’ is evident in the vertical than in the horizontal. *Iki* is also evident, though less emphatically so, in patterns generated from, or related to, stripes, in lattice criss-cross or checked patterns for example, or when simple shapes or schema (he suggests the ‘measuring box’ schema, the tie-dyed mesh pattern, the thunderbolt zig-zag and the *genji* schema as appropriate shapes), are arranged in rows in parallel lines.

Curving, arabesque, or wave-like forms on the other hand, whether evident in patterns or in compositional structures that disrupt the formal arrangement of stripe or lattice patterns, are unlikely to express *iki*. Curvilinear designs are too showy, and they tend to disrupt the quieter ‘cool disinterest’ of formal relationships of straight-line patterns. The *iki* that is most evident in the quiet, formal and abstract patterns of the vertical stripe is not present in pictorial designs. Thus the vertical striped or geometrically patterned fabrics popular in Edo during the later eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century are *iki*, while the extravagantly designed complex pictorial stencil-printed *kimono* decorations of carp, hens, flowers, birds, or even whole genre or landscape compositions so popular during the later nineteenth century are most decidedly not.

*Iki* may also pertain to qualities of colour, particularly where those qualities are directly relational to *iki* patterns. In general, showy colour cannot be considered to be *iki*, but quiet, weakly saturated, cool or dark colour may be. Kuki specifies three general categories of colour – mouse grey, tea brown and azure – that can be expressive of *iki*. Within each of these categories he defines a range of finer distinctions.

In architecture Kuki finds *iki* in the quality of coquetry quietly evident in the relations of contrasting materials and spatial compartments, and of colour and illumination. In Japanese music the relational tension that generates the experience of *iki* is located in subtly contrived displacements of scale and between rhythm and melody.

Kuki’s focus on what he called the ‘free arts’ seems to have been motivated by his desire to find the purest expressions of *iki* – the ‘essence of *iki*’. The pictorial or narrative content of the representational arts can only obscure or detract from the delicate tensional interplay of elements that generates *iki*. Some elements of *iki* are, nevertheless, evident in *ukiyo-e* prints. *Iki* and *ukiyo-e* were both generated within the same milieu, and from the same sources, after all. Thus we can find some measure of *iki* in *ukiyo-e*, as references made in the subjects represented in images for example, in patterns and colours, particularly in the *kimono* designs which *ukiyo-e* so often promoted, or in the countenance, gesture and interplay of the figures represented, particularly those of courtesans and their clients.

Thus Katsukawa Shuntei’s image of Tomomori would immediately have suggested to Edo audiences that quality of *iki* which Kuki describes as *ikiji*, or ‘brave composure’, and which Asō Isoji describes as *hari* or ‘uncompromising strength of character’. Tomomori has lost in battle, and is now taking the most honourable course of action. He is doing so calmly and resolutely. These qualities are generated in the work not simply by the caricature-like representation of unswerving commitment on Tomomori’s face, or the powerful tension generated in the inter-relationship between limbs and anchor, but in the
relations between the two figures. Where Tomomori’s gestures represent cool strength and resolution, those of the figure reeling behind him are weak, uncoordinated and twisted. Where Tomomori stares resolutely ahead, the other figure gazes helplessly up into the air. Where Tomomori’s strength is implicit in his scale – his body extends almost the entire height of the composition – the second figure’s weakness is evident in his smaller scale and position in the lower half of the composition.

The quality that generates a sense of *iki* most clearly is the moment of the narrative Shuntei has chosen to depict. He might have represented the visually spectacular moment immediately preceding this one, that of Tomomori’s defeat in battle. He might equally, and also to theatrical advantage, have represented the point immediately following this, where Tomomori plunges to his death in the waves beyond. Instead he chose to represent that short moment before this where Tomomori stands, poised with the huge anchor above his head, precisely at the moment where he is about to throw himself over. Shuntei’s representation of this is *iki* because it is suffused with the potential for the ultimate commitment that Tomomori is about to perform, rather than presenting the outcome itself. Potential is a fundamental condition for *iki*; consummation is its antithesis.

It is this condition of potential rather than consummation that allows Shinsai’s *surimono* to be suffused with a sense of gentle eroticism. The *iki* quality in Shinsai’s composition lies also in the tensions between opposites – between the stylistic refinement of line and colour and the unrefined nature of the pictorial subject, particularly evident in the exaggerated gestures of the two boys; between the subdued greys, tea browns and blues, and the showy qualities of bright red and arabesque line; between the chic/iki coquettishness of the gesture of the woman and the conventional, or *yabo*, character of the prosaic pictorial subject. Most *iki* of all in Shinsai’s composition are the delicately poised gestures of the wrists and hands of the woman, and the little glimpses of naked flesh in her wrists, feet and ankles and partly exposed breast.

The same inherently *iki* focus on delicately poised gesture is also evident in the carefully contrived position of wrists, hands and fingers in Eishō’s image of two courtesans. Again any implication of eroticism or *bitai* is one of potential rather than one of realization – for the greater part of the audience for *ukiyo-e* prints, like this one, the courtesans depicted represented a world of sexual encounters that would remain completely out of their reach; a world of potential rather than one of actual experience. This sense of *bitai* is enhanced by the relations contrived between the figures – Eishō has carefully arranged them on subtly different planes, the one at the left slightly closer to the picture plane than that at right; each figure is quite self absorbed – neither their glances nor their gestures interact. The picture is one of the potential for some engagement between the two women, not of the engagement itself.

The image also reflects both *iki* and non-*iki* fashions of the day. The *kimono* of the figure at right is not only fashioned from fabric patterned with vertical parallel lines, but the stripes are in alternating black-blue and inky grey-blue, reflected also in the colours of the planter behind her. The sense of *iki* of the *kimono* is enhanced by its relation to showier rose-pink floral pattern of the woman’s *obi*, but this is, in its turn, tempered by the *iki* character of the subtly geometric arrangement of its embossed patterns. The woman at left is dressed in similarly *iki* fashion, in a light lemon tea-brown *kimono*, on which the blue-green circular decorations are arranged on *iki* straight-line principles. Her *obi* likewise
provides a contrasting relation to the *kimono*, both in its showier rose-pink and in its more complex pattern.

The *iki* fashions worn by the courtesans in Eishō’s print are evident also in Utamaro’s image of Yamauba and Kintaro. Yamauba is dressed in an elegantly fashionable plum-red brown and grey over-*kimono* over a blue-grey checked pattern *kimono*; Kintaro in blue-grey chequer-board pattern. In Yamauba’s case the subdued quality of these patterns is emphasised by contrast with the more ornate and showy patterns of her *obi*, and the rich red of her linings; in Kintaro’s by the bright red stripes of his narrow sash. The sense of *bitai* or allure that underlies this composition is generated principally from the manner of Utamaro’s representation of Yamauba. The wild mountain woman who adopted the strong boy Kintaro is represented here as her almost complete opposite – the most up-to-date and elegant of Yoshiwara courtesans. Her *bitai* character is evident not just in her clothes or in her fashionably decadent occupation, but in her ornate coiffure, immaculate but for a tiny *iki* strand hanging down at the left, and implicitly erotic through the exposure of the tufts of hair at the nape of her neck, by the delicately refined gesture of her hands, her exposed and naked foot, and, most of all, by the attenuated elongation of her figure – about as extreme in the exaggeration of physical height as Utamaro ever attempted. Again the delicate poise of her countenance is emphasized by contrast, here with the explicit violence of Kintaro’s actions; he is shown crushing a rat between a brick and a lacquer tray.

Besides its sense of *bitai* Utamaro’s composition contains, both explicitly and implicitly, qualities of *ikiji* or *hari*. The secondary subject represented in the inset cartouche is alluded to in the resolute and uncompromising strength implicit in Kintaro’s actions, and even in the form of the tail of the rat, and in the composure evident in Yamauba’s countenance faced by this act of violence, and the burning taper she is holding. The subject of the inset image is the mid-twelfth century General Minamoto no Yoshimasa slaying the Nue, or chimera. The rat’s tail constitutes a reference to the snake tail of the Nue (the Nue had the head of a monkey, the trunk of a dog, the legs of a tiger, and the tail of a snake). The reference therefore is quite explicitly to the strength and unswerving resolution of the *samurai* committing great feats of strength against terrifying odds. By the end of the eighteenth century it was also, implicitly, a statement about the status of the *samurai*, whose real power had by then been almost completely lost, and an acknowledgement and reminder of the absolute power of the Tokugawa bakufu. Since the seat of Tokugawa control was centred in the new capital they had established in Edo, and since the courtesan is represented in the most up-to-date (*fūryū*) attire, the composition as a whole is a complex and subtle representation of the urbanity of *akirame* or *akanuke* that was now firmly associated with this world.

As the nineteenth century developed, the *iki* character of *ukiyo-e* became progressively compromised. Ippōsai Kuniyasu was born in 1794, trained as a pupil of Utagawa Toyokuni I, and worked until 1832, twenty-six years after Utamaro completed his image of Yamauba and Kintaro. The beginnings of a significant shift in the stylistic character in *ukiyo-e* are evident in his work earlier than in the better known pupils of Toyokuni like Kunisada I. Kuniyasu’s print of a single standing courtesan exhibits some characteristics of *iki*: the subject, for example, is the playful nature of floating world pleasures, and the handful of emblems – a poem, smoking paraphernalia, some books of *shunga* and a toy dog, serve to emphasise the light-hearted pleasurable experiences that underpin the experience of *bitai*; the absence of any other background information
introduces the requisite relational contrast to the detail of these features. The patterns in the *kimono* are arranged, in the *iki* manner, in vertical stripes, and coloured mainly in *iki* charcoal grey and cool blue.

Elsewhere however the *iki* self-possession of design is counter-balanced by showiness. The *obi*, ostensibly *iki* in its chequered pattern, is over-bright and ornate; the toy dog is fussy and imprecise; the coiffure is a little ornate, as is the lacquer work on the tobacco box. These things might provide a nice counterpoint to the picture’s more *iki* qualities, but the one element that really contrives to counteract the effectiveness of the *iki* is the over-aggressive arabesque sweep of the figure’s pose, and the complex curve of her hemline, *obi* and sleeves. Kuniyasu is using the same device that Utamaro uses to describe the coyness of the coquette. Where the curves of Utamaro’s backs are subtly, but tensely, simple however, the twisting contra-posto of Kuniyasu’s figure is so exaggerated as to lose any sense of tension or subtlety. Kuniyasu’s image, restrained in some ways, contains the seeds of the mannerism and over-ornate decoration that were to characterize the final decadent phase of the development of *ukiyo-e*.

Utagawa Kunisato’s double-figure composition was published almost forty years after Kuniyasu’s work, and only a decade before the end of the Tokugawa period that had nurtured the development of both the floating world and *ukiyo-e*. Kunisato’s work contains a few vestiges of the qualities Kuki defined as particularly *iki*, but these are now almost completely subsumed by qualities of *hade* (showy), *kiza* (affectation), or *anami* (sweet). The *iki* is just evident in the blues and browns of the woman’s *kimono* and *obi*, and the male figure’s *happi* coat, and there is a trace of it also in the linear arrangement of the lozenge emblems that decorate the garments of both figures. Elsewhere however, any sense of *iki* is displaced by confusions of design and over-elaborate decoration. The curving arch of the back of the female figure, for example, lightly suggestive of erotic allure in Utamaro, more obviously so in Kuniyasu, here becomes lost in an over complex network of arabesques which lace not only through her *kimono* and *obi* but extend also through the male figure behind. The result in the woman’s figure is that any suggestion of posture or countenance of the body itself is completely submerged in the complex linear curves of the clothing; even the hands and feet are hidden by the then fashionably ultra-long sleeves and hems, and the tensions that might be generated through the twist of the torso are lost underneath not one, but two highly decorated *obi*.

In a similar fashion the linear arrangement of the lozenge patterns is broken up and confused by the intermeshing curves of the garments. In fact this pattern, together with the arabesques that run through both figures, serves to knit them together into a single form. It is this element more than any other that disposes of any sense of *iki*. *Iki* is generated not from the union between members of the opposite sex, but from the potential for such a union. Consequently potential can only be suggested in graphic terms where a spatial tension is generated between two separate, but spatially related, bodies. Here the confusion between the two counteracts any such sense of graphic tension.\(^{85}\)

The lozenge patterns themselves would, in any case, have lost any sense of *iki*. Kuki favours checks and lozenge patterns because they emphasise a certain sense of linearity. Here the lozenges are each occupied by complex floral or geometric patterns, in both positive and negative form, and in over-bright yellow and pastel blue. This sense of over-ornate and showy decoration also colours the elaborate star pattern of the lining of the woman’s garments, the leaf pattern of the man’s undergarment, the wave pattern of the
woman’s, and both the geometric patterns of the woman’s larger obi and the intricate pattern of star-fish suckers on the smaller, supplementary obi. In an earlier ukiyo-e composition one might have found the cluster of sakura blossom at the top of the picture to have been suggestive of Kuki’s ‘brave composure’ (ikiji) or resignation (akirame). In the context of this composition however, it simply provides an extension to the undisciplined showiness and saccharine sweetness of the rest of the composition. Where the earlier ukiyo-e compositions had provided something of an indication of the experience of iki, those of the later part of the Tokugawa era are characterised by all of those qualities that Kuki sets in opposition to iki. Where for early ukiyo-e these qualities tend, where present, to emphasise the ‘iki-ness’ of compositions, in later compositions they confuse, subsume, or simply replace it.

III

Explanations of suki describe it in terms of ‘subtle elegance’ and ‘eccentricity’. They expand on its ‘delight in the unusual, curious or idiosyncratic’ and on its ‘love of pleasure and creative freedom’. It is easy to establish an accord between the ‘love of pleasure’ of suki and some of the preoccupations of ukiyo-e. It is particularly evident in ‘genre’ pictures which represented the hedonistic nature of so many floating world activities – moon-viewing parties, cherry blossom-viewing expeditions, the activities of the teahouses, music, dance, kyōka competitions, or pleasure cruises on the Sumida River. It is even more evident where the participants are recognizable denizens of the floating world, or even more specifically, of Yoshiwara – courtesans represented promenading through streets or gardens together with their entourages of kamuro and servants for example. Such scenes not only represented a world of hedonistic pleasure, but they were presented in a stylistic idiom entirely consistent with that world – lightly playful, colourful and highly decorative.

The ‘eccentricity’ of suki also finds some expression in the stylistic character of ukiyo-e. An understanding of ‘eccentricity’ as ‘unusual’, ‘curious’ or ‘idiosyncratic’ can find some expression in the apparently limitless range of curiosities of human form or image documented in Hokusai’s manga for example. Elsewhere however something of a quality of ‘ordinariness’ pertains to ukiyo-e prints. They were, in themselves, the most ordinary of things, and, where they represented genre or landscape scenes, they reflected the most ordinary of worlds. Even when ukiyo-e artists depicted social environments common citizens could not engage in personally, these were not worlds of which they were unaware.

More importantly perhaps, something of the quality of ‘subtle elegance’ that lies right at the heart of suki could also be found in ukiyo-e, and can provide some foundation for explaining ukiyo-e prints. This quality of elegance is evident in the subtlety and economy of means, the precise delicacy of line and surface (both in terms of colour and of texture), and inventiveness of pictorial allusion that are particularly a characteristic of print forms like surimono. The Shinsai image is a good example of this. Subtle elegance is also evident in the subtlety and restraint of gesture, and the self-absorptive quietness of the still, delicately poised figures of Harunobu’s ukiyo-e prints.

The concept of suki is less appropriate for describing or explaining other, especially later, examples of ukiyo-e however. Words like ‘subtle elegance’, ‘delicate poise’,
‘restraint’, and ‘economy’ have little in common with the iconographic and stylistic excesses of the artists of the later nineteenth century for example, particularly later print designers like Kuniyoshi, Yoshitoshi, Chikanobu or Kunichika.

There are two key areas in which the character of ukiyo-e was at odds with the ethos of suki: they are the pictorial subjects represented in certain classes of ukiyo-e, and the stylistic idioms of the later schools. The pictorial focus of one whole field of ukiyo-e prints was the kabuki theatre, and the world of the theatre was characterized, perhaps more than in any other aspect of life in Edo, by excess. It had been so since its earliest days – the close relation between the occupations of acting and prostitution in the early days of kabuki had encouraged the ban on females from the stage, for example, and even then the association continued with male actors. The kabuki play itself was excessive, characterized by long ten or eleven hour performances, complex stage sets, impossible narratives, caricature-like characters, loud music and sound effects and harshly contrasting bright fields of colour; the kabuki theatre was quite incompatible with the notion of suki.

Excess applied equally to methods of acting. Battle scenes, amorous moments or complex human interactions were often choreographed into complex, visually confusing, dance sequences. Gestures and movements were often highly exaggerated, excessively expressive and melodramatic, if only to ensure they remained clearly visible in every part of the dark interior of the theatre. This expressive excess is nowhere more evident than in the mie poses which punctuated the kabuki narrative:

The mie, a strong physical pose, is unique to kabuki theatre. There are hundreds of different mie, but typically the actor plants his feet in a firm position, sets his torso, locks his arms outward, rotates the head, and freezes motionless for several seconds. The actor draws all of his energy inward, centers it in the motionless body, and in that ‘frozen moment’ projects the full force of his character’s physical presence out to the audience. The strongest of mie is one eye crossed over the other (nirami) for added force. The mie is then relaxed and the scene continues.87

Excess also came to be typical of the private lives of kabuki actors. Like film stars today many actors assumed larger-than-life personas for their publics – often emphasized by extravagances of life-style and inordinate degrees of influence on the artistic decision-making processes of the theatre. The ukiyo-e print played a key part in the generation and maintenance of such personas.

The quality of excess evident in the representations of theatrical subjects could also colour straightforward genre scenes. It is evident for example in Hokusai’s earthy, sometimes ribald, sometimes vulgar, and sometimes almost surreal visions of the lives of the common folk, particularly those in rural settings. These images seem humorous and charmingly poetic to western audiences today, but in nineteenth-century Japan they represented a world most Edokko would have preferred to have kept at arms length. The representation of dirt, honest toil and human imperfection was not, in any way, suki.

A decidedly non-suki character also colours many other representations of human interaction. Even in everyday scenes figures are often depicted struggling dramatically against the forces of rain and wind, or tottering under the weight of huge loads, or riding horses at breakneck speed. And in the representation of intimate union, in the shunga prints ukiyo-e artists resorted to exaggerations of physiology and extremes of contortion that would defy the most flexible of bodies.
The second area of excess in ukiyo-e is evident in the stylistic mannerisms which, from the early nineteenth century onwards, became increasingly inconsistent with the concept of suki. This was evident in the increasing complexity of line in ukiyo-e prints throughout the century. During the eighteenth century the linear contours of ukiyo-e prints had been crisply precise, restrained and economical. During the nineteenth century the linear character of prints became increasingly complex – fussy detail confused, rather than enriched, contours; arabesques overlapped, enmeshed and then tangled. Increasingly the demonstrative application of the skills of the block-cutter and the printer over-rode any notion of expressive economy of line.

This quality of excess also came to characterize spatial relations and inter-relations of figures. The delicate tension generated by the asymmetrical arrangements of the eighteenth century becomes, by the mid-nineteenth century, the confused jumble evident in Kunisato’s print, or the exaggerated and mannered chaos of Chikanobu or Kunichika actor prints. Where Harunobu’s figures were poised delicately in a single moment of time, Kuniyoshi’s or Yoshitoshi’s warriors lunge powerfully, leap dynamically, and crash violently together. Similarly, where Harunobu’s women are purse-lipped and silently self-absorbed, Kuniyoshi’s samurai scream, their faces contorted, crossed-eyes popping out of their sockets and mouths frozen in rictus-like grimaces.

This stylistic excess is most evident in the decorative qualities of colour, pattern and surface. Increasingly, throughout the nineteenth century, the focus on the decorative that had always been characteristic of ukiyo-e became less an issue of graphic order and more one of the detailed representation of the most ornate patterns, the complex overlays of the richest colours and the finest designs, and the increasingly inventive application of novel decorative effects – gauffrage (embossed) printing, mica prints, the addition of metals and metallic oxides, and even ‘trick’ prints with hidden images, or little opening doors and windows like advent calendars. This focus on decorative novelty had the advantage of taking the skills of the technicians of the production of ukiyo-e – the cutters, printers, papermakers – to their very highest level, but it was also at the expense of clarity, subtlety or economy.

These qualities were not inconsistent with the fashions and social mores that prevailed throughout this time, but they were, increasingly, incompatible with the gentle elegance demanded by an aesthetic like suki. Conversely therefore, suki becomes an increasingly inappropriate measure or foundation for providing explanations for ukiyo-e.

Of the two concepts of suki and iki, it is the latter notion that seems to bear the closest relation to ukiyo-e. Its sense of bitai, whether understood as ‘coquetry’, as ‘erotic allure’ or as ‘playfulness’, or as the fashionably up-to-date of fūryū is perfectly in accord both with the manners, habits and appearances of the floating world, and particularly Yoshiwara, and with their representation in ukiyo-e prints. Its sense of ikiji, or ‘cool, proud spirit, brave composure’, is as relevant to the representation of a Yoshiwara courtesan as it is to the representation of Japan’s tragic warrior heroes in illustrations of literary, historical, mythological or theatrical narratives. Its sense of akirame, or ‘resignation’, conforms as nicely to the older Buddhist understanding of ukiyo as ‘sorrowful world’ as it does to the world-wise urbanity of Edo’s pleasure quarters.
The tidiness of this fit is hardly surprising. *Iki* and *ukiyo* developed hand-in-hand, within the same cultural environment. All three dimensions of *iki* were fundamental values of the floating world, and all three were easily referred to in the art of *ukiyo-e*. Thus *iki* contributes to the particular pictorial character of *ukiyo-e* images, and can contribute to our understanding of them:

*Iki* thus designates, on one hand, an essential aspect of Japanese taste and, on the other hand, an aesthetic standard for an evaluation of taste, which can be applied to all kinds of style, both in cultural objects and in human behaviour.  

The problem some would find in *iki* is the apparent specificity of its field of reference. *Iki* appears to refer, quite specifically, to the aesthetic consciousness of the floating world, and perhaps even more narrowly to the brothel quarters of Yoshiwara:

The objects Kuki depicted are specific to the narrowly circumscribed world of the Edo pleasure quarters: the enticing gestures of geisha, the colours and patterns of their clothing, interiors suggestive of short-lived liaisons, the *shamisen* music that drifted out of teahouses and Kabuki theatres.

Certainly this is exactly the world in which *iki* developed, but by the later eighteenth century the floating world had come to embrace a broader range of experiences than the narrowly defined sensual activities of Yoshiwara. And even there, poetry, dance, music or literature were as important components of the notion of ‘sensual play’ as sexual dalliance. On the contrary therefore, the key attraction of *iki* is that it is much more inclusive than other concepts. It finds its principal expression in human interaction – in manners of speech, gesture or countenance, in habits of dress and comportment, and in the subtly, playfully provocative behavioural interplay between the sexes. It can equally be evident in, and can contribute to explanations for, a broad range of objects: textile or fabric patterns (most obviously in woven or printed decorations of vertical stripes), and in the designs not only of *kimono*, but also of such apparently prosaic garments as fireman’s jackets, fans, hair ornaments, illustrated *ninjo-bon* (love story books), children’s games and toys, smoking paraphernalia, and even the presentation of food.

This quality was of special importance for *ukiyo-e*. The central problem of concepts like *suki* and *yūgen* was the narrowness of their scope in relation to *ukiyo-e*: they could explain some categories of *ukiyo-e* prints, but not all of them. *Iki* could provide explanations for a much broader range of works. In terms of pictorial subject for example, it could be related to courtesan images, to genre scenes (often the same thing), to warrior images, illustrations of historical, mythological or theatrical narratives, actor portraits, humorous scenes, landscapes and travel pictures. More importantly, it could explain not only what Fenollosa and his successors thought of as the ‘classical’ period of *ukiyo-e* production, but also works of the later ‘decadent’ phase. Thus *iki* provides as valid a foundation for explaining the later Utagawa School works of Kunichika, Kunisada, Chikanobu or Kuniyoshi as it does for Moronobu, Harunobu, Kiyonaga or Utamaro. Similarly, *iki* can provide as valid a foundation for evaluating the works of the lesser known and less regarded of *ukiyo-e* artists – barely remembered figures like Ipposai Kuniyasu or Utagawa Kunisato for example – as it does for the giants of the history of the genre – Hokusai, Utamaro or Sharaku.

Equally importantly, an experience or understanding of *iki* is not exclusive of other aesthetic concepts. To a greater or lesser degree *iki* experience may be informed by experience of *suki* or *yūgen* for example. Kuki, in creating a structural framework for the
explanation of the ‘extensional structure’ of *iki*, in its relation to other aesthetic concepts (*hade, jimi, yabo, shibumi* and so forth), provides a structure in which both *iki* and non-*iki* objects can be positioned. This structure thus allows us to place *ukiyo-e* in relation to concepts which might otherwise seem quite antithetical to it, but in such a way as to open avenues for developing new, relational, explanations for it.

The third advantage of *iki* for explaining *ukiyo-e* lies in the way we can understand it. Although Kuki subjects *iki* to the most systematic of analysis, he is always insistent that the analysis and enumeration of the constituent aspects of *iki* cannot in themselves generate a satisfactory, comprehensive or equivalent understanding of it. *Iki* must be experienced. It has no exact equivalents, and it cannot be explained in any other way than by direct experience. The experience of *iki* is subjective and it is intangible:

> In fact, the argument of ‘*Iki* no kozo’ rests squarely on the conviction that artworks ‘express’ subjective ‘experience’, and further, that experience can be ‘understood’ because of a fundamental unity between the one who understands and the one who gives expression.92

Thus *iki* constitutes a precise parallel, in life and behaviour, for the nature of the experience we have of artworks, and as such it forms a particularly useful foundation for explaining that experience.93

What is potentially valuable for framing explanations for art works, or at least for explaining our responses to artworks, also generates something of a problem however. Kuki’s method of explanation of *iki* takes the form of a rigorous process of logical analysis. This method allows us to see, in some detail, the ‘components’ of *iki* experience, but, no matter how detailed the analysis is, it cannot stand as an equivalent substitute for that experience. The sum of *iki* is worth more than its parts, and there are no clearly equivalent experiences to be found in other contexts. Kuki acknowledges the problem both in his introduction and in his concluding remarks:

> The abstract conceptual moments of transformation we have been able to obtain in our analysis of *iki* do nothing more than indicate certain aspects of the concrete *iki*. *Iki* can be analyzed into individual conceptual moments but we cannot in reverse constitute the being of *iki* with them…For this reason there is an incommensurable gap between the *iki* as an assembly of conceptual moments and the *iki* as experiential meaning. In other words, there is a sharp distinction between the potentiality and actuality of *iki*’s logical expression. The reason why we think we can constitute the being of *iki* by combining the abstract conceptual moments of transformation obtained through analysis, is because we already carry *iki* with us experientially.94

The deepest problem here is that *iki* sensibility is beyond our reach. *Iki* was, quite specifically, an aesthetic consciousness of the floating world. It was, as Kuki notes, a distinctively Japanese, distinctively Edo, and specifically late eighteenth-century to mid-nineteenth-century phenomenon.95

One charge that has been leveled at Kuki’s explanation of *iki* is that it is too narrowly focused on the aesthetic experience of Edo, that it is too narrowly ‘ultranationalistic’ in motive and form, and that Kuki has somehow ‘displaced’ the nineteenth-century aesthetic into a twentieth-century political context.96 Certainly Kuki was working, in Japan, at a time when the nation itself, after more than fifty years of
attempted Westernisation, imperial expansionism and renewed xenophobia, was preoccupied with redefining its own national identity. The tension between Western and Oriental experience evident in Kuki’s own life may well have provided the motive for his attempts to describe a specifically Japanese aesthetic.

This argument does Kuki something of a disservice however. In the first place, ‘Iki’ no kozo is a much more complex and subtle project than a political statement of national identity. In the second, such an argument has little consequence for the validity of Kuki’s project: one area of Japanese cultural experience that had, to date, received no satisfactory explanation was that of Edo; Kuki chose specifically to explain this cultural experience, drawn to it, quite possibly, because he saw in this last pre-Meiji period of Japanese history something of a state of ‘pure’ Japanese culture, unpolluted by contact with the West, and perhaps also through his personal sympathy for the ethos of iki. Coincidentally, iki is of some interest for explaining ukiyo-e.

A more interesting problem of Kuki’s analysis is the apparent incommensurability of iki and pictorial composition. Kuki’s awareness of this problem is evident in his distinction between the ‘subjective’ ‘free arts’ in which iki could flourish, and the ‘objective’ ‘concrete representation’ of painting, sculpture and poetry in which it could not. This is not to say that we cannot locate iki in painting – quite the reverse: ‘…painting and sculpture can completely express the natural form of iki as content.’ Thus a particularly iki textile pattern, or colour, or combination of the two, may be worn by a figure in an ukiyo-e image. In this sense iki is present in the dress of Eisho’s courtesans, or in Yamauba’s kimono in Utamaro’s print. This sort of reference is hardly surprising, since one function of ukiyo-e prints was the commercial promotion of make-up, textiles and kimono fashions. In these instances we can assume that the artists reference to iki qualities may be quite intentional.

In a similar way the figures in an ukiyo-e image may be seen to have iki countenance, to engage in iki gestures or interactions, or to be in an iki state of déshabillé. In a different way the images of Tomomori or Tomimoto Toyohina may refer to an iki act or an iki profession; we need to reach more deeply into our knowledge and values of the Tokugawa era – our cultural stock – to see this.

Kuki also allows that we can identify iki qualities in the formal relations or material character of paintings:

For example, in painting the fact that a picture has a schematic outline, that the colouring is not thick, and that it is an uncomplicated design, can be the condition for a form appropriate to the expression of iki.

Kuki suggests, however, that the problem with figurative images is that pictorial content may obscure iki (as it does, for example, in the Kunisato composition), or that pictorial content may displace iki as the primary object of interest or absorption. In any case the reference to iki sense through content or idiom is the expression of iki in only a narrow sense. In the subjective ‘free arts’, on the other hand, iki can be embraced into the whole of the form – Kuki refers here to:

…the complete materialization of iki as pure art form,…since subjective art is barely able to handle concrete iki as content, it entrusts the whole responsibility of expression to abstract form itself. As a result the art form of iki is expressed in a vivid form.
Consequently, art forms which can express iki must be sought mainly within the formative principles of subjective art, that is, within the free arts.100

One final problem attaches to Kuki’s apparent insistence on a rule-bound foundation for iki. Kuki’s analysis yields a lexicon of minutely detailed conditions for iki, in life, in design, in architecture and in music. These conditions determine whether an experience can be iki or not. The problem here lies in the inconsistency between a notion of rule governed practice in art on the one hand, and the insistence on playfulness as a fundamental condition of iki, and of originality or the individuality of endeavour in artistic pursuits, on the other.

A part of the answer to this problem might be found in the correspondence in mid-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Edo between the notion of a rule-bound aesthetic, and that of rule-bound etiquettes for social engagement that were so prevalent in all aspects of life, and which were held to be especially important in Yoshiwara. The problem of rules and art is a bigger one than this suggests however, and will be confronted in the next chapter.

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1 Donald Keene, among others, has made this observation. Accepting that concepts of taste varied radically over time, and through differing social groups, Keene notes that the importance of aesthetic considerations is evident in things as trivial as the provision of flowers in public transport, the wrapping of purchases, the presentation of food, or the cult of cherry blossom viewing. He notes the origins of this sense of aestheticism in the tenth century and its gradual ‘spread from the court to the provinces, and from the upper classes to the commoners.’ Donald Keene, ‘Some Japanese Landscapes’ in Keene, Appreciations of Japanese Culture, Tōkyō, London, New York: Kodansha International, 1981, pp. 11 – 13.

James Jackson Jarves locates the origins of this aestheticism in a profound sensitivity to beauty in nature: ‘Regarding nature, the Japanese manifest a very sensitive aesthetic conscience. Believing it to be the most satisfactory source of enjoyment, whether by itself or transfigured by art, they study to secure her best in multiform ways, with no end of variations and inventions. It is this wholesome habit of mind which has prevented them from stagnating like the Chinese, despite kindred faiths and equally changeless codes and customs. Their love of nature being at the bottom of their love of art, the two are so mingled as to save them from the grosser materialisms of their neighbours, and to reserve in them a perpetual juvenescence of feeling, elasticity of temperament, quickness of intellect, almost Arcadian simplicity of life, and general goodness of disposition.’ James Jackson Jarves, A Glimpse at the Art of Japan, 1876, Rutland, Vermont and Tōkyō: Charles E. Tuttle and Company, 1984 edition, pp. 115 – 116.

2 Ivan Morris elaborates on the origins of this acute sensibility or ‘cult of beauty’ amongst the ‘good people’ of the aristocracy and court of Heian Japan: ‘The immense leisure enjoyed by members of the upper classes allowed them to indulge in a minute cultivation of taste. Their sophisticated aesthetic code applied even to the smallest details, such as the precise shade of the blossom to which one attached a letter or the precise nuance of scent that one should use for a particular occasion…Not only did the rule of taste extend to every sphere of life and apply to the smallest details, but (with the single exception of good birth) it took primacy over everything else. Artistic sensibility was more highly valued than ethical goodness.’ Ivan Morris, The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan, London: Penguin, 1969, pp. 206 – 207.


6 Note, for example, Itō Teiji’s explanation of suki, as ‘subtle elegance’, as aesthetic occupation with ‘the unusual, curious or idiosyncratic’ on the one hand, and the alternative dictionary meaning of suki as the verb for ‘to like’ (or to love) on the other. Itō Teiji, ‘The Essence of Japanese Beauty’ in Itō Teiji, Tanaka Itō and
Itō Teiji claims that the *Hikone Screen*, for example, exhibits only one of the accepted qualities of suki, that of a ‘love of pleasure and creative freedom’. Itō Teiji, 1993, p. 12.

7 The creators of the new culture naturally chose selectively from the various meanings of *wabi*, *sabi* and *suki*, adding from time to time original and singular meanings of their own. Itō Teiji, 1993, p. 12 and f. A description of the evolution of the aesthetic of *chanoyu*, and of indigenous Japanese concepts of beauty, follows.

8 Haga Koshiro’s explanation of *wabi*, for example, is dependent on an acceptance of the interconnectedness of *wabi*, *sabi* and *suki*, and of these aesthetic principles with *yojo* and *yūgen*, with ideals of nō, with moral and social principles established by the Chinese scholars Confucius, Lao Tzu and Hsün Tsu, and with Muromachi sumi-e. Haga Koshiro, ‘The *Wabi* aesthetic through the Ages’, in Nancy Hume ed., *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 245 – 278.


12 Haga Koshiro, 1995, pp. 245 – 249. Here Haga Koshiro traces, through the etymology of *wabi* and *wabiru*, even more subtle nuances of meaning embracing ‘disappointment, frustration and poverty’ for example, and establishing a strong spiritual thread in its character: ‘*wabi* means to transform material insufficiency so that one discovers in it a world of spiritual freedom unbounded by material things. It means not being trapped by worldly values but finding a tranquil serenity apart from the world.’ Haga Koshiro, 1995, p. 246.

13 Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, ‘Chado Bunka no Seikaku’ in Haga Koshiro, 1995, p. 250


15 Itō Teiji: 1993, p. 7. Teiji also describes the relation of *sabi* to the natural world: ‘Appreciation of *sabi* confirms the natural cycle of organic life – that what is created from the earth finally returns to the earth and nothing is ever complete. *Sabi* is true to the natural cycle of birth and rebirth’.

16 As demonstrated in Shinkei, *Oi no Kurigoto*, Haga Koshiro, 1995, p. 263. The inclusion here of ‘chilliness’ may seem incongruous, but it can be conceived, in part, in terms of a sense of distance, or disengagement, or impersonality: ‘…the effect of Basho’s *sabi*, which emerges when the personal is transformed into the impersonal. Both sublimity and *sabi*, being inhuman, have an overall effect if chilliness’. Ueda Makōto, 1991, p. 223.

17 ‘I once asked my Zen master, Goto Zuigen, about the meaning of the related term, *sabi*. He told me to look at a pond in the temple precincts. I followed his instruction, looking at the waters for a long while then returned. He asked whether I understood, and I confessed that I did not. He told me to look again.

This time I went to the edge of the pond and selected a large rock on which I could sit in meditation. It was mid-winter, and the water’s surface was covered with the withered leaves of the lotuses. Suddenly I realized that the flowers had not simply dried up, but that they embodied, in their decomposition, the fullness of life that would emerge again in their natural beauty’.


21 Ueda Makōto, 1997, pp. 222 – 223. A rather more poetic and suggestive, but far less certain, explanation of *yūgen* is offered by the monk Šōtetsu: ‘*Yūgen* can be apprehended by the mind, but it cannot be expressed in words. Its quality may be suggested by the sight of a thin cloud veiling the moon or by autumn mist swathing the scarlet leaves on a mountain-side. If one is asked where in these sights lies the *yūgen*, one cannot say, and it is not surprising that a man who fails to understand this truth is likely to prefer the sight of a perfectly clear, cloudless sky. It is quite impossible to explain wherein lies the interest or the remarkable nature of *yūgen*’. Šōtetsu, in Keene, 1978, p. 16.


23 Morris, 1969, p. 208. Note also from de Bary: ‘In old texts we find it (*aware*) first used as an explanation of surprise or delight, man’s natural reaction to what an early western critic of Japanese literature

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(Ivan Morris) called the “ahness” of things, but gradually it came to be used adjectivally, usually to mean “pleasant” or “interesting”. One scholar who analysed the uses of aware in the Manyōshū, the great eighteenth-century collection of poetry, discovered that an aware emotion was most often evoked in the poets by hearing the melancholy calls of birds and beasts. An inscription from the year 763 contains the word aware used to describe the writer’s emotions on seeing the spring rain. Gradually, therefore, aware came to be tinged with sadness. By the time of The Tale of Genji only the lower classes (or the upper classes in moments of great stress) used the word aware as a simple exclamation: elsewhere it expressed a gentle sorrow, adding not so much a meaning as a colour or a perfume to a sentence. It bespoke the sensitive poet’s awareness of a sight or sound, of its beauty and its perishability. It was probably inevitable that with the steady heightening of the sensitivity of poets to the world around them the tone of sadness deepened.” De Bary, 1995, p. 44.

25 ‘In its widest sense (aware) was an interjection or adjective referring to the emotional quality inherent in objects, people, nature, and art, and by extension it applied to a person’s internal response to emotional aspects of the external world…Buddhist doctrines about the evanescence of all living things naturally influenced this particular content of the word, but the stress in aware was always on direct emotional experience rather than on religious understanding. Aware never entirely lost its simple interjectional sense of “Ah!”’. Morris, 1969, pp. 207 – 208.

29 Hago Kishiro, 1993, p. 266.
30 ‘Miyabi was perhaps the most inclusive term for describing the aesthetics of the Heian period. It was applied in particular to the quiet pleasures which, supposedly at least, could only be savoured by the aristocrat whose tastes had been educated to them – a spray of plum blossoms, the elusive perfume of a rare wood, the delicate blending of colours in a robe. In lovemaking too, the “refined” tastes of the court revealed themselves. A man might first be attracted to a woman by catching a glimpse of her sleeve, carelessly but elegantly draped from a carriage window, or by seeing a note in her calligraphy, or by hearing her play a lute one night in the dark.’ Theodore de Bary, ‘The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics I’, 1995, p. 46.
31 As, for example, in Chobunshai Eishi’s portrait illustrations for the publication of a carefully contrived poetry competition between the Thirty-Six Immortal Women Poets. See Andrew J. Pekarik, The Thirty-Six Immortal Women Poets: a Poetry Album With Illustrations by Chobunshai Eishi, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1991.
32 ‘The influence of miyabi was not wholly beneficial, it must be admitted. In refining and polishing down the cruder emotions such as may be found in the Manyōshū, it severely limited the range of Japanese poetry and art. Miyabi led poets to shun the crude, the rustic, the unseemly, but in doing so it tended to remove or dilute real feeling.’ De Bary, ‘Japanese Aesthetics I’, 1995, p. 46.
33 See, for example, the totally cloistered life described in the diaries of court women of Nara or Kyōto. For an example, note Sei Shonagon, trs., Ivan Morris, The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, London: Folio Society, 1979.
34 ‘Part of the difficulty in attempting to establish the typical words used by Tokugawa writers in making aesthetic judgments stems from the fact that there was no uniformity. That is, we have no reason to suppose that the touch-stone of taste in 1650 remained such in 1850, or that the ideals which guided a chronicler of the glories of the gay quarters were the same as for a poet living in a tranquil hermitage.’ De Bary: ‘Japanese Aesthetics III’, Hume, 1995, p. 69.
37 Alternatively ‘comparison’ or ‘allusion’ pictures. For a discussion see Timothy Clark, ‘Mitate-e, Some Thoughts and a Summary of Recent Writings’, in Impressions, 19; 1997, pp. 6 – 27.
40 ‘It is not easy to say “flower” in Japanese. The difficulty has to do with the Japanese insistence upon the specific in the observation and description of nature. In the best short dictionary of Japanese language the
first definition of hana, informing us that it refers to the reproductive parts of the higher flora, seems to satisfy the need for a general term. The second definition is an extension of the first, covering the branch at the end of which the hana appears. It is with the third and fourth that trouble begins: hana, without qualification, becomes the cherry blossom and the plum blossom. Edward Seidensticker, ‘The Japanese and Nature, With Special Reference to The Tale of Genji’ in Seidensticker, This Country Japan, Tōkyō, New York and London: Kodansha International, 1979, p. 1. Note also in the use of cherry blossom, or sakura, as an emblem of the fallen warrior, a further allusion to Chūshingura, and particularly to the tragic, but inevitable, seppuku of Enya Hangan.

41 ‘Originally expressing attraction, fascination and curiosity, suki is aesthetic adventure beyond conventional standards, delight in the unusual, curious or idiosyncratic. Initially, suki seems to have expressed an idea of beauty that was heretical and unorthodox. The shōgun Ashikaga Yoshinori (1399 - 1441) was a patron of the arts known for his revolt against old and established aesthetic rules. His salon was receptive to bold and new ideas that were to become firmly established in the sixteenth century as what we might describe as “subtle elegance”. Many today are devotees of suki, the pursuit of beauty in unconventional forms and guises, but their search continues to be faithful to the quality of subtle elegance, which circumscribes the ageless essence of suki.’ Itō Teiji, 1993, p. 7.

42 ‘From early times much has been made in chanoyu of the word suki, meaning taste or refinement with a hint of eccentricity thrown in. It is found in such combinations as wabi-suki (wabi-taste), sukisha (man of taste), sukiya (tearoom) and suki dogu (fine utensils). The author of Zen-cha Roku praises suki as the “very essence of chanoyu” and devotes a whole chapter to its elucidation. There the original meaning of suki is given as “a form in which the parts are eccentric and do not match”. It is further explained as lacking essential parity, being asymmetrical, unbalanced. The true man of taste, sukisha, it asserts, is “one who does not march in step with the world, who does not bend to worldly concerns, who does not cherish conformity; an eccentric who takes pleasure when things do not go as he might expect them to.”

The structure of the tearoom is also used to illustrate suki: “Pine pillars, bamboo joists, left as they are, curved and straight, square and round, up and down, left and right, new and old, light and heavy, long and short, broad and narrow, repaired where chipped, patched where torn. Everything at odds, nothing matching. This irregular beauty of suki, too, is an aspect of the beauty of wabi’. Haga Koshiro, 1995, p. 248.


44 ‘One of the best known (screen paintings) is a screen passed down by the Ii family, lords of the Hikone domain (present-day Shiga prefecture). The screen, which has been designated a national treasure, depicts these women, in their fanciful costumes and hairstyles and displaying numerously ingeniously designed accessories, on a gold background. It was executed in delicate brushwork of a decadent style. Of the meanings of suki described above, (see note 37) the screen exhibits only love of pleasure and creative freedom. All the other meanings of the word were ignored. In this way, the cultural vanguard of the new age picked out from the fabric of existing culture the threads from which they proceeded to weave a new and distinctive aesthetic.’ Itō Teiji, 1993, p. 12.

45 Fenollosa was quite emphatic in his assertion that the Hikone Screen was the seminal work of ukiyo-e. This claim was confirmed for Fenollosa by his conviction that the screen had been painted by Iwasa Matabei – in his view the first ukiyo-e artist. While it is now widely accepted that this work was not painted by Matabei, we can still acknowledge its key place in the early developments of ukiyo-e, and the precedents established in its focus on genre subjects, and on the ‘floating world’ in particular, and on its introduction of new stylistic idioms and spatial devices. See Sandy Kita, The Last Tosa: Iwasa Katsumochi Matabei, Bridge to Ukiyo-e, Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999, pp. 44 – 50.


51 ‘For the Japanese, abalone has been an important shellfish since antiquity. Whereas HAMAGURI, the Japanese clam with its matching pair of shells, has been a symbol of marital harmony, abalone, because of its single shell, has long been used by poets as a symbol of unrequited love.’ (Ironically, abalone diving is

52 The principle source for this and the following observations on iki is Kuki Shūzō, *‘Iki’ no Közō (The Structure of Iki)*, trans., John Clark, Sydney: The Power Institute, 1997. Other sources which provide a critique of Kuki Shūzō’s work will be mentioned in later footnotes, but an alternative, and slightly later explanation can be found in Asō Isoji’s *Iki/Tsū*, referred to in Nishiyama Matsunosuke, *Edo Culture: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600 – 1868*, trans., and ed., Gerald Groemer, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997.

53 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 32.
56 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 41. See also Kuki’s note 45, p. 136 for his understanding of the sense of resignation in Buddhist terms of ‘awareness’ and ‘enlightenment’.

58 Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 54.
59 Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 54.
60 Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 55.
61 Kuki Shūzō’s original draft was, in fact, titled ‘The Essence of Iki’.
62 This particular instance emphasizes the urban locality and urbane character of iki. Yabo means, literally, ‘to live in the fields’ (cf. yabu = rustic man) or more generally ‘countrified’ or ‘not urbane’. Alternatively iki may be read as ‘town-style’ (ie. Edo-style) as against the ‘household-style’ of yabo. Preference for either iki or yabo is a matter of taste, but for the cognoscenti or literati of Yoshiwara or Nihonbashi the taste was very clearly for iki.
63 In a later footnote Kuki Shūzō expands on the particular relationship between iki and these two more literal qualities of taste. He identifies chic (sui) as sour, located midway between sweet and astringent, where the opposition of the two states is relieved (for example by the reduction of astringent to ‘subdued’) the sugary sweet remains. Later still Kuki extends the explanation to identify astringent with ‘stillness’. Kuki Shūzō 1997, pp. 140 – 141.
64 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 63.
66 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 73.
67 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 75. Kuki suggests Harunobu as the master of the representation of this particular state.
68 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 76.
69 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 79.
70 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 81.
71 Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997; and note that in the focus on the notion of the ‘up-to-date’ there is a reference to the notion of fūryū, which underpins one whole class of ukiyo-e, that of mitate-e.
73 By ‘free arts’ Kuki Shūzō is referring to art forms which are not bound to a function of pictorial representation or narrative exposition. In painting, sculpture, and poetry qualities of iki may be evident – in the dress of the subject represented for example – but in Kuki’s ‘free arts’ it can more readily and more comprehensively be a property of the formal relations of elements of the medium itself. See Kuki Shūzō, 1997, pp. 85 – 86.
74 Generally speaking, fūryū may be taken to mean ‘fashionably up-to-date’. Its connotations are richer and more complex however – Philip Harries asserts that it suggests ‘elegance, refinement, taste and style’, and that its compass can be extended to include ‘…the elaborate courtliness of the Heian period, to the austere restraint of the tea ceremony, and to the gaudy display of medieval popular dance, where refinement has become lavishness and “putting on the style”’. Philip Harries, ‘Fūryū, a Concept of Elegance in Pre-Modern Literature’, in Gordon Daniels, ed., *Europe Interprets Japan*, Tenterden, Kent: Paul Norbury Publications, 1984, p. 137.
75 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 87.
76 Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 89.
77 Kuki Shūzō does allow several instances in which horizontal stripes may exhibit iki – where the horizontal stripe has a ‘reciprocal relation to the vertical stripe’ for example, or where it bears a ‘reciprocal relation to
the form of the whole scene” – through its relation to a particular compositional structural principle, or where it might provide a certain freshness or relief from the monotony of sensation engendered by persistently vertical patterns. Kuki Shūzō, 1997, pp. 89 – 90.


Within the category of grey or ‘ash-white’ for example Kuki lists a variety of nuances – ‘Fukugawa mouse grey, silver mouse grey, indigo mouse grey, lacquer black mouse grey, crimson mouse grey’ etc. With blues he prefers the cooler to the warmer hues – particularly dark blue and indigo, blue-tinted purples, or greenish browns. He defines an even wider range of *iki* browns, including those named after the abstract quality of the colour itself, such as ‘whitish straw brown, grey-blue brown, lemon-yellow brown…’, ‘those named after the object bearing the colour: wood warbler [greenish brown], siskin [yellowish green], black kite bird [auburn], smoked bamboo [red grayish-black]…’, or those named after the preferences of certain actors – ‘Shikan [reddish deep brown], Rikan [blackish deep brown-tinged blue]’ etc. Kuki: 1997, pp. 97 – 99. Note also Ernest Fenollosa’s observation of the role of dove greys as a defining factor for the elegance of Shigemasa’s *ukiyo-e* prints. Fenollosa, 1912, Vol. 2, p. 193.


Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 54. See footnote 56 for *ikiji* as ‘brave composure’.

It is easy to assume that the pleasures of Yoshiwara were enjoyed by most Edokko; this was not really the case, except, perhaps, vicariously. Some floating world experiences were accessible for the masses – a cheap *kabuki* ticket cost about the same as a bowl of noodles for example, and an *ukiyo-e* print could be obtained for tiny sums – sometimes in cents rather than dollars. The masses could also seek their sexual indulgence with prostitutes elsewhere in the unlicensed districts, but those of Yoshiwara were less available. The highest regarded *tayu* were sometimes known as ‘castle-topplers’, in a dual reference to their ability to reduce even the most enthusiastic of their clients to a state of replete exhaustion, and to their potential to bankrupt the most secure of family fortunes in sometimes a handful of visits: ‘The basic price for engaging one of the highest-ranking courtesans was 3 gold *bu* (4 *bu* = 1 gold *ryō*), but based on figures given in a manuscript, *Nama-giki sōshi*, thought to date from the early 1780s, Nakano Mitsutoshi has calculated that the total cost once the entertainment expenses were added would be about 5 gold *ryō* and 1 *bu*, which he suggests would be about 400,000 yen (about £1,600, including tips) at 1980 prices.’ Timothy Clark, *ukiyo-e Paintings in the British Museum*, London: British Museum Press, 1992, p. 16.

Since Yoshiwara etiquettes obliged that any actual sexual encounter be preceded by a number of courtesy visits, the total cost of even a single sexual engagement could be enormous.

This sense of tension between separate figures is recognized also in the spatial conventions of the *kabuki* theatre, where, particularly at those key points where actors move into the highly theatrical *mie* pose, each actor occupies his own separate and clearly defined space.

*Sakura*, or cherry blossom, was the shortest-lived of the tree blossoms, a brief display of intense beauty followed by an inevitable disintegration. As such it has long been held in Japan as an emblem of the beautiful brevity of human life. It can refer explicitly to the warrior fallen in battle – a beautiful and noble death of one in the prime of his life – or less precisely to the death of the young. As such it implies the potential beauty of life, rather than its consummation, together with a sense of the rightness, courageous acceptance of, and resignation to fate. These qualities are alluded to in poems like the following verse by Ono no Komachi:

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Hana no iro ha
utsurinikeri na
itazura ni
wa ga mi yo ni furu
nagame seshi ma ni
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The colour of the flowers
Has faded indeed
In vain
Have I passed through the world
While gazing at the falling rains.

As Joshua Mostow notes the reference to flowers here is quite specifically to cherry blossoms, and the metaphor of the faded blossom refers not just to the broader concept of the passing of life, but quite specifically and poignantly in this instance to the decline of Komachi’s own charms.
This is a broader understanding of iki-in-practice than some. Nishiyama Matsunosuke, for example, sees iki to be implicitly gender-specific: ‘…iki was the aesthetic consciousness typified by courtesans (yūjo) and female geisha; the model of tsū, by contrast, was found among pleasure seekers who actively fostered the development of iki – that is, the men who frequented the pleasure districts. Tsū was their model of cultivation and their principle of behaviour. In the world of play iki represented the utmost refinement of the culture that women used to captivate men; tsū was the principle of behaviour typified by men who best understood the iki qualities of such women.’ Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 60. In Nishiyama’s explanation the experience of iki is very much limited to the brothel quarters of Yoshiwara.

That works by later or lesser artists might be iki is a little more conditional however. The later Utagawa artists might certainly have represented iki themes, habits, gestures or decorative patterns. The theatrical character that underlay the melodramatic exaggerations of figure and gesture are, on the other hand, decidedly not-iki.

Pincus, 1996, p. 65. Elsewhere Pincus suggests that this incompatibility between the rigorous logic of rational analysis and the immediacy of experience of iki renders Kuki’s argument invalid: ‘The contradictions that shadow “Iki” no kozo became palpable in a linguistic fissure running through the text. The title itself already suggests an unlikely alliance between two disparate languages: Iki, a word with its roots in the popular culture of late Edo, expresses an appreciation of style in a colloquial, even performative, mode; kozo, or structure, a weighty analytic term of more recent origin, suggests the continuing dialogue of Japanese intellectuals with Western knowledge...What such doubts often imply is that Western methods, far from innocent, violate the “Japaneseness” of the subject in question...Heidegger strongly suggested that Kuki’s attempt to “say the essential nature of Eastasian art” was already betrayed by the discriminating language of Western aesthetics...yet, proposed Karatani, even as Kuki discovered the distinctiveness of Edo, he had already buried it beneath epistemological categories derived from the West...Both philosophers, charges Karatani, imposed a “despotic system” on the cultural or spiritual disposition they hoped to rescue from the ravages of modernity. In both cases that “despotic system” harboured ideological potential for imperialism and nationalist fanaticism...the form of Kuki’s inquiry conferred a meaning that was in no way ideologically neutral’. Pincus, ‘In a Labyrinth of Western Desire: Kuki Shūzō and the Discovery of Japanese Being’, in Misao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, eds., Japan in the World, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 232 – 234.

Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 113. This observation was also made by Robert Adams. Adams notes that the difficulty – perhaps impossibility – of devising any really satisfying explanation of iki is a concomitant of the philosophical method which Kuki has followed: ‘Simply put, the founding insight of the Kyōto School, following the lead of Nishida Kitārō, was that logical analysis, because of its reductive nature, fails to capture the essential attribute of the objects it studies: their living reality. And this incompleteness of analytical knowledge leaves it worth less than the real things that become its objects.

Kuki’s adherence to this tenet is evident, and it adds a layer of complexity to his study of iki. On the one hand, in the conclusion to the book, where he assessed the methodological implications of the study, Kuki makes the following observation, which clearly denies the possibility of logical closure...on the other hand, the study itself attempts to adjust what Kuki has termed impossible, by defining iki so precisely that no play is left in the definiendum’ Robert W. Adams, ‘Reflections on Japanese Taste: The Structure of Iki by Kuki Shūzō’, Monumenta Nipponica: Studies in Japanese Culture, Tōkyō: Sophia University, 53; no. 1, 1988, p. 123. In other words, iki is more than the sum of its parts, and Kuki’s analytical enumeration of those parts, no matter how precise and detailed, will always be a less than complete account.

Nakano Hajimu suggests the problem is even more fundamental than one of cultural and historical isolation from the experience of iki: ‘...as it fundamentally represents a mental phenomenon, iki can only be
grasped through experience. *Iki* is thus essentially beyond conceptual understanding.’ Hajimu, in Rimer, 1990, p. 269.

Nakano’s conviction appears to be shared by other Japanese writers: ‘An adequate definition of *iki*, however, remains elusive. *Iki* may be quite easily grasped experientially, but verbalizing this experience is difficult. Parallels may be found in the performing arts: here too direct (and often secret) transmission, not verbal explanation, provides the surest means for attaining true mastery of details in speech or movement. Since verbal description cannot fully convey a culture of feeling, no generally accepted theory of *iki* has yet been established’. Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 53. Nishiyama is more optimistic on the survival of *iki* in the modern Japan: ‘...the aesthetic of *iki* continues to be a vital element in the Japanese sensibility. Even in the future, things that are experienced as *iki* will probably continue to move the Japanese people.’ (p. 63)

At least one argument suggests that this focus is an inevitable consequence of Kuki Shūzō’s confusion between Western method and Japanese subject. The key protagonist for this argument appears to be Karatani Kojin. His critique is summarized in Pincus, 1993, pp. 225 – 236.


Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 86.

Kuki Shūzō, 1997, p. 86.

3 LEARNING UKIYO-E

I

How did ukiyo-e artists learn their trade? How did the ways in which the knowledge and skills were passed from one generation of artists to the next condition the nature of their enterprise and the pictorial character of their pictures? The short answer is that artists learnt by example. However independent they may have become in their maturity, as students they worked within a conformist tradition. There were three principal structures for the transmission of knowledge: the artist school, or studio; the practice of working from existing graphic models; and the concept of working to rule. In each case the principal practice was a copyist one.

Most ukiyo-e artists learnt to work, as had Japanese and Chinese artists for many generations before them, through their membership of particular artistic schools or dynastic lineages, in an apprenticeship system. Such schools were usually known by the studio name of their earliest master – hence Kaigetsudō, Torii, Katsukawa or Utagawa. Entry could be by different processes – by birth, for example, or by marriage, through apprentice arrangements, or business alliances (often brokered by publishers) or simply through a desire to learn the trade, or some claim to stylistic allegiance. The iemoto, or leading master, of each school determined who might be a member, or who might be excluded. Rights of school membership could be conferred, and they could be withdrawn. When the stylistic character of Hokusai’s work veered too far away from the house style (ie no hō) of the Katsukawa School, his membership, and his right to sign his works as a member of that school were rescinded.

School membership was important for ukiyo-e artists. It provided systems for training; it created networks for creative intercourse between artists and artisans like block cutters and printers; it established avenues for entering and practicing within the complex hierarchies of the art world; and it gave artists a place and a participating role within the broader ‘floating world’.

The role of the artist school in the professional development of an artist is evident in the training of even the earliest ukiyo-e artist, Iwasa Matabei (1578 – 1650). We can infer from the inscription on a painting by Tosa Buson (1716 – 1783) that Matabei trained in the Tosa School, under Tosa Mitsunobu (1583 – 1638). Sandy Kita claims that Matabei also studied painting in the Kanō School, with Kanō Naizen (1590 – 1616), and that he was:

acquainted with almost all of the important artists of his age in Kyōto, Ōsaka and Sakai, including the painter Hasegawa Tōhaku (1579 – 1638), the tea master Sen Rikyū (1522 – 1591), and the calligrapher Karasumaru Mitsuhiro (1579 – 1638).

Two kinds of professional experience then may have informed Matabei’s development as a painter: the formal training in the Tosa and Kanō schools, and the professional relations he maintained with contemporary artists and art world figures outside those schools. His allegiance to the Tosa school can explain the ‘courtly classical style’ of his painting, within the distinctively Japanese Yamato-e tradition.
of Chinese painting conventions can be attributed to his Kanō School associations. His aristocratic and government family connections may have predisposed, or even obliged, him to make the Kanō connection.

The earliest schools of *ukiyo-e* appear to have had few members and to have survived for only one or two generations. The early Kaigetsudō school, for example, seems to have been founded by Kaigetsudō Ando (1671 – c. 1743). His career seems only to have lasted through the decade leading up to 1714. Through this period there seem to have been three other Kaigetsudō school artists: Kaigetsudō Anchi (possibly Kaigetsudō Ando’s son or adopted son), Kaigetsudō Doshin, and Kaigetsudō Dohan. They all appear to have worked only between 1710 and 1716.

Both family relations and vocation seem to have been the foundation for membership of the early Torii school. The name Torii refers to their primary occupation as painters of theatre banners, particularly those that were placed above the entrance to *kabuki* theatres. The earliest member may have been the Edo artist Torii Kiyotaka. Better known is the history of the Ōsaka artist Torii Kiyomoto, who later came to work in Edo. His son, Torii Shōbei Kiyonobu I (1664 – 1729) is recognized as the first head of the Torii school. Torii Kiyomasu I was his contemporary.

Following the deaths of Kiyonobu and Kiyomasu, their names were adopted by their pupils. Torii (Hanzaburō) Kiyomasu II became the second head of the school. The son of Kiyomasu II, Torii Kiyomitsu, became the third head of the school:

The third titular head of the school was Torii Kiyomitsu, the son of Kiyomasu II. Unfortunately, the third great master’s own son Kiyohide, who showed great artistic promise from an early age, died in 1772. In order to assure a successor to the Torii School, Kiyomitsu gave his son-in-law, an artist of little talent, the artistic name Kiyohide and devoted a great deal of energy to his artistic education. Following Kiyomitsu’s death in 1785, the atelier, represented by Kiyotsugu, Kiyotoki, Kiyokatsu, and Kiyōsaka, decided to take Kiyonaga, one of Kiyomitsu’s best students, as their teacher. The theatre owners, moreover, asked Kiyonaga to take over the position of the head of the school, despite the fact that Kiyomitsu’s son-in-law was actually chosen to the succession. It was not until 1787 that Kiyonaga officially became the fourth titular head of the school when Kiyomitsu’s daughter, Ei, gave birth to a long awaited male heir, Shonosuke, who was to become known as Kiyomine. This artist eventually became the fifth head of the Torii School when he assumed the name Kiyomitsu II. Kiyomitsu II died in 1868, the year of the Meiji restoration.

The leadership of a school could thus be inherited, by direct descent or through marriage; it might be received through election by one’s peers within the school; or it might be awarded as the consequence of a particularly strong contractual relation with a publisher or theatre manager. In each instance, when a new leader emerged, he might assume the artist-name of his predecessor. This was not necessarily the case however – Kiyonaga retained his own name for example – but all members of his school adopted the school-name (*geisai*) Torii. In addition to its key figures, the Torii school attracted numerous lesser students. The pupils of Kiyonobu I, for example, included, besides Kiyonobu II and Kiyomasu II, Kiyotada, Kiyoshige and Kiyomoto. In each instance, on entering the school, the student was able to embrace the ‘Kiyo’ part of their master’s name into their own artist-name. These artists worked closely together, often collaborating on
illustration projects or print series; the work of one artist member of the school was often so difficult to distinguish from that of others that attributions are regularly confused.

The last great school of *ukiyo-e*, the Utagawa school, appears to have attracted many more pupils than any earlier studio. Though the professional relations between its many members are complex, the principles governing master/student relations, conditions of succession, and traditional patterns of name sharing were sustained until well after the Meiji Restoration.

The school’s name was established by its earliest master, Utagawa Toyoharu (1735 – 1814). Both the school name and the ‘Toyo’ of his own name were assumed by his pupil Utagawa Toyokuni (1769 – 1825) and his fellow student Utagawa Toyohiro (1763 – 1828). Toyokuni assumed the leadership of the school after 1814. The first or last parts of his name were adopted by various students who worked under him – hence Kunimasa, Kunisada, Kuniyoshi, Kuniyasu, Kunihisa, Kuninao. His full name was assumed firstly by his pupil and son-in-law after his death. Toyokuni II retained his position until 1844 when his leadership was challenged by Kunisada. Toyokuni II subsequently used the name Toyoshige, while Kunisada signed his works Toyokuni III.

Kunisada was, in turn, succeeded by his pupil Baidō Kunimasa, who assumed his master’s name after marrying his daughter in 1846. After Kunisada’s death in 1870, Kunisada II began to sign his works as Toyokuni III, despite the fact that he was actually the fourth artist to adopt that name. His own pupil adopted the name Kunisada III. Within this framework of inherited or assumed leadership were myriad professional relationships. Toyokuni I had numerous pupils, as did Kunisada – some, like Utagawa Kuniteru, studied under both. Other lesser leaders like Utagawa Kunitsugu established studios and student followings of their own. Utagawa Kunitoshi, for example, was a pupil in the workshops of both Kunisada and Kunitsugu. Over time, the roll of the Utagawa school became immense – Richard Lane lists eighty-eight major artists – and its name survived, through the careers of artists like Yoshihide or Yoshiiku, right into the twentieth century.9

The training of one of the very last *ukiyo-e* artists, Kawanabe Kyōsai, seems to have been as diverse as that of the earliest, Iwasa Matabei. Kyōsai’s training lasted from 1837 to 1849, beginning in the Utagawa studios:

Shūzaburō (Kyōsai’s childhood name) showed an early ability for sketching and in 1837 was enrolled in the studio of the *ukiyo-e* artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797 – 1861). Although Shūzaburō studied with Kuniyoshi for only two years at the most, the influence was seminal, particularly the importance Kuniyoshi attached to the practice of sketching from life (*shasei*). Why the child ceased to be a Kuniyoshi pupil is not clear, but the decision to switch to Kanō training undoubtedly broadened his horizons and ensured him increased technical facility. From 1840 Shūzaburō commenced lessons with Maemura Tōwa (d. 1853), a Kanō trained painter to the Yamanouchi clan. After only a year, however, he moved to join the studio of Kanō Tōhaku Norinobu (1818 – 1851), head of the Surugadai branch within the vast pyramid structure of the Kanō school and one of fifteen ‘official painters’ (*omote eshi*) of the Shōgunate.10

In 1849, after his formal training had been completed, his membership of the Kanō School was cemented when he was given the name Kanō Tōiku Noriyuki. In 1850 he was adopted by Tsuboyama Tōzan, painter to the Akimoto fief. He did not break completely with the Kanō school until 1854. His entry into the world of Watanabe, and his inheritance
of his name, followed his marriage in 1857 to Okiyo, daughter of the Rimpa painter Suzuki Kiitsu.\textsuperscript{11}

How did these artist schools affect or condition the artistic outcomes of their young students? In the first instance, the leading figure, or master-artist, of any school maintained considerable control over practice within the school.\textsuperscript{12} He chose which students would enter his studio in the first place, and, since many were very young – often still children – he assumed something of a paternal role. Watanabe Kyōsai, for example, was only six years old when he entered Kuniyoshi’s studio, and still only nine when he transferred to the Kanō school studio of Kanō Tōhaku Norinobu.\textsuperscript{13} This was an unusually short period of training – apprenticeships usually lasted seven to eight years.\textsuperscript{14} He also negotiated contracts with publishers, and then decided which students might work on which projects. He often worked collaboratively with his pupils, even when they had attained independent status – Hiroshige is known to have collaborated with Shigenobu (Hiroshige II) in his later serial projects for example. Alternatively he devised collaborations between his students.

In many instances, in their very earliest endeavours, these student-artists remained anonymous. The artist-school also guided their entry into the art world. A master not only decided when a young artist would make his debut, but usually carefully managed the process. Toyoharu Kunichika’s official introduction to the public, for example, was organized by his teacher Kunisada. Kunisada’s own debut had been arranged by his master Toyokuni, and was announced to the public in the frontispiece of the novel Kagamiyama homare no adauchi (Revenge at the Famed Kagamiyama), in 1806.\textsuperscript{15} Membership of a school was usually a condition of entry into the art world. It empowered an artist in two ways – it gave him a status as a trained artist, and this was important for establishing his credibility; and it established the network of professional relations through which he could survive in the commercially competitive world of the arts.

This was so even for the very earliest of ukiyo-e artists. For Iwasa Matabei, for example, his knowledge of both Kanō and Tosa school practices validated him not just as an artist but as a man of manners who could move comfortably in the upper reaches of his art world. It was evidence of his urbanity, his knowledge, and his status. Thus in his autobiographical Record of Travel Through the Provinces Matabei presents himself as a highly educated man:

However, it was not just general education that Matabei valued, but education of a very special sort. He wanted to be known as one who had the learning of courtier. That is, Matabei sought to be seen not just as educated, but as a man whose learning had burnished him into a person of culture, manner and breeding. Scholarly, yes, but not a mere scholar. Rather, a ‘learned gentleman’.\textsuperscript{16}

In joining a school, a young artist was gaining access to the professional status and networks enjoyed by the members of that school, which had been negotiated by its succession of masters. For ukiyo-e artists the most important doors that this opened were those that gave them access to the publishers who would not only commission them to work on projects, but who would also promote their work in a highly competitive marketplace. As they gained an independent reputation artists could negotiate their own contracts, and, as they became increasingly self-directed, establish their own studios, and take in their own students, developing smaller ‘sub-schools’ that promoted their own interests while enjoying the umbrella membership of the broader studio. Both Kunisada and Hiroshige, for example, were artists who enjoyed the status of membership of the
Utagawa school, while also supervising student activities and apprenticeships within their own studios, and establishing their own titular dynasties.

Some artists maintained close relationships with their schools throughout their careers. Within the Utagawa School this was often achieved through professional alliances between contemporary artists. Kunisada and Hiroshige collaborated on several print series for example. In others, artists returned to their earlier schools for further instruction at later stages of their careers. Watanabe Kyōsai graduated from the Surugadai Kanō school in 1849, aged eighteen. Later however, and after his adoption by Tsuboyama Tōzan, he appears to have received further training at the Surugadai Kanō school, around 1859, and he may have studied further with Kanō Eitoku Tachinobu after 1884.17 Despite his independent enterprise as an ukiyo-e and Yamato-e painter, Kyōsai continued to enjoy the benefits of Kanō school instruction and affiliation throughout his career.

Other artists followed different paths, and often operated more independently than this, but this was often at some cost to their careers, or under special conditions. Hokusai’s expulsion from the Katsukawa School is a case in point. Hokusai is known to have worked first, as a child, in a bookseller’s shop, using the name Tokitarō, before working through an apprenticeship as a wood-engraver, or block cutter, under the name Tetsuzō. In 1777, at eighteen years of age, Hokusai was admitted to the studio of Katsukawa Shunshō. By 1779 he had completed his apprenticeship there and had been given the name Katsukawa Shunrō. From as early as 1782 however, Hokusai began to work in a manner increasingly different from that of his master, embracing on the one hand the more sensuous idioms of Torii Kiyonaga, and on the other the pictorial conventions of the Kanō school. By 1794 he had fallen out with his earlier master to such a degree that he was forbidden to use the Katsukawa name. From as early as 1786 Hokusai began using alternative artist names. From this point in his career, Hokusai’s work is characterized by independence and variety of direction, rather than by adherence to the distinctive Katsukawa house style.18

Hokusai’s bid for freedom so shortly after the completion of his apprenticeship might have cost him his career. In the years immediately following he was reduced to selling red peppers and calendars in the streets to make a living. Without the umbrella of his master and his parent-school, he lost the connections, status and professional relations necessary for nourishing a fledgling career. It was almost a decade before he recovered.19 Roger Keyes has been able to measure Hokusai’s fall from grace quite precisely:

In the winter of 1791, Hokusai’s moderately successful career as an ukiyo-e artist collapsed…it is clear that for the next three years he did not have enough work to support himself. Between 1788 and 1791 he had designed an average of forty prints each year, signing them ‘Shunrō’, the name he received in 1779 from his teacher. During this period he worked for the two leading Edo print publishers Nishimuraya and Tsutaya, in succession. Between 1792 and 1794 he produced an average of eleven prints each year. Not one was issued by a major publisher.20

Some artists were able to work outside the school system, but only under special conditions. Kitagawa Utamaro, for example, was the adopted son and pupil of the little known artist Toriyama Sekien. His career was really nurtured, however, through his close relationship from 1780 with his publisher and mentor Tsutaya Jūzaburō. The relation was more than just a business partnership – at some time from the mid-1780s to 1792 Utamaro lived in Jūzaburō’s own home.21 It was as much a relationship of common temperament and common interest as it was of economic interdependence, and it not only nurtured
Utamaro’s career, but established through a process of personal and professional negotiation, the focus on women and on sensuality that was to become the foundation of his oeuvre.22

Not all artists were able to survive independently of a school in the same way as Utamaro. Tōshūsai Sharaku appears not to have trained in any school, though he did, briefly, enjoy the patronage of Jūzaburō. Sharaku was, by profession, a nō dancer. He began publishing ukiyo-e prints of kabuki actors from the fifth month of 1794. Sharaku’s caricature-like images failed to sell however, and his career ended in the first month of 1795.23 Working outside a school system meant that Sharaku was not required to work according to conventional idioms – the invention and originality of vision we admire in his work today were beyond the comprehension of contemporary audiences whose taste was as much conditioned by the pictorial conventions of ukiyo-e schools as their artist’s skills were tempered by them. With neither the pictorial knowledge generated through an apprenticeship education, nor the professional network a school could have established for him, Sharaku’s career was doomed to failure.

Generally, the professional relationships within a school were exceptionally close – the more so where founded on family ties – and conditions were tightly controlled by the senior artist in the studio. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that the works of different members of a studio could often be very similar in appearance. The works of the Kaigetsudō artists, for example, resemble one another so closely that some observers have argued that they are all by the hand of a single designer, using different pseudonyms.24

We might equally see something of a house style in the works of the early generations of the Torii school masters. They concentrated on the representation of kabuki actors. Their works are all characterized by dynamic structural relations composed of asymmetrical arrangements of planes of colour and pattern, emphasized by sweeping, violently opposed curving lines. The works of the early Torii masters are all grand gesture and high visual impact; this stylistic mannerism appears to have been developed quite specifically to meet the requirements of immediacy and dramatic punch of the work that the Torii painters completed in their primary vocation – as painters of banners and posters for the entrances to kabuki theatres.

The Katsukawa school artists also focused their attention on the representation of kabuki actors in role but, working more exclusively in the medium of the woodblock print, they developed a different, and equally idiosyncratic, house style. Where the Torii compositions are characterized by dramatic action, the Katsukawa images are quietly self-contained; frozen moments in time. Where the Torii line was often sweeping, strong and black, the Katsukawa contour is characteristically composed, fine and detailed. Where Torii colour and pattern is bold and bright, Katsukawa is quiet, often building on subtle background fields of light mouse-grey or delicate yellow-brown. Where Torii images are loud overstatement, Katsukawa are quiet and reserved.

The Utagawa school artists worked in much more diverse ways than the artists of the earlier studios. They represented the whole range of ukiyo-e subjects, for example, including yakusha-e (actor prints), sensō-e (war pictures), shunga-e (‘spring-pictures’ – erotic prints), bijin-ga (images of beautiful women), uki-e (perspectival landscape prints), kachō-ga (prints of birds and flowers), or musha-e (warrior pictures), as well as working with such highly specialized subjects as hoso-e (works whose subject is smallpox), and
**namazu-e** (representations of catfish). Where some artists specialized – Kuniyoshi in *musha-e* for example, others engaged with quite diverse ranges of subjects. Where the stylistic consistency of artists of the Katsukawa school is clearly evident, a single particular house-style is more difficult to trace for the Utagawa school. It is present though, in two ways. In the first instance, the artists of the Utagawa school shared a preoccupation with realism in their representations of almost every subject. This is evident in the early perspectival devices developed by Utagawa Toyoharu for the representation both of *uki-e* landscapes and the interiors of theatres. It is equally evident in the later and more exaggerated perspectival constructions of Hiroshige. It is evident in representations of actors and courtesans in the efforts made to record individual identities, not just as indications in *mon* or named cartouches, but by making genuine physiognomic likenesses, so that contemporary audiences could recognize the appearance of their favourite actor or courtesan.

The second Utagawa school hallmark, evident only in figure images, is a preoccupation with the expressive potential of facial mien or physical gesture. Katsukawa faces are completely inexpressive; Utagawa faces smile seductively, grin mischievously, shout, converse, grimace, weep or scream. Where Katsukawa limbs are arranged in gentle, almost still, interactions, Utagawa limbs are often engaged in violent, dramatic gestures – sometimes exaggerated to a point that defies physical possibility, particularly in the contorted wrestling figures of *shunga-e* and the violent conflicts represented in *musha-e*. It is the melodramatic character of so many of these later images that make them appear so mannered and heavy-handed.

Why, in a domain in which one might expect to find individuality of enterprise, or value the unique over the conformist, does one find in *ukiyo-e* such evidence of house-styles or consistency of convention, evident amongst contemporaries, and sustained over quite long periods? The answer lies in the ways students learnt things within these schools. The *ukiyo-e* artist-school, like that of Kanō or Tosa, trained its students using highly prescriptive copyist methods:

> Kanō training consisted primarily of a rigid course in mastering copybooks by earlier Kanō masters and learning the prescribed techniques of colouring, and so on. ‘Learned painting skills’ (*gakuga*) were championed over ‘natural painting skills’ (*shitsuga*) as a more trustworthy base for perpetuating the schools monopoly on official commissions. Thus young artists learned by example. They emulated their masters – this was not just a matter of idiomatic sympathy, they were required to do so. The master-artists carefully prescribed every aspect of their activity – often in their personal, as well as in their professional, lives. They dictated precisely what subjects their students would represent, and for what context or purpose – book illustration, handbill, single sheet print and so forth. They supervised characteristics of colour and pattern, and they facilitated the learning in Japanese literature, history and connoisseurship that was required to inform the representation of narrative subjects. This copyist model, and the requirement that students should repeat tasks until fully conversant with them, were not unique to *ukiyo-e*. They were fundamental learning activities for other arts in Japan, in calligraphy for example, and, indeed, were accepted practice for training artists in Europe. What was important here was the prescription only of models that were fully consistent with *ukiyo-e* traditions, or even with the particular conventional practice of each individual school.
The senior members of artist-schools employed a range of copyist devices to facilitate this process. In the first instance, young artists were required to copy from existing works, reproducing them very closely. The legacy of this practice in training was its survival well beyond the professional confines of the apprenticeship. Katsukawa Shunei’s musha-e representation of a warrior charging through space on horseback, for example, is closely modeled on the much earlier composition of the same subject by the anonymous Kambun Master (Plates 9, 10).

In a similar way, though with more questionable intent, Shiba Kōkan made imitations (nisemono) of works by Harunobu. In the earliest of these he appears to have copied even Harunobu’s signature; later works were signed ‘Harushige’.27 Ironically enough, Harunobu himself was not averse to reproducing the works of his predecessors. His 1765 calendar design Mitate of Fei Zhangfang, in which he represents the Chinese deity carried on the back of a flying crane, is copied directly from Okumura Masanobu’s woodblock illustration of The Immortal Fei Zhangfang (Hi Chōbō senjo) from Ehon Edo-e sudare byōbu, and this in turn is founded on a portrait of Ding Lingwei in a woodblock pattern book of 1721 by Hayashi Moriatsu.28

In fact, copying of this kind conformed to a particular habit that had long precedent in both Japanese and Chinese art. The re-presentation of existing works – often age-old classics – with only the subtlest of modification, had long been an accepted practice, in kyōka for example, and in ukiyo-e in the development of the particular form of mitate-e:

In Japan, the method of relying on past works of art to determine composition or subject matter in painting was a widely accepted practice.

In premodern Japan (for that matter in the Orient in general, including China and Korea), artistic creation consisted of adding a cautious amount of personal expression to sample works chosen from the revered paintings of the classical past. New works of art were much like honkadōri in poetry, which relied on allusive references to classical Japanese poems. In accordance with the Analects of Confucius (‘I am a transmitter, not a creator’), it was considered to be a virtue to cultivate and propagate the seeds sown by the great masters and ancient sages. In contrast, the attempts by minor personalities of later generations to recultivate self-expression were despised as heretical behaviour. In Japan’s Middle Ages, ink paintings of the Muromachi Period (1336 – 1573) strove to emulate the brush methods of Song (960 – 1280) and Yuan Dynasty (1280 – 1368) Chinese artists, whose production was strictly governed by Confucian principles. For a brief moment, during the Sengoku (1467 – 1568) and Momoyama (1573 – 1615) periods, individual freedom like that of the artists Sesson and Kanō Eitoku was appreciated and praised. However, during the Edo period (1615 – 1868), the concept of paintings as humble imitations of classical artwork once again prevailed. In particular, painters of both the Kanō and Tosa Schools, which were patronized by the Tokugawa government, succumbed to artistic formalism. For the most part, they relied on the ‘honka’ of painting, namely funpon, or model books, comprising copies of ancient paintings.29

Models for copying by both apprentice-students and amateur artists were formulated by leading artists and reproduced in block-printed book format. Utagawa Toyokuni’s 1817 manual Yakusha nigao hayageiko (Quick Instruction in the Drawing of Actor Likenesses) draws together a collection of reasonably realistic representations of key actors of that season (Plate 11). Some pages represent the face of a particular actor, set in a range of expressive equivalents to those the actor would be required to represent for different key-points, and in differing roles, in that season’s plays. Other pages gather
together a range of role-prescribed hair-styles, and so forth. *Nigao* were an essential tool for the apprentice-artists of the Utagawa workshops. They ensured that each apprentice represented actors in precisely the way their master wished, and they ensured that where a number of apprentices collaborated in a single illustration or a serial project, their various representations of each actor stayed consistent with one another. It was a device that allowed the master-artist to retain pictorial control of production within his studio (and upon which his own reputation rested), and coincidentally it helped to teach the Utagawa School artists to draw reasonably accurate likenesses of the actors of their day.

A quite different kind of manual for copying, one intended more for an amateur artist audience, is to be found in the fifteen volumes of Hokusai’s *Manga* sketchbooks. The *Manga* contain an immense outpouring of drawings of the broadest range of subjects – people from all walks of life, particularly rustic peasant groups, drinkers, and entertainers; habits of work and play; folk tales; studies from nature; landscape compositions; historical images; technical diagrams; and grotesqueries. Each volume of the *Manga* provided as varied an array of entertainments as the comic books and magazines that bear the name today. Within each volume however, were a range of drawings and diagrams designed quite specifically for copying by other artists.

One volume, for example, includes a whole range of small portraits of blind people, of varying ages, and with varying expressions – a sort of lexicon of acutely observed but simply drawn model images from which other artists might select samples for inclusion in their own compositions (Volume 1 of the *Manga*). Others take a single physical action – lifting a bale of rice for example – and draw it through every stage of the action, and from every viewpoint (Volume 3). Others show figures in various positions bracing against high winds (Volume 12), wrestling (Volume 3), or on horseback (Volume 6). In images of flora Hokusai represents whole plants, and separate details of foliage, branch structure or flower head, in some instances detailing the individual *sumi-e* brushstrokes required to reproduce them correctly (Volumes 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 15). Landscape studies focus on the geomorphic structures of the land (Volume 1), or the movement of water (Volumes 2, 3) in ways strikingly similar to those recorded in Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks. Some of the most interesting for Hokusai’s contemporaries, many of whom were representing landscapes in increasingly realistic ways, were his diagrammatic explanations of perspectival spatial constructions (Volume 3), and diagrams giving instructions for drawing architecture (Volume 5). That Hokusai intended these images as instructional drawings is verified in their captions. That of one perspectival drawing for example reads:

The law of 3-way division: if the drawing is 3 *sun* in height (1 *sun* = something over 1 inch), make the sky 2 *sun* and the earth 1 *sun*, as shown here …Draw the lines after the basic pattern (at the right) like this.\(^{30}\)

One of the architectural studies carries a long and detailed instructional caption titled:

*What Should Be Kept in Mind When Drawing Temples and Shrines*\(^{31}\)

The pages of Hokusai’s *Manga* typically present the artist with an array of choices of parts of pictures – components which can be combined in any number of ways in the artist’s own compositions. Other instructional manuals, or *gafu*, were published which presented the artist with complete compositions suitable for copying.\(^{32}\) The earliest of these, like *Hasshū gafu (A Collection of Eight Volumes of Pictures*, c. 1672), reproduced Chinese models for Japanese painters. The best known was Wang Kai’s *Kaishi-en gaden*
(Chinese – Chieh-tzu-yüan, hua-ch’üan, Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, first published in 1679 and translated into Japanese in 1753). Among the earliest Japanese manuals were Ikeno Taiga’s Taigadō gahō (Taiga’s Art of Painting, 1804). 33

Such books of examples for copying proliferated throughout the nineteenth century. A typical example might be published in three or four volumes. The first volume might contain instructional text and explanatory diagrams; subsequent pages might present the viewer with a sequence of increasingly complex compositional studies, followed by a series of fully resolved compositions. 33 While the earliest ones focused on demonstrating compositional or drawing modes in the broadest sense, and often lacked fine detail or complex colour schemes, later volumes, like Watanabe Seitei’s Seitei kachō gafu (Seitei’s Drawing Book of Flowers and Birds, 1890) were characterized by finely observed detail, subtly gestural linear qualities, and complex and delicately modulated surfaces of colour. Where Hokusai’s models encouraged his copyists to be inventive, the carefully contrived compositions of Seitei encouraged his imitators simply, but with great care, to apply the technical skills necessary for making a straightforward copy of the already resolved composition (Plate 12).

Underlying both the apprentice/school model and the copyist practices was a long tradition of working to rule – learning practice in the arts by observing sets of conventions for pictorial practice. This pattern was evident elsewhere in the arts. The playwright Seami, for example, described in nine stages the aesthetic principles of nō. 35 Similarly, the court painter Tosa Mitsuoki laid down stringent guidelines for painters which detailed even where they should set their seals and signatures. 36 In calligraphy the seventeenth-century artist Ojio Yusho compiled a comprehensive set of guidelines both for beginners and for advanced students of the art. 37 The appropriate order and character of every stroke of the brush had been established in Chinese models which exhorted the calligrapher to make dots ‘like a tiger’s claw descending’, or ‘like an eagle’s beak’. 38 Guidelines for garden design were established in the twelfth-century text Sakutei-ki. 39

The earliest sets of rules observed by Japanese painters were Chinese. The principal foundation was located in The Six Canons of Hsieh Ho, the sixth-century Chinese painter and critic. Hsieh Ho’s canons were:

1. Rhythmic Vitality and Spiritual Rhythm expressed in the movement of life,
2. The art of rendering the bones or anatomical structure by means of the brush,
3. The drawing of forms which answer to natural forms,
4. Appropriate distribution of colours,
5. Composition and subordination, or grouping according to the hierarchy of things,
6. The transmission of classic models. 40

Hsieh Ho’s sixth injunction confirms a copyist model, not just for teaching students, but as desirable practice for accomplished artists.

Other early Chinese manuals encouraged artists to observe particular methods, in one instance in a manner strikingly similar to Leonardo da Vinci’s advice to Western artists:

You should choose an old tumble down wall, and throw over it a piece of white silk. Then, morning and evening, you should gaze at it, until at length you can see the ruin through the silk, its prominences, its levels, its zig-zags, and its cleavages, storing them up in the mind.
and fixing them in the eye. Gradually these prominences, wrinkles, and hollows will assume the shapes of the mountains, streams and forests; you can fancy travelers wandering among them, and birds flying through the air.\textsuperscript{41}

The most comprehensive English language account of the codification of Japanese painting was made by the American Henry Bowie.\textsuperscript{42} Bowie visited Japan first in 1893, and again in 1894. He studied painting, initially under the master Torei, later with three subsequent teachers. He was a student of Japanese painting for nine years in total. Although his study is not specifically of \textit{ukiyo-e} – indeed, Bowie is quite dismissive of it – some of the conventions he described are manifest in both the prints and the paintings of \textit{ukiyo-e} artists.\textsuperscript{43}

Within this survey Bowie discusses the ‘Laws for the use of brush and materials’;\textsuperscript{44} ‘Laws governing the conception and execution of a painting’ (which included principles of proportion and contrast); laws of form, and those for painting various subjects - landscape, historical etc - laws for using line and ‘faults to be avoided’;\textsuperscript{45} the ‘canons of the aesthetics of Japanese painting’; and notes on the selection of pictorial subject.

Two areas of Bowie’s discussion are of particular interest for \textit{ukiyo-e}. The first is his observations on the use of colour. Here he is concerned specifically with water-colours, and this in itself is of interest: the thing that water-colour paint has in common with woodblock printmaking is the transparency of pigment and binder. Just as the water-colour painter relied on this transparency to allow a layer of, say, blue over a layer of yellow to produce green, the woodblock printer relied on the same property to produce secondary colours and colour-patterns when one block was printed over the top of another.

Bowie describes eight different ways of painting in colour, in descending order of quality. These include the layering of three or more coats of colour; and the ‘ordinary application of colour’ in single layers; the light water-colour method; \textit{tsuketate}, where ‘all outlines are suppressed and sumi or colour is used for the masses’; shading by ‘applying dark brown colour or light sumi wash over the sumi lines’; reddish-brown painting; \textit{hakubyo} – ‘white pattern’ painting in which no colour is used; and \textit{suiboku}, where \textit{sumi} only is used.\textsuperscript{46}

Bowie himself notes only the multiple layering method as having any special relevance for \textit{ukiyo-e} painters, but each of these classifications has some useful connection. The transparency of pigment on which block printed colour mixing was so reliant is also the fundamental characteristic of many of the painting methods described by Bowie. \textit{Sumi} wash painting has its equivalent in \textit{ukiyo-e} prints in the development of the \textit{bokashi} method for tonal gradation and colour change. \textit{Suiboku} is present in \textit{ukiyo-e} in, for example, \textit{urushi}-prints, and in \textit{sumizuri-e}, and \textit{hakubyo} has its equivalent in \textit{karazuri}, or embossed printing. \textit{Mizu-e} or ‘bone-less style’ pictures are the printmaking equivalent of \textit{tsuketate}. Most interesting of all, for both painting and printmaking in \textit{ukiyo-e}, were the brown wash painting methods, in which the softly patinated browns and reddish browns were able to suffuse a painting with a sense of \textit{iki}.

Bowie’s explanation of rules for qualities of line is particularly complex in its detail. In one area, for example, he enumerates ‘The Eighteen Laws for the Lines of the Dress’. Included there, and of particular interest for \textit{ukiyo-e}, are:
The nail head and rat-tail line … In making this the stroke is begun with the feeling of painting and reproducing the hard nature of a tack and then continued to depict a rat’s tail, which grows small by degrees and beautifully less…

The line of the female court noble or tsubone … This line and the preceding are much used for the soft and graceful garments of young men and women and have always been favourites with the Ukiyo-e painters…

The whirling water line … is used for rapid work and reproduces the swirl of the stream. It was a favourite line with Kyōsai…

The orchid leaf line … This is a very beautiful method of painting whereby the graceful shape of the orchid leaf is recalled; the line is used for the dresses of geishas (sic) and beauties (bijin) generally…

The subtle variations in linear quality that are described in taxonomies like this are evident in ukiyo-e from a very early stage – present as early as the works of the Kaigetsudō and Torii artists. The Torii artists were the first to employ the more exaggerated variations in linear thickness, and the sharp punctuations of ‘nail-head’ point and sudden change of direction. The most obvious application of this was in Torii Kiyonobu’s development of ‘gourd legs’ (hyōtan-ashi) and ‘earthworm lines’ (mimizu-gaki):

‘Gourd legs’ refers to the technique of violently exaggerating the muscles of the actors legs to suggest his strength and the exertion demanded by the performance. The term ‘earthworm lines’ alludes to the highly modulated lines that Kiyonobu employed to suggest the violent intensity and rhythm of the actor’s movements.

Both the precision and the graceful flowing quality of sou i byou, or tsubone, are evident in the contours of the flowing robes of Eisho’s courtesans, or both the contours and the iki patterns of parallel vertical lines in Utamaro’s Yamauba. Where the richly variegated line engendered a dynamic and aggressive punchiness in Kiyonobu’s prints, the ‘line of the female court noble’ is, in these works, reserved and soft. It describes the gently curving asymmetrical structure of garments, but does not over-emphasise contour at the expense of patterned or coloured surface.

The ‘swirling water design’ draws the advantages of the former two together: it enables artists to employ a wide range of linear thickness in a very gestural manner, but at no loss of reserved control. It is the line that is evident in the mature works of Hokusai. The broad range of mark that it facilitates is evident in works like Hokusai’s sumizuri-e composition of a mountain landscape. It can describe both the broad contours of the land and its finer clefts and crevices. It can describe twisting limbs of trees and the rich textures of bark surfaces; the swirling curves of moving water, and the lightness of frothing foam and the dark transparency of deep troughs. The ‘whirling water line’ is the employed by Hokusai’s pupil Shinsai in his surimono representation of the fisher-woman and the two boys.

The ‘orchid leaf line’ which Bowie describes as ‘beautiful’ and ‘graceful’ is a more mannered version of the sou i byou (tsubone). Its variations in thickness are more exaggerated, its sweeping curves less reserved. It appears in the later and more mannered of Utamaro’s courtesan prints, and in the mid to late Utagawa school bijin-ga like Utagawa Yoshiiku’s Geisha Ariwara at Inamotoro (Summer in Yoshiwara) (Plate 13).

The adherence of ukiyo-e artists to the rules outlined by Bowie is not really surprising. Ukiyo-e artists never developed their knowledge and skills in isolation from the other Sino-centric or court schools of painting with which Bowie had been concerned.
Indeed, as we have seen, many trained in both types of studio. Also, though the iconographic repertoire of the court painter was narrower than that of the *ukiyo-e* artist, it was not exclusive. Thus Hokusai was able to paint *ukiyo-e* genre, *surimono*, literary narrative illustrations or *uki-e*, but could also find audiences for his landscapes in the Chinese style, or for his own repackagings of classic themes. Both iconographically and stylistically, consistency with the rules is as evident in *ukiyo-e* as it is elsewhere in Japanese painting.

II

A convention-bound practice in the arts did serve several practical purposes. Most importantly it ensured that young artists could learn to work competently. Equally important was the maintenance of stylistic consistency within individual schools. The idioms of the master were sustained in the works of the pupil. The works of one student were consistent with those of his peers. Stylistic character could be preserved over periods of time, sometimes between generations. For publishers, and through them for the audiences of *ukiyo-e*, this ensured a conformity of means to purpose: publishers could be confident that images designed by different members of a school could perform the functions that were required of them equally well.

Thus the publisher commissioning an early Torii artist could rely on that artist’s knowledge of the theatre and of theatrical convention, and on his ability to translate these into a suitable graphic form. He could be equally confident that the Torii artists representation of a *kabuki* actor in role might be executed with some flamboyance of gesture – a high impact idiom that effectively promoted the high drama of a theatrical performance. The publisher commissioning a Katsukawa School actor image on the other hand could expect a more restrained composition, but one which contained a more explicit description of a specific point in the dramatic narrative, and a more complex and delicately patterned colour scheme. The publisher of any Utagawa School *kabuki* scene could certainly expect to see a recognizable likeness of each individual actor, and an exaggerated sense of theatricality in gesture or countenance. Thus audiences could recognize their heroes – both actors and literary or historical figures. In each instance publishers and audiences could have clear expectations of what they were getting.

This need for a reliable match of house style to pictorial function existed for the most pragmatic of reasons – it ensured sales. This was important, because for publishers then, as now, *ukiyo-e* images were, before anything else, a marketable commodity. The livelihoods of whole teams of people – publishers and bookseller, artist, block-cutter, paper-maker and printer – were dependent on the consistent success of sales. Beyond this immediate set of commercial relationships, the promotion of theatrical productions, and later the soaring public successes of individual actors, were directly related to the effectiveness of their promotion through media like *ukiyo-e* prints. A similarly symbiotic relationship developed between *ukiyo-e* teams and the entertainment industry of Yoshiwara. Even the later success of the Meiji Restoration was to some extent related to the reliability of the Utagawa School artists’ ability to represent the young emperor as accurately as they represented the heroes of the stage. (Ironically the artists who made the earliest representations of Meiji can have had no idea what he looked like. They had never seen him, and the first photographs of the emperor that they might have consulted date
from the early 1870s – the first official and publicly distributed photograph was taken by Uchida Kuichi in 1872). While the maintenance of house style ensured consistency of production it did not necessarily commit a succession of artist-members of a school to working in exactly the same way. An artist learnt from his predecessor or his peers, and might have been required to work within quite closely set parameters. Working within these conditions, however, any individual artist might also follow an individually negotiated pathway, forging new directions, confronting new pictorial problems, developing new pictorial devices or novel applications of medium. Conventions established during an artist’s training, or negotiated within a school provided a sound foundation on which that artist’s own inventions could be built. This satisfied both an artistic impetus towards originality, and the increasing demands of their audiences for novelty.

Within the Torii School, for example, the broad parameters of a house style were established by its earliest members. The productive relationship with the theatre was established early by Shōbei Kiyomoto, and the early conventional forms – the single-sheet actor print and the development of a theatrical, gestural style characterized by flowing arabesques and vigorous linear variation – were established by Torii Shōbei Kiyonobu I. Each successive member of the early Torii School worked within these parameters but, equally, each of these other artists brought something different to bear on their own oeuvre.

Kiyonobu’s contemporary, Torii Kiyomasu I, for example, worked in ways that align very closely to those of his peer – in many instances apparently directly reproducing existing figural poses and compositional structures. In Kiyomasu’s images, however, the linear descriptions of musculature and the exaggerations of gesture become even more overstated. Where Kiyonobu employed sweeping, intersecting arabesques of contours, Kiyomasu arranged limbs and torsos in dynamic and angular oppositions that fairly represented the dramatic aragato style of acting of the kabuki theatre. Where Kiyonobu’s line was thick and bold, Kiyomasu’s was characterized by ‘calligraphic virtuosity’.

Where Kiyonobu I had focused his attention on a single form – the single-sheet print – his successor Kiyonobu II narrowed his even more closely to a single format, the narrow hosoban print (see Appendix 2). Additionally, although like those of his predecessors his early prints are hand coloured, Kiyonobu II quickly developed designs for multi-block printing, specializing in two-colour green and rose prints. His compositions are less flowing and theatrically expressive than those of either of his predecessors.

Like Kiyonobu II, Kiyomasu II continued to work according to the needs of the theatre, and also to extend his work into benizuri-e and urushi-e. Kiyomasu II also extended the range of his repertoire to include series of genre scenes in landscape settings. Their contemporary Torii Kiyoshige also worked within an expanded repertoire, in painting as well as in print design and book illustration, and in bijin-ga and musha-e as well as in kabuki-e. The theatrical exaggerations of the first generation of Torii artists are replaced in Kiyoshige’s works by subtler and more closely controlled rhythmic flow. The arabesques of contours became more complex and interwoven in the gracefully swaying figures of their later contemporary Torii Kiyohiro. Kiyohiro also specialized in benizuri-e, often on a larger scale than his contemporaries.
The third titular head of the Torii School, Torii Kiyomitsu, maintained the Torii family contract with the kabuki theatre, producing playbills, posters and actor prints, as well as exploring other illustrative genre. Where the works of all of the earlier Torii artists had been characterized by the description of movement, however, – whether the violent exertions of Kiyomasu’s actors or the graceful sway of those of Kiyohiro – Kiyomitsu’s figures are far less demonstrative. His actors are precisely positioned, but reserved and impassive. They lack either the vigorous energy of the works of the earlier Torii artists, or the decorative and expressive detail of the Katsukawa School actor images that rapidly displaced his own works on the popular market.

The works of the fourth head of the school, Torii Kiyonaga, depart completely from the parameters established by his predecessors. Though Kiyonaga did produce kabuki-e, and was, indeed, quite innovative in both the pictorial complexity and stylistic character of his theatre prints, his most striking innovations were in the representation of women. Not only was the move to producing bijin-ga a major departure in pictorial subject, but Kiyonaga established a whole new set of stylistic parameters within this field. This is most obvious in the graceful elongations of the figure, in which Kiyonaga set a standard for his own generation of artists. It is equally obvious in the new complexity of overlapping, multi-figured compositions. A much broader range of poses and figural activities than had ever before been combined in single compositions were now arranged within more comprehensively drawn and naturalistic landscape settings.

This sequence of changes, shifts in focus, or innovation evident in the works of the succession of Torii school principals did not occur quickly. The earliest works of Torii Kiyonobu I date from around 1697; the last works of Kiyonaga were completed over a century later, in 1815. The process of change, seen as a whole, was neither overt, nor marked by huge individual leaps or shifts. Rather, it occurred like a game of Chinese whispers: a broad framework was established to begin with, and this provided the parameters that ensured consistency of standard and truth to purpose. Within this framework each successive participant worked in ways consistent with his immediate predecessors, but at exactly the same time moved in other, more idiosyncratic, directions. The result, in any short term sequence, was the maintenance of consistency, enlivened with the novelty of invention. The result in the longer term was a complete shift in focus, contractually, iconographically and stylistically. Seen side by side, the works of Kiyonobu I and Kiyonaga seem almost impossible to be related.

Precisely the same tension between the observation of convention on the one hand, and the pursuit of individual direction on the other, is evident also in other schools. Within the last great school of ukiyo-e, the Utagawa, artists observed, in the broadest terms, a single shared standard: naturalistic representation. They achieved this using a range of pictorial conventions in common: uki-e conventions for linear perspective, for example, in two-dimensional descriptions of three-dimensional space; bokashi gradations of tone and colour to contrive the visual effects of aerial perspective; copy-book reproduction of every aspect of the physiognomy of individual actors from books of nigao; figural poses that accurately reproduced the mie pose of the kabuki actor.

The representational model was established in the works of the founding masters of the school, in Utagawa Toyoharu’s perspectival spatial fields, and in Utagawa Toyokuni’s realistic representations of individual actors. These characteristics were reproduced in the works of their followers. Both the direct realism and the reserved dignity of Toyokuni’s
actor representations are preserved in the earlier actor images of his student Kunisada (later Toyokuni III), for example. Gradually however, Kunisada began to introduce exaggerations of pose and gesture in his actor images which increasingly reflected the theatrical contrivances of the stage. In his later images the frozen gesture of mie is replaced by more vigorously dynamic movements and interactions between figures (Plates 14, 15).

Kunisada’s fellow student under Toyokuni was Kuniyoshi. Kuniyoshi had also studied in the Tosa, Kanō and Maruyama schools of painting, and possibly also studied much earlier under Katsukawa Shunei. In his mature work however, Kuniyoshi broke with the conventions of all but the Utagawa school. He observed the Utagawa commitment to representationality, and in particular built on established conventions for representing convincing landscape spaces. His representation of Act XI from Kanadehon Chūshingura (Plate 16) for example, employs a finely articulated linear perspective, a low horizon, the diminution of scale with distance, and aerial perspective to articulate a convincing illusion of depth. Similarly, in his actor portraits and musha-e his figures are individuated and easily distinguishable from one another, and the narrative role assigned to each is always clearly evident. Where Kuniyoshi built on, and extended beyond, the conventions of his school, however, was in the extremity of exaggeration of pictorial depth in his landscapes, and in the highly theatrical overstatement of expressive gesture and countenance in his figures.

The exaggeration of gesture evident in the later works of Kunisada and in Kuniyoshi’s musha-e is sustained in the increasingly mannered compositions of Kunisada’s student Utagawa Kunichika (Plate 17). Colours have become extremely bright and intense, gestures are melodramatic. Naturalistic pictorial conventions have been displaced by highly contrived devices, as in the fabric design of starfish suckers that forms the background, or media tricks like karazuri, or embossing. The overstatement of Kunichika’s image is extended in an even more theatrical manner in the caricature-like gestures of the two figures in the smaller inset cartouche by his contemporary Kyōsai. As in the Torii School, each successive member of the Utagawa School owes something to conventional ways of working established by his predecessors, and each also forges something of an independent path of his own.

Hokusai’s dilemma provides a clear illustration of the artist’s tension between rule-following and invention. Hokusai was at the once the most convention-dependent (albeit also the most eclectically so) and the most freely divergent and original of ukiyo-e artists. His determination to explore the particular idiomatic constructs of a wide range of schools is evident in the diversity of stylistic attachment or formal affiliation he forged throughout his early and middle career. The professional relationships he made in this way informed and sustained him through a rapid sequence of shifts of pictorial preoccupation. Increasingly however, Hokusai pursued more independent directions. In his later works in particular, in series like Hyakunin isshu uba-ga-etoki (The Hundred Poems, By the Hundred Poets, Explained by the Nurse), though pictorial conventions from sources as widely divergent as Kanō school Chinese devices or uki-e perspectival systems are regularly employed, the combinations of these diverse devices are so cohesive, and so original and imaginative, as to construct an entirely new way of working. The originality of Hokusai’s invention is so strong that, even though he was one of the last great masters of ukiyo-e, Edmond de Goncourt was led to describe him as the ‘true creator of Ukiyo-ye (sic), the founder of the popular school’.  

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In making this claim for Hokusai, de Goncourt is acknowledging both the freshness and innovation of Hokusai’s pictorial compositions, and an aesthetic response to his world that is at one and the same time vulgar and painfully realistic, and charmingly, imaginatively poetic. That Hokusai himself was aware of the lengthy transition from convention-bound practice to original invention throughout his career is evident in the declaration he made, at the age of seventy-five, to accompany his fifth formally announced change of name, from Hokusai Iitsu to Hokusai Manji, in 1834:

From the age of six I had a penchant for copying the form of things, and from about fifty, my pictures were frequently published; but until the age of seventy, nothing that I drew was worthy of notice. At seventy-three years, I was somewhat able to fathom the growth of plants and trees, and the structure of birds, animals, insects and fish. Thus when I reach eighty years, I hope to have made increasing progress, and at ninety to see further into the underlying principles of things, so that at one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art, and at one hundred and ten, every dot and every stroke will be as though alive. Those of you who live long enough, bear witness that these words of mine prove not false.

Told by Gakyō Rōjin Manji

III

How best then can one explain the specific role of rule, and of rule-bound behaviour, in relation to aesthetic experience, particularly in ukiyo-e. In the first instance one can acknowledge that rule systems used in ukiyo-e were not simply arbitrarily chosen or applied. They had their origins in the common experience, or common usage, of large numbers of artists – within schools, between schools, over long periods of time, and even between cultures (most notably between those of China and Japan). In this sense ‘rules’ or conventions can be seen as developing out of the ‘norms’ or ‘normal ideas’ of common experience. They are generated for their usefulness, in a range of practical conditions, for solving particular aesthetic problems. The composition of hanshira-e, for example, presented artists with a particular visual problem: how to manage pictorial relations and sustain visual interest through, and between, every part of a particularly difficult format – the exceptionally narrow and elongated ‘pillar-print’ form. The usual solution was to contrive a compositional structure of stacked alternating diagonal lines and planes. This solution proved to be so reliable, for different artists, working at different times, representing different pictorial subjects, that, with time, it became the generalized ‘norm’ of artistic practice which was eventually adopted as a pictorial convention or rule. Later artists could draw on this rule; they could found their own pictorial solutions to the same structural problem on the rule, while simultaneously developing their own idiosyncratic extension or application of it. Thus for some artists alternating stacks of diagonals in hanshira-e compositions are displaced by alternating interlocking diagonals; for some, planar inter-relations are replaced by those of arabesques; for others the alternation of plane is reinforced by an alternation of light colour and dark, warm with cool, plain surface with patterned, or coloured with black. In each case the basic principle of alternation underpins the composition. Norms generate rules which can then be applied while some degree of original invention is also achieved.

Secondly, we might acknowledge the ways in which rules might constitute a necessary precondition for the free play of artistic invention in ukiyo-e. This relation may
appear to be paradoxical: adherence to rule seems to be inconsistent with the freedom and originality we associate with invention, and trying to find an association between aesthetic experience and a system of rules may seem futile. Immanuel Kant described the necessity of rule, and the relation between rule and free invention, thus:

For every art presupposes rules which are laid down as the foundation which first enables a product, if it is to be called one of art, to be presented as possible. The concept of fine art, however, does not permit of the judgment upon the beauty of its product being derived from any rule that has a concept for its determining ground, and that depends, consequently, on a concept of the way in which the product is possible. Consequently fine art cannot of its own self excogitate the rule according to what it is to effectuate its product. But since, for all that, a product can never be called art unless there is a preceding rule, it follows that nature in the individual (and by virtue of the harmony of his faculties) must give the rule to art, i.e. fine art is only possible as a product of genius.  

For *ukiyo-e* artists, learning the foundation conventions or rules of their enterprise was a fundamental condition for working with complete freedom. In other words, in order to engage freely and inventively within their domain, artists needed to be absolutely comfortable with the pictorial conventions, conditions of medium, or methodological constraints and affordances of their enterprise. It is only when these conventions are mastered or absorbed completely that their employment becomes second nature, and the artist is able to move beyond conventional practice into the realm of free and creative activity. By conforming to rule in the first instance, the artist becomes empowered to move beyond convention into invention:

Hence it is only conformity to law without a law, and a subjective harmonizing of the imagination and the understanding without an objective one – which latter would mean that the representation was referred to a definite concept of the object – that can consist with the free conformity to law of the understanding (which has also been called finality apart from an end) and with the specific character of a judgment of taste.

Thus the succession of Torii masters are each able to work at the one and the same time within, and outside of, the framework of rules that characterized their school. For each painter the Torii school rule system is evident in the dynamic compositional principles of asymmetrically opposed planes and a strongly rhythmic idiom. For each individual painter however, a new, more idiosyncratic and inventive mode is evident. Working to rule laid the foundation upon which the individual invention of each artist could be built.

A concept of taste, or beauty, cannot be established only from systems of rule however: ‘There can be no objective rule of taste by which what is beautiful may be defined by means of concepts’. Aesthetic invention in *ukiyo-e*, as elsewhere, lies outside rules, or belongs to a different domain, even though rules may contribute essential knowledge and skills for its artists. By the same token, simply following a set of rules, however comprehensively assembled and coherently inter-related that set might be, cannot necessarily guarantee aesthetic success. Utagawa Kunisato’s double figure composition (Plate 8) for example, is, in most of its specifics, consistent with the conventions of its school. The manner of representation of the human forms, their physiognomy, their gesture, their interaction, is entirely consistent with Utagawa conventions for the representation of individual personalities in theatrical idioms. Its asymmetrical composition, swirling, intersecting arabesques, rich conjunctions of line, pattern and colour, each correspond to models to which Kunisato was required to conform. Adherence
to each of these conventions, however closely matched to the expectations of his colleagues, has not guaranteed Kunisato a satisfactory outcome. The image is confused, muddled, and unclear.

Rules can, on the other hand, provide the component building blocks for the inventive free play of the artist. Individual pictorial conventions, which might be located in a number of existing pictorial sources, may be recombined in new compositions, in response to new pictorial problems, in such ways that they can act not just as pictorial components, but as contributors to a bigger, more complex, more innovative or more satisfying solution. In this way, for example, Andō Hiroshige could employ a host of *uki-e* spatial conventions which, while not in themselves dependent on one another, do, in each particular pictorial instance, combine in a symbiotic relation to inform a new, more complex, and altogether original entity. In *Goyū, tabibito tome-onna* (Goyū, Women Soliciting Travelers, from the series *Tōkaidō gojūsan-tsugi no uchi*, Fifty-three Stations of the *Tōkaidō*, 1833 – 1834, Plate 18), for example, Hiroshige has employed linear perspective conventions similar to those employed by Western artists, and evident in the perspectival orthogonals of the buildings and the road, and even the trees beyond the buildings. He has combined these with effects of diminishing scale in objects such as facades and windows, and the figures distributed along the road from the foreground into the background. He has reinforced this with the device of overlapping objects, most evident in the jostling figure group in the immediate foreground. All three scale oriented devices are complemented by the aerial perspective evident both in the progressively narrower colour range in zones from the foreground to the background. The *bokashi* gradations of tonal value in the middle and background emphasise the sense of distance as well as indicating the onset of evening. The outcome is neither an imitation of a Western perspective composition, nor an unrelated assembly of different pictorial devices. It is a coherent, cohesive, and unique composition. It is consistent with other images from the body of work to which it belongs, and each of these in its turn constitutes a discrete outcome. Thus, far from labeling Hiroshige a shallow copyist of Western draughting conventions, viewers can recognize a wholly original artist engaged in his own independent enterprise.

Simply analyzing or listing the pictorial conventions employed in Hiroshige’s composition is not in itself sufficient to replicate an aesthetic experience equivalent to seeing it. Making a valid aesthetic judgment of the work is fully dependent on our experiencing the work as a whole, and impossible to divine from an observation of each of its parts. As Kant put it: ‘...I must feel the pleasure immediately in the representation of the object, and I cannot be talked into it by any grounds of proof’. In any case, when confronted with artworks we are generally presented with final outcomes, resolved and fully integrated entities rather than assemblies of discretely identifiable components. Analysing those components can inform or perhaps explain aspects of our response to art works, but it cannot act as a substitute for that response.

Simply put, the notion of working-to-rule suggests a straightforward copyist, or imitative, role for the artist. The young artist imitates the pictorial conventions and stylistic idioms developed by his master. The school artist reproduces the devices and idioms of his peers. This is an inappropriate understanding of the role of rules in art however – it misstates the position of particular rules in relation to the more complex processes of pictorial development and resolution. It over-simplifies in its description of the creative activities in which the artist is involved; it excludes mention of the one thing we so often value in art...
experiences – the unique or individual character of aesthetic invention. In this sense it can explain imitative behaviour, but it cannot explain the more complex domain of aesthetic invention.

A more useful way of explaining the particular relation of artistic enterprise to rule or convention may be found in the notion of artists working by example. This acknowledges the place of the myriad relationships against which an artist can act in his own professional practice, and suggests a project in which early dependence on models gradually gives way to more independently negotiated contracts.

Since learning from example is only one component in a much more complex creative process, artistic outcomes can still be novel, inventive, and original. While example or convention may condition the ways in which artists work, many other factors also combine to condition the distinctive character of any artistic outcome. The artist’s personal ‘cognitive stock’, for example, an amalgamation of his knowledge of and idiosyncratic view on his world, his culture, its customs and conditions, practices and mores, is a key factor in shaping the way he thinks and works. Utamaro’s knowledge of social engagements, for example, was determined by the world he moved in – that of Yoshiwara. The intimate knowledge he had of the sexual commerce of the brothel districts conditioned the sensual character of his works in much the same way that an intimate knowledge of kabuki determined the theatrical character of Torii works, or the ceaseless traveling of Sesshu engendered a preoccupation with narrative in his works.

In a similar way artists’ knowledge or experience of their medium determined different outcomes at different times. Moronobu could not have been expected to have produced nishiki-e – the requisite skills of registration had not yet been developed. He could be, and was, expected to produce small scale illustrations, in black line on a white ground, in which text might be required to be integrated into the pictorial composition, because the medium of wood-block picture making was seen to be one and the same as that of wood-block book printing. By Harunobu’s time, the kentō registration system had been refined, and he could be fully expected to immerse himself in an intensive exploration of the pictorial possibilities it offered. By the time of the Meiji Restoration new synthetic pigments were available, and these allowed artists to pursue new directions again. Similarly, artists working patterns might be conditioned by their professional relationships – Utamaro with the brothel illustrator Jūzaburō, for example, – or their personal circumstance, or by idiosyncrasies of their own working method.

In one sense, the relations between rule and invention that we find in art are exemplified also in play, in games. In The Master of Go Kawabata Yasunari described the course of an epic match between the elderly master Shūsai, and his younger opponent Otake. Both players observe the rules of the game throughout. The younger Otake has also, at an earlier stage, acquired some of his knowledge of the game from the older master. This experience alone does not determine the way the younger competitor plays – if it did, a victory would be highly unlikely, since both players would play an equal game. Though they work with a foundation of knowledge-in-common, the game unfolds in a manner unlike that of any previous contest; it is a unique experience. Only one player can win – in this case the younger, and apparently less experienced, Otake. The understanding of rules provides the common ground or agreement that allows the game to take place. The purposively inventive play of the imagination allows one player to win.
Kawabata’s reconstruction of an actual 1938 Go match which he had reported for the newspapers, known today as Mainichi, provides something of an insight into the creative process. In particular, it establishes an analogue for the relations between rule and imagination that underpin the experience of ukiyo-e artists. Where rules ensure a conformity of outcomes to ukiyo expectations, in purposeful or ‘end-directed’ experiences in the art world, in the playful, purposeless world of the game rules provide a framework of agreement within which individual players can move with independence and invention.

There is one particular characteristic of the creative process in which the imaginative behaviour of the artist is distinguished from the rule-bound behaviour of other domains, and which ensures, for the artist, a precedence of invention over copyist reproduction. One of the key distinguishing features of ‘artistic intelligence’ is diversity of aesthetic outcome.63

No matter how similar the conditions under which different artists may find themselves working, no matter how closely related the artistic problems they are confronted with, intelligent activity in the arts ensures diversity, rather than conformity, of outcome. For any given artistic problem there can be, not one, but several, valid outcomes. This is not to say that just any outcome will do, but that some different ones will solve the problem in different, but equally satisfactory ways. One can recognize aesthetic richness, originality, invention, uniqueness, in different outcomes.64

There is a reason for this. In each instance, one thing that distinguishes what an artist does from, say, a grocer or a pharmacist, is that artists are generally found to be working towards unknown outcomes. However clear a sense of purpose an artist may have, the aesthetic outcome he or she achieves has not existed before. However clear an intention one might have for that outcome, or however clearly it may be formed in one’s mind’s eye, the complexities of the creative process and the subjective nature of creative invention ensure that each outcome will be unique.

This has two significant implications for the role of rules in the creative process. In the first instance, rules can only be devised to regulate known situations, they can only be used meaningfully to organize or articulate the familiar. Each artist produces things that have not existed before: how can we devise sets of rules to explain or regulate things that do not yet exist? In the second instance, rules can only usefully be applied to broad spectrums of experience – to groups of the same, or similar, things or situations-in-common. Generally, however, art works are unique. Just as each subjective experience of an art work is unique. Where there is only one instance of something, any notion of rule can have no useful function. Any art work may draw from a whole lexicon of rules or conventions, but in the end, each art work is a unique entity. Where there is only one instance of something, a knowledge of rule alone cannot provide a useful foundation for explaining it. For artists, on the other hand, a knowledge of rule, a confident ability to employ the conventions of their enterprise, provided the foundation of knowledge and skill upon which their own inventions could be built. The relation between rule and free invention may seem paradoxical or uneasy, but it is a necessary one: for ukiyo-e artists, as for artists in most other domains, rules constituted a necessary precondition for freedom.

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1 *Ie* = household. In the organisation of the fictitious ‘household’, the *iemon* took ‘…both responsibility and credit for transmitting to disciples the orthodox form of the house tradition’. Gerald Groemer, translator’s note, Nishiyama Matunosuke, 1997. The development of the *iemon* system was contemporaneous with that


3 ‘The falling cherry blossoms in the capital are like the peeling white paint in Tosa Mitsunobu’s pictures.

I met Ukiyo Matabei Amidst Omuro’s blossoming cherries’


4 Kita, 1999, p. 5.

5 Kita, 1999, pp. 1 – 6.


7 Confusion surrounds the identities, attributions and relationships of the artists of the Kaigetsudō School. Some suggest the names of Ando’s followers were really pseudonyms used on his own works, though why he should have done this is unclear. Hugo Munsterberg, *The Japanese Print, A Historical Guide*, New York: Weatherhill, 1982, pp. 31 – 36.


12 The six rights by which the *iemoto* were able to maintain control over their pupils (in all of the arts, including *kabuki* and literature) were:

1. Rights regarding the art – for example, the right to secrecy, the right to allow or prohibit performances, rights over the repertoire or the set forms (*kata*) of an art.

2. Rights concerning the teaching, transmission and licensing of the art.

3. The right to expel or punish members of the school.

4. The right to dispose of costumes, ranks (pseudonyms), and the like.

5. The right to control equipment or properties used in the art.

6. Exclusive rights to the income resulting from the preceding five items. Since the Meiji period this right has included the copyright of all musical scores, nō texts, textbooks, scholarly writings, or journals issued by the school or family.’


14 Amy Reigle Newland, *Time Present and Time Past, Images of a Forgotten Master: Toyoharu Kunichika 1835 – 1900*, Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 1999, p. 8. Learning *sumi*-e painting involved a similarly lengthy training. Henry Bowie’s explanation of Japanese painting is focused mainly on *sumi*-e. His own study in this domain lasted for nine years. He describes the initial ‘art school’ stage thus: ‘…substantially the course takes from three to four years and embraces copying (*ISHA, mitori*), tracing (*MOSHA, tsuki-utsushi*), reducing (*SHUZUKU, chijimeru*), and composing (*SHIKO, tsukuri kata*)’. (Bowie, p. 12). This initial stage was followed by a period working as an apprentice or disciple.


16 Kita, 1999, p. 31.


This claim is made, for example, by Laurence Binyon and J. J O’Brien Sexton; see Link, ‘Thirty Years Later’, p.393.

25 The production of hoso-e can be related to smallpox outbreaks which had a profound effect on the tightly packed population of Edo; catfish, more oddly, were thought to cause earthquakes. Such prints were particularly popular after the major earthquake of 1885. Sandy Kita, A Hidden Treasure: Japanese Prints From the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Carnegie Museum of Art, 1996, p. 165.

26 Clark, p. 19. Clark notes also the apparently contradictory practice of drawing from the life that Kyōsai had learnt under Kuniyoshi, and the ‘weekly connoisseurship classes’ he excelled in with the Kanō School.


28 David Waterhouse, ‘Some Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist Mitate-e by Harunobu’, Impressions, Number 19, 1997, pp. 29 – 47. (Though note that copying of this kind extends well beyond the more allusive conventions of mitate-e.)


31 Manga Volume 5, in Michener, 1958, p. 251.

32 ‘No specific restrictive meaning has ever been attached to the term gafu in the titles of books, though it often appeared on manuals that had instructional intent, such as Ransai gafu, but in the nineteenth century it more generally signified a series of pictures which might certainly be used by students as models, yet whose primary purpose was as an exposition of the work of a painter already widely known, or, even if not, likely to appeal in graphic form to the audience that had existed for printed pictorial art.’ Jack Hillier, The Art of The Japanese Book, London: Sotheby’s, 1987, p. 780.


35 Zeami’s nine stages bore delightfully allusive titles:

‘THE HIGHER THREE STAGES
1. The flower of the miraculous
2. The flower of supreme profundity
3. The flower of stillness

THE MIDDLE THREE STAGES
1. The flower of truth
2. The art of versatility and exactness
3. The art of untutored beauty

THE LOWER THREE STAGES
1. The art of strength and delicacy
2. The art of strength and crudity
3. The art of crudity and inexactness.’


37 Ojio Yusho, Hitsuwo hidenso (The Secrets of Calligraphy). Ojio Yusho includes seventy-seven directives. These range from, for the beginner:

‘1. Keep your body upright and your soul righteous as you take up the brush
2. Write with a calm mind while carefully studying the forms of the characters…’

For the advanced student:

‘1. Write with force, while retaining gentleness in the brushwork…
5. Do not lose the individuality of your brush…’

and on the appropriate (and anthropometric) appearance of characters:

‘1. The character wears a hat and shoes
2. The Semi-Cursive character looks as if it is being seated
3. The Cursive character looks as if it is walking…’


38 The seven basic types of stroke prescribed by Lady Wei Shuo in her ‘Battle Array of the Brush’ include:

‘(1) the horizontal (heng) stroke to the right – actually first leftward a moment, and even at the end of the rightward stroke rising in a lively manner; (2) the dot (tien) is meant to be like a rock bounding down the face
of a cliff, though varieties of it include the leftward kind “like a tiger’s claw descending”, or the rightward one “like the head of a tortoise”, and a vertical one, first up and then down, “like an eagle’s beak”. In (3) the leftward stroke (p’ieh), first rightward, then sweeping left and pausing at the end, the result should be as clear cut as a rhinoceros horn or elephant tusk. Leaves of orchid or iris are not said to be painted, but p’ieh-ed, not with positive left to right strokes when the student is more advanced, but with negative ones in the reverse direction. (4) The t’i stroke, downward from left to right, should be able to recall “a drooping pine tree with firm roots”. For (5) the chih, a vertical line “like a vine thousands of years old but still stout and full of strength”, a flick upwards precedes the downward movement, which twists back at the very end. Varieties of this may remind one of a sheep’s leg, or dropping dew or a number of other things. (6) The rightward downstroke (na), less stiff than the t’i, is the opposite of a p’ieh : as with the heng stroke, the brush moves first slightly leftward, then right for the body of the stroke, then slightly left, and the effect may well be one of breaking waves, or a swimming fish, or a “flying cloud emitting growls of thunder”. Last of all (7) the sharp curve called wan should have the same sort of sinews and joints as a crossbow. ’Owen E. Holloway, Graphic Art of Japan: The Classical School, London: Alec Tiranti, 1957, pp. 34 – 35.


61 Sung Ti, in the eleventh century; in Binyon, 1911, pp. 79 – 80.


63 Ukiyo-e artists ‘…do not exemplify art as the Japanese understand that term’. Bowie, 1952, p. 20.

64 Bowie, 1952, pp. 31 f.

65 Bowie, 1952, pp. 46 – 76.

66 Bowie, 1952, pp. 43 – 44. Bowie includes Japanese terms for each of these methods, and elsewhere for pigment types also. His romanizations are idiosyncratic however, and I have included them only where I have been able to verify their accuracy.


70 The pursuit of individual pathways that were at variance with house-styles (ie no hō) was not confined to ukiyo-e schools but was also evident in the works of Kanō and Tosa artists. Timon Screech describes the radical shift in paradigm in the work of the Kanō painter Maruyama Ōkyo, away from a copybook practice into one founded on direct observation from nature (shasei), tempered by the judicious application of Kanō pictorial conventions. Timon Screech, The Shōgun’s Painted Culture: Fear and Creativity in the Japanese States, 1760 – 1829, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, pp. 167 – 207. This disparity between observation of formal convention on the one hand, and the spontaneity or uniqueness of each individual style on the other, was evident even in earlier Chinese precedents in calligraphy and painting. Lothar Ledderose, Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 187 – 213.


75 Immanuel Kant saw these ‘norms’ as being founded on observations of some ‘average’ or ‘common’ character observable in a large number of experiences of the same genre: ‘This normal idea is not derived from proportions taken from experience as definite rules: rather it is according to this idea that rules for forming estimates first become possible. It is an intermediate between all singular intuitions of individuals, with their manifold variations – a floating image for the whole genus, which nature has set up as an archetype underlying those of her products that belong to the same species, but which in no single case she seems to have completely attained.’ Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, trs., James Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952, pp. 78 – 79. This concept seems as easy to apply to pictorial problems in common as it does to Kant’s example – the observation of numerous human and cattle forms. But while it can constitute an origin of convention or rule, it does not, of itself, provide the explanation of the aesthetic character of an art work. Kant warns: ‘But the normal idea is far from giving the complete archetype of beauty in the genus. It only gives the form that constitutes the indispensable condition of all beauty, and, consequently, only correctness in the presentation of the genus.’ Kant, 1952, p. 79). Thus adherence to rule is, on its own, no guarantor of beauty.'
And note here the correspondence of this relation to aesthetic enterprise – of ‘free-play’ on the one hand and of individual invention on the other, with notions of ‘playfulness’ and ‘novelty’ inherent in the notion of iki.

Kant, 1952, §46, p. 168, l. 14 – 26. Kant had prefaced this statement with an earlier assertion of the necessity of rule: ‘It is not amiss, however, to remind the reader of this: that in the free arts something of a compulsory character is still required, or, as it is called, a mechanism, without which the soul, which in art must be free, and which alone gives life to the work, would be bodyless and evanescent (e.g. in the poetic art there must be correctness and wealth of language, likewise prosody and metre). For not a few leaders of a newer school believe that the best way to promote a free art is to sweep away all restraint, and convert it from labour into mere play.’ Kant, 1952, §43, p. 164. He then distinguished the notion of invention built on rule from that of slavish copying: ‘Now since learning is nothing but imitation, the greatest ability, or aptness as a pupil (capacity), is still, as such, not equivalent to genius. Even though a man weaves his own thoughts or fancies, instead of merely taking in what others have thought, and even though he go so far as to bring fresh gains to art and science, this does not afford a valid reason for calling such a man of brains, and often great brains, a genius, in contradistinction to one who goes by the name of shallow-pate, because he can never do more than merely learn and follow a lead. For what is accomplished in this way is something that could have been learned. Hence it all lies in the natural path of investigation and reflection according to rules, and so is not specifically distinguishable from what may be acquired as the result of industry backed up by imitation.’ Kant, 1952, §47, p. 169.

‘There is, however, a matter upon which it is competent for critics to exercise their subtlety, and upon which they ought to do so, as long as it tends to the rectification and extension of our judgments of taste. But that matter is not one of exhibiting the determining ground of aesthetic judgments of this kind in a universally applicable formula – which is impossible. Rather it is the investigation of the faculties of cognition and their function in these judgments, and the illustration, by the analysis of examples, of their mutual subjective finality, the form of which in a given representation has been shown above to constitute the beauty of their object’. Kant, 1952, §34, p. 141.

It is tempting to try to locate, within this brief framework, a consistency with Richard Wollheim’s notion of critical retrieval. Kant later expands on the relation between the freedom of intuitive free play of imagination, and the notion of concepts or conformity to law, of understanding (§35, esp. lines 16 – 30):

‘That is to say, since the freedom of the imagination consists precisely in the fact that it schematizes without a concept, the judgment of taste must be found upon a mere sensation of the mutually quickening activity of the imagination in its freedom, and of the understanding with its conformity to law. It must therefore rest upon a feeling that allows the object to be estimated by the finality of the representation (by which an object is given) for the furtherance of the cognitive faculties in their free play. Taste, then, as a subjective power of judgment, contains a principle of subsumption, not of intuitions under concepts, but of the faculty of intuitions or presentations, i.e., of the imagination, under the faculty of concepts, i.e., the understanding, so far as the former in its freedom accords with the latter in its conformity to law’.


In the realm of individual achievement, at least. In some cultures – throughout the Pacific or the African continent for example – art works are more likely to be the products of a community enterprise. In one sense the production of ukiyo-e prints was as much a group project as an individual achievement.
4  PICTORIAL FUNCTION AND PICTORIAL CHARACTER

I

Pictorial character is conditioned, and sometimes determined, by the particular functions pictures are required to perform. Art making is often held to be a peculiarly individual project, characterized by self-expression or idiosyncratic individual projects. For ukiyo-e this was not usually the case. Ukiyo-e artists seldom worked in a vacuum; their pictures were rarely the sole product of independent whim. Pictures were expected to perform particular tasks – to inform, or to educate, or to promote, for example – and these tasks required pictures to look the way they did in order to do the job competently. Pictures provided practical means to pragmatic ends. In addition, ukiyo-e pictures were made for particular audiences, who had particular expectations of them. The patrons of ukiyo-e painters could expect their works to reflect their own wealth and status, learning, manners or discernment, and they needed paintings that could fit, physically, into their own domestic environments. These conditions favoured particular subjects, sizes and pictorial formats. Ukiyo-e prints, on the other hand, performed quite different functions, communicating about floating world concerns to a diverse urban audience, in a correspondingly diverse range of pictorial projects. The functions pictures were required to perform provided one of the sets of constraints within which artists had to perform, and this could determine the ways pictures looked, or alternatively open possibilities for artists to work in new or particular ways.

In the broadest sense the function of ukiyo-e pictures was to produce the experience of the floating world in the minds of its viewers. In representing the floating world artists were responding to complex needs of their audiences. In ukiyo-e prints, for example, they were reproducing the experience of the floating world for people who could never have accessed it directly in their own life – within the huge new urban population of Edo only a small proportion of citizens had first hand experience of Yoshiwara and its various entertainments; for the remainder their knowledge of this world was generated from ukiyo-zoshi novels and ukiyo-e images. Equally though, ukiyo-e artists found themselves reproducing the experience of the floating world for the enjoyment of its participants (its actors and their audiences, its courtesans and their clients, its drinkers, poets, artists – the tsū or informed dandy participants of the floating world). Also, ukiyo-e artists were themselves participants in this world. The Torii school painters participated as informed promoters of the theatre for example; Harunobu was the distanced but participant observer; Utamaro the unabashedly hedonist participant. With each artist the nature of their personal involvement is evident in the different character of their pictures – in the theatricality of Torii compositions for example, in the precise and delicate interactions of Harunobu’s figures, or in the sensual languor of those of Utamaro.

Ukiyo-e artists participated in the construction both of the fact and the concept of the floating world, its ethos and its habits. By representing the habits and manners of floating world participants ukiyo-e artists acted as agents for their cultivation both within the floating world and amongst the broader Edo society. Ukiyo-e was not an outsider
representation of this world, but an intimately enmeshed part of it. The ideal of the floating world as represented by *ukiyo-e* artists did not always correspond with its reality. Images were tailored to the expectations of their audiences. Thus Yoshiwara was represented as a ‘glittering world’ of extravagance, conspicuous display and consumption and overt sensuality. It was in fact a world of short careers, repressive indenture and a debased and imprisoned lifestyle. *Ukiyo-e* helped to fabricate the artifice while simultaneously promoting the real activities of this world.

The functions *ukiyo-e* were required to perform became manifest in three different aspects of *ukiyo-e* paintings: pictorial subject, pictorial style, and pictorial format. Pictorial functions could determine the choices of subjects that artists might make. As described in the first chapter, one broad way of explaining *ukiyo-e* was to define it through its preoccupation with genre subject matter. Its scope encompasses the whole gamut of scenes from daily life, from the domestic environment, through rustic activities of rural peasants, or urban street scenes, to representations of people at work or at play. Within this diverse range, however, subjects from the more narrowly defined ‘floating world’ itself provide the recurrent themes of *ukiyo-e* painting. ‘Traditional subjects’ – those which occupied the artists of both Chinese derived modes and the more nationally defined *Yamato-e* - had been confined very much to the representation of deities, classical virtues, or historical or literary subjects, or, especially during the Momoyama period, portraits of distinguished aristocratic and military leaders. The popularity of these subjects was sustained throughout the Tokugawa period, but they were now overwhelmingly displaced by pictorial subjects drawn from the worlds of the theatrical and prostitution districts and the variety of entertainments that were associated with those worlds. The greater proportion of these paintings were images of courtesans or *geisha*, usually depicted full-length, often together with their *kamuro* or other attendants. Sometimes these women were shown dancing, or reading, or playing music or games. More often they were depicted promenading through environments that contain few references to the cloistered world of Yoshiwara. They walk through open spaces in graceful displays of ornate finery.

As well as these representations of individual courtesans, associated genre scenes of the pleasure quarters were also popular. These scenes, sometimes located in rural idylls, sometimes in rooms of Yoshiwara itself, represent courtesans together with their servants and their patrons. These groups are shown taking tea or *sake* or food, playing music or games, engaged in picnics or boating expeditions, or snow or blossom viewing excursions. While the majority focus on the social interactions of the brothel district, some contain more explicit representations of the sexual encounters for which the Yoshiwara district was created.

*Ukiyo*, the ‘floating world’, was a world of paradox: it was both a tangible entity and an intangible one, both accessible and inaccessible. Its tangible form was clearly evident in the physical structures of the Nihonbashi district *kabuki* theatre buildings and the walled-in precinct of Yoshiwara. Its ethos of escape or elevation beyond the mundane concerns of daily life was less readily grasped (even more ethereal was the word’s earlier Buddhist reference to the sadness and transitory character of life). Accessibility to some of its experiences was straightforward - *kabuki* theatre tickets, woodblock print illustrations of floating world experiences, or *ukiyo-zoshi* novels were cheap and, by and large, readily understood by Edo audiences. Other floating world experiences, particularly the literary subtleties of poetry competitions, or the pleasures of Yoshiwara, were accessible only to
that small elite sector of the Edo population that had either sufficient education and manners, or sufficient wit and money, to engage in them.⁶

To a large extent, the factors that determined entry to or exclusion from the floating world were knowledge and wealth. Engagement in many of the pleasures of ukiyo was in itself evidence of privilege. For most it appeared to be a world of glamour and frivolous luxury. The conspicuous expenditure of sometimes vast sums of money was tangible evidence of the careless disregard for thrift for which the Edo chōnin were well-known.

_Ukiyo-e_ paintings were required to represent the richness and extravagance of this world. In representations of _kabuki_ themes this simply entailed a straightforward reproduction of the bright and harshly contrasting colours of the costumes and sets of the theatre. For the higher ranking Yoshiwara courtesans there was no clearer evidence of wealth and status than the _kimono_. Collections of _kimono_, some immensely expensive, many quite old, often beautifully hand-painted with intricate scenes or patterns, were carefully tended and passed down within each _myōseki_. A courtesan’s _kimono_ bore witness to her knowledge and good taste, and to her social standing within her world. Its decorations might include iconographic clues to her own identity, or at least to her adopted professional name, and might even indicate the house or employer to whom she belonged.⁷ The most ornate were rarely worn in the course of a woman’s normal working day. Their use was reserved for public displays of fashion and wealth in carefully contrived outings, processional promenades through the streets of Edo, for blossom viewing expeditions or boating parties on the Sumida River.

Just as a high ranking courtesan’s occasional public displays reminded the Edo world of her exclusivity, taste and status, _ukiyo-e_ painters were charged with the task of reproducing these very qualities in their paintings. To some extent this involved the straightforward representation of qualities of dress and manners in images of courtesans. The rich, intense colours of the multiple layers of silks, particularly the luscious reds, purest whites, or brightest of yellows and blues, became the characteristic colours of _ukiyo-e_ painting. Over these were traced intricate layers of linear pattern that replicated every fine detail of woven or stencil-printed patterns. The details of appliqués of precious metallic threads were carefully recorded in gold and silver pigments, or the intricacies of images hand-painted onto _kimono_ were carefully translated into the paintings.

In a way quite complementary to the images represented in _ukiyo-e_ paintings, the very pigment employed was indicative of wealth and excess. In diametric contrast to the parsimonious thin layers of _sumi_ ink washes in the painting of the Kanō school, the richer _ukiyo-e_ paint surfaces were built up with thicker opaque layers of denser, brighter pigments. Just as the expensive lapis lazuli ultramarine pigment adopted by quattrocento Italian painters for certain sections of a painting conferred a particular value or status on the part of the image so painted, the sheer extravagance of some of the pigments of _ukiyo-e_ painting were an unequivocal statement of the wealth and extravagance of the subjects the images described (and, implicitly, of the wealth of the patron for whom they were painted).⁸ In addition to the five foundation colours blue (sei), yellow (ō), black (kuro), white (hyaku) and red (seki), the painters of _ukiyo-e_ were able to embellish their paint surfaces with precious metals – powdered gold and silver were both favoured – and with a crimson manufactured from the stamens of the saffron crocus. The other expensive colours were the mineral pigments known as _iwamono_ that included blue (gunjiō), a darker Prussian
blue (konjō), a light bluish-green (gunroku), green (rokushō), light green (byakugin), pea green (charoku shō) and light red (sango matsu). 9

While ukiyo-e prints were cheap, and available for most of the Edo public throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ukiyo-e paintings seem to have been much more expensive. This was not just a consequence of the high cost of pigments. The most popular painters, from Hishikawa Moronobu or the painters of the Kaigetsudō, through Nishikawa Sukenobu, the Torii painters, the Katsukawa artists, through the three generations of Utagawa School painters, each enjoyed high reputations in their day. Their painted works were sought after, and highly valued, not by the everyday Edo worker, but by its wealthier citizens.

The precise cost of ukiyo-e paintings is difficult to establish. Certainly both anecdotal and documentary evidence suggests that they were considerably more expensive than woodblock prints. Timothy Clark notes, for example, that while the prices of colour woodblock prints remained fairly constant at about twenty mon each, some sets of hanging scrolls by Hiroshige seem to have been valued at as much as sixty to three hundred ryō (the value fluctuated between 3,700 – 6000 copper mon = 1 ryō). 10 Who could afford to pay such sums for paintings? Little is known of the patronage for ukiyo-e painting, partly because it was only one sector of a much more complex array of school/patron relations, and partly because huge numbers of ukiyo-e paintings, records of contracts, commissions or bills of sale, have been destroyed over the years, particularly by the fires that periodically ravaged the Japanese capital. Clark suggests that some commissions came from ukiyo-e publishers – literate and relatively well-to-do men who maintained ongoing professional partnerships with ukiyo-e artists – and minor-ranking daimyō (feudal lords) who had broken the tedium of their bun obligations in Edo by engaging in the pleasures of the floating world. 11

Donald Jenkins, on the other hand, suggests that the newly elevated Edo merchantile class might have formed the principal audience for ukiyo-e paintings:

One of the few avenues of self-expression left open to them, apart from scholarship or devotion to their work, was pleasure. This probably explains the intensity with which so many Edo chōnin pursued pleasure. They spent vast amounts of money and creative energy on pursuits that to us often seem frivolous. Yet they also attended the theater, took part in poetry contests, followed the latest trends in music, and purchased paintings. They became, in short, patrons of the arts; and the arts responded by increasingly reflecting the interests of their new patrons. The result was a burgeoning of new forms of expression: kabuki, ukiyo-e, and the proliferation of amusing literary genres known collectively as gesaku. The chōnin, the merchants, were not the only patrons of the new art forms, as we will learn later, but there can be no question that they constituted the primary market for them, that it was their money that stimulated their development. 12

Nishiyama Matsunosuke explains that by the mid-eighteenth century the Edo population contained a cosmopolitan mixture of warrior and chōnin, and suggests that both classes engaged in the pleasures of Yoshiwara, mixing freely, and equally adeptly as patrons of the arts. 13

Warrior or chōnin, the audience for ukiyo-e painting was affluent, literate, and attuned to the tastes of the floating world. It had clear expectations of its pictures: they expected painters to be able to reproduce all of the colour and energy, the subtleties of mystery and eroticism, the personalities, manners and practices of that world. Though in some ways the chōnin patrons were well educated – they were literate, numerate, and
highly knowledgeable in the ways of commerce – they had never been privy to the sort of cultural education that had been enjoyed by aristocratic patrons since Heian times. This was an education which (with some notable exceptions) had cultivated a taste for the austere in almost every area of life, from cuisine through theatre, verse and calligraphy, to sumi-e painting. By the mid-eighteenth century the chōnin class were clearly aware of the value of engaging in leisure and cultural pursuits. Games, contests, parties and outings offered a release from the intense tensions of the commercial working day, activities that could occupy the leisure time that few had been able to enjoy before, and opportunities to display their new-found wealth and knowledge. The result was the development of taste, in literature, art and social entertainments, unfettered by parsimony or historical precedent, and fertilized by a universal acceptance in the values of conspicuous consumption and the public display of knowledgeable savoir-faire.\(^\text{14}\)

In painting this new taste was reflected in the popularity of floating world themes as pictorial subjects, and in a taste for brightness, intensity and, eventually, decorative excess. The new patrons confronted painters with a far more pragmatic problem however: they favoured paintings of different scale and format than earlier patrons. Momoyama art collectors had been, almost without exception, aristocratic and military leaders. They lived in relatively large buildings. This in itself was not unique – contemporary fishing or farming villages, for example, also had very large timber-framed domestic architecture. Whole communities could be housed in these buildings.\(^\text{15}\) The luxury of aristocratic households was space. Momoyama patrons lived in relatively spacious apartments and were therefore able to favour relatively large formats for paintings. There were two popular forms of moveable painting. The first, especially popular for portraits, was the single sheet painting, usually in hanging scroll format. A range of sizes was popular, but the larger formats of approximately 75 x 53 cm., and 120 x 58 cm., were favoured.\(^\text{16}\) On an even larger scale were free-standing folding screens. Usually painted in pairs, the more popular six-fold screens usually measured approximately 160 x 370 cm., for each six-fold assemblage. The even larger eight-fold screens were generally about 190 x 500 – 600 cm., in size, and again, were usually painted in pairs.\(^\text{17}\) Even placed close to the wall these screens occupied a significant amount of floor space.

Ukiyo-e patrons, on the other hand, favoured different formats and different scales. Free-standing screens appear to have been quite rare. The predominant forms were hand scrolls, usually about 30 cm., in height, and of varying length, and hanging scrolls. The most popular size for the latter seems to have been about 90 x 33 cm. Smaller formats included the vertical hanging scroll format of approximately 65 x 30 cm., and the horizontal format of approximately 33 x 53 cm.\(^\text{18}\) These smaller formats had three key characteristics: they were predominantly wall-mounted or table-top, rather than free-standing, formats; they were considerably smaller than Momoyama paintings, and were easily stored. All three qualities made them ideal solutions for the problem of displaying art works in the relatively small interiors of even the wealthier Edo homes.\(^\text{19}\)

Ukiyo-e woodblock prints appealed to a diverse public, from the tsū connoisseur of the floating world to the huge working class population. In catering to the needs of a heterogeneous public the form itself became characterized by diversity.

One key function for ukiyo-e prints was the illustration of written texts. The illustration of text had been a function of woodblock printed images for several centuries prior to the development of ukiyo-e. The very earliest appear to have been printed as
Buddhist or Shinto charms or mantras, perhaps as early as the seventh or eighth century. The majority of prints of this type that have survived date from the Kamakura period (1185 – 1336). These images were required to perform several functions. They were teaching devices, an aid to the spiritual education of a public with limited literacy. They needed also to convey something of the magical or spiritual experience of religious devotion – as objects of prayer, as devices used in the practice of prayer, or as talismans that could bring good fortune or protection. On a more pragmatic level, they were objects of exchange; their sale was a key source of funds for the temples and shrines from which they were distributed.

To fulfil the requirements of the first of these functions, these prints had to be simple and easily understood. Thus textual messages consisted of single prayers, or even single phrases, accompanied by symbolic references – images of the Buddha’s footstep for example – or the images of single deities – Shakyamuni, Amida, Kannon, Fudō, Shōtoku Taishi or Bishamonten. Each of these deities was easily recognizable through their characteristic attributes or emblems. To perform the second function, they had to be easily distributed and cheap to produce. They thus tended to be small in scale, single sheet prints, each printed from a single block in one colour only, usually black.

Though *ukiyo-e* prints were, in contrast, almost always secular in character, many still retained something of the spiritual preoccupation of these early precursors, through their focus on superstition or the fear of the supernatural. This was particularly evident in the production of prints whose purpose was to ward off illness or natural disaster for example – issues of real concern in the densely packed urban environment of Edo, with its neighbouring wetlands and marshes. It was even more evident in the persistent popularity of pictures of ghosts – the *yōkai*, *yūrei* and *oni* that recur throughout Japanese literature.

One important function for woodblock prints was the provision of illustrations for books. Indeed, the evolution of woodblock-printed images and hand-printed books were intimately related, and the same publishing networks commissioned and supervised the production and distribution of both forms. One distinctive characteristic of life in Edo was an acute consciousness of the role of language for the development of new patterns of cultural identity. The Edo population had become increasingly literate, and the proliferation of illustrated books both reflected and contributed to this. There was a proliferation of different types of book during this period. Not all could be described as *ukiyo-e*, but under the umbrella of *ukiyo-zoshi* (‘floating world books’) were included *sharebon* (‘smart book’, witty novelettes, mainly about the licensed quarters) *kibyōshi* (‘yellow covered book’, small scale volumes of illustrated fiction, often satirical), *yomihon* (‘reading books’, often historical novels, and didactic in character), and *makura-ehon* (erotic books).

The function of providing illustrations for texts conditioned the development of the *ukiyo-e* print in a number of ways. In the first instance, it established precedents for a favoured scale for *ukiyo-e* prints. Though often printed in multiple volumes hand printed books were quite small (refer Appendix 2), a condition determined by requirements of portability – books were not only bought during this period, but were regularly loaned from one reader to another. The older hand-scroll format could be unrolled for perusal on a table-top, but each scroll could contain only a limited amount of information, and scrolls were bulky and difficult to store. Books were necessarily more compact, easily stored, and held in the hand for reading.
This smallness of scale, established in *ukiyo-e* books and sustained in *ukiyo-e* prints, determined a particular intimacy in the way *ukiyo-e* were viewed. Generally Japanese audiences were used to viewing paintings positioned vertically, whether hung on a wall or painted directly onto it, or free-standing in the case of screen paintings. They could step back from the image to gain the distance necessary to view the composition as a whole, and they were viewing images whose position and scale related in some degree to the scale and line of sight of an adult. With the exception of hand-scrolls and decorated ephemera, these were the conditions attendant on the viewing of paintings.

Books were apprehended from a much closer distance however, perhaps from as close as thirty centimetres. This practice of viewing objects or images held in the hand was sustained with *ukiyo-e* single sheet prints (*ichimai-e*). Though there appear to have been many instances where prints were displayed on the wall, they were generally viewed singly, held in the hand, or in simple concertina-like bound volumes on a table-top. This allowed the viewer to perceive each composition both as a whole, and in closer detail, and this facility determined the close integration of a cohesive pictorial structure and finely articulated pictorial or technical detail that became the hallmark of the Japanese print.

The task of illustrating text had a profound effect on the development of the stylistic character of *ukiyo-e*. Illustrations remained monochromatic and essentially linear in character for a surprisingly long period – from before 1600 to the mid-eighteenth century. This was partly a matter of economics – each page of text or illustration could be printed off a single block. Where moveable type was used, as in the anonymous *Ise monogatari* of 1608, pages of text were separate from image pages. Later, combined compositions of text and image became the norm, with both text and image printed off the same block. The integration of illustrative content and text on the same page determined the way in which this particularly linear character developed. Both artist/designers and block-cutters developed a facility for applying a very broad range of linear characteristics that allowed their illustrations to become exceptionally descriptive, particularly of qualities of texture and surface or the flowing qualities of garments, and which also engendered an idiomatic sympathy between the drawn line of the image and the calligraphic mark of the characters.

Multi-block printing, and the development of *nishiki-e* did not really reach its peak until the late 1760s. The first really consistently accomplished achievement in this field was in the illustrated books and single sheet prints of the last decade of Suzuki Harunobu’s career. The multi-block mode of the ‘brocade print’ was subsequently adopted by almost every *ukiyo-e* illustration artist, and this, in turn, established the standard for single sheet prints. Through the peculiarity of the Japanese binding process, two page illustrations, on facing pages, were actually printed in two halves, off separate blocks. The result was frequent mismatches of colour or linear alignment. This same printing convention was sustained in the printing of polyptych prints. Each separate sheet of a triptych or diptych, for example, was usually printed off separate blocks, at separate times, and this accounts for discrepancies between each section of the image. The other key stylistic legacy of the role of the illustrator was in the establishment of the serial print as one of the most popular forms. Serial images allowed artists to publish prints in sets of related subjects, or in narrative sequences. Utamaro, for example, published most of his best-known collections of prints as named series, and later the series was to become the favoured format for Hokusai and Hiroshige.
The final consequence of the illustrative function of woodblock prints was the development of the publishing infrastructure that eventually nurtured the promotion of the woodblock prints. A complex web of enterprise was necessary for the publication of illustrated books. At its heart lay the relation between publishers, artists and writers (often, as with Santō Kyōden, artist and writer were the same person). In addition, the widespread production and consumption of books required calligraphers, book binders, designers, papermakers, block cutters, block makers, printers and book-sellers (besides being sold from shops on the publishers or printer’s premises, prints and books were often sold by itinerant sellers). It required these people in huge numbers, and it required them to be highly skilled. The development of this infrastructure and its high level of technical facility were a necessary condition for the successful development of the nishiki-e print.

The principal function for ukiyo-e prints was an informing one. They were cheap, easily and widely distributed, and readily understood. This made them an ideal vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge. In later years, during the Meiji period, they performed a function not unlike a newspaper, informing the general public of current events, the development of technology and the process of Westernisation of Japan – the process of bunmei kaika, or civilization and enlightenment – or the key events of the Sino-Japanese war for example.

In this role ukiyo-e prints played an important part in the single most significant change in over two hundred and fifty years of Japanese history – the Meiji Restoration. The restoration was not a straightforward process. It followed a long period of sustained peace and prosperity, especially evident in the improved lifestyles of urban people. It also came at the end of a long period of political seclusion, evident in international relations, and in the careful maintenance of official control over almost every area of life. The government had, through a series of sumptuary edicts, controlled extravagance in spending and in decoration for example, and had restricted public knowledge about those in control – the pictorial representation of the shōgun, for example, had long been prohibited.

Toyohara Chikanobu’s portrait of the Meiji Emperor (Plate 19) was one of the first officially sanctioned images of the young leader to be made available to the Edo public. The importance and position of Meiji are reflected in the physical surroundings, the ornate decoration of the imperial buildings, and the court ladies arranged about him and the male court staff formally seated in the distance. This image thus represents the wealth, power and status of the new Emperor; it also works on more complex levels however. In the first instance, for the vast majority of the Edo public (including Chikanobu himself) this image afforded one of their first glimpses of Meiji. Apart from a tiny court coterie no-one had seen him before. His whole life had been carefully cloistered and concealed from the public eye; even the first official photograph of the Emperor was not published until 1872, six years after the restoration of imperial government. The ukiyo-e print thus provided, for many Japanese, the first knowledge they had of the Emperor:

At the beginning of his reign the existence of the Emperor Meiji was unknown to most of his subjects, but the nishiki-e, showing him amongst scenes that were known to the public at large and revealing the changes that had been brought about during his enlightened reign, endeared him to his subjects at large.

This print, and others like it, formed the Japanese public’s only view of Meiji, but it was a representation that was necessary if public support for his government was to be sustained.
Chikanobu’s composition portrays the young leader in a particular light. His own dress, a highly ornate European styled naval uniform, is repeated in the dress of the male attendants in the distance, and emphasized by contrast with the traditional dress of the women. The impression of wealth and status of the dress and surroundings is reflected also in the technical character of the print itself, in the intricate gauffrage-embossed patterns of the women’s white outer kimono, for example, and in the adoption of aniline dyes for the reds, blues, greens and purples. This latter characteristic was not just evidence of the expense of the printing process used here (these newly adopted pigments were far more expensive than the older vegetable dyes they replaced), but these pigments had been developed in the West, and their adoption in this print was in itself evidence both of the relaxation of government control that had allowed the importation of these pigments, and of the newly progressive and Europhile policies of the Japanese government.

This print and those of the following twenty years, were occupied with the promotion of the new government as modern and forward thinking. They celebrated the introduction of the railway, the new tall buildings of brick, steel and cement, western fashions, and increasing levels of engagement with western nations. They also marked the end of the world that had nurtured the ethos and the habits of ukiyo.

During the Tokugawa period prints functioned as something of a broadsheet. They were the principal means of informing the public about events in contemporary Edo, particularly those of the kabuki theatre or Yoshiwara. This function involved the promotion of specific events – particular productions for example. Beyond the advertisement of each season’s playbill however, ukiyo-e prints promoted the individual careers of each actor, or the particular attractions of each courtesan. As well they became the principal means of disseminating current fashions in clothing and accessories. When a particular actor or courtesan was represented in the latest in fabric or kimono design, for example, that fashion could quickly become the rage throughout Edo:

When… the seventh Danjūrō wore a costume with the design of a symbol of sickle (kama) and the syllables wa and mu – thus spelling the word kamawanu (‘I don’t care’) in rebus form- a kamawanu fad immediately swept through the city. This fad stimulated the production of a large variety of dyed fabrics and kimono or kerchiefs with the kamawanu design. Somewhat earlier, the checkered pattern of the obi used by the actor Sanokawa Ichimatsu (1722-1762) had become a highly fashionable design. The famous mid-eighteenth century onnagata Segawa Kikunojo was also a pivotal figure in determining women’s fashions!

Thus when Utagawa Kuniyasu’s representation of a standing courtesan (Plate 7) was distributed during the 1820’s, even though the courtesan herself remained anonymous, the image promoted a fashion for the combination of iki vertical blue stripe and geometric pattern with horizontal hem layers and a contrasting obi of red chequered and golden blossom design. Both the fashionability and the potential sexiness of the fabric combinations were confirmed by the tobacco box and pipe (tobacco smoking was a most fashionable activity at the time) and green covered books of shunga-e. The fashionability of this combination was confirmed by the consistence of its portrayal with those of other contemporary prints.

Fifty years later Utagawa Yoshiiku’s representation of the geisha Ariwara (Plate 13), in a way that was consistent with other contemporary representation of floating world
entertainments, confirmed a shift in fashion to pictorial, rather than geometric, ornament. Ariwara’s inner *kimono* is decorated with images of flowing river waters and autumnal falling maple leaves: her *kamuro*’s *kimono* bears an image of pine branches. Ariwara’s outer *kimono* confirmed a fashion for contrasting layers of colour – blue against the reds of *obi* and undergarment fading out into white in the lower arch which contrasts strikingly against the deep blue of the inner *kimono*. Just as Kuniyasu’s composition confirmed a public taste for *iki* fashions during the 1820’s, Yoshiiku’s generated a fashion for the pictorial and the ornate in 1869.

This promotion of floating world fashions through the medium of *ukiyo-e* prints was successful because the woodblock print had always been used to promote the entertainments of Yoshiwara in particular. This was evident, for example, in the development of the Yoshiwara ‘guidebooks’ such as Suzuki Harunobu’s 1770 publication *Ehon seirō bijin awase* (*Picture Book Comparison of the Beauties of the Green Houses*). These guides to the personalities and the practices of Yoshiwara courtesans usually contained separate (though rarely individuated) portraits of each of a number of courtesans or *geisha* from a particular house or houses. Though most of these women look very similar, each is usually identifiable by the inclusion of a *mon* or their name. In addition, the particular strength or attraction of the entertainments each woman could provide was indicated by the inclusion of, say, a *samisen*, or calligraphy equipment, or carefully presented food and wine.

These guides performed an important function, besides identifying the key personalities of Yoshiwara. The habits and manners and practices of Yoshiwara were complex, but rigorously observed. For the knowledgeable *tsū* it was relatively easy to make one’s way through the web of protocols with some aplomb. For those newly arrived men approaching the officially approved brothel district for the first time, however, the path was more difficult to follow, and the potential for making a disastrous gaffe was high. *Ukiyo-e* guides gave new clients the knowledge they needed to consummate a satisfactory transaction.

By the end of the eighteenth century the production of guides to Yoshiwara was still one of the principal functions for *ukiyo-e*. It was the central occupation of the publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō, for example, who occupied premises directly opposite the main entrance to Yoshiwara. The most famous of the artists indentured to Jūzaburō was Kitagawa Utamaro, and from the earliest days of their association Utamaro contributed to the designs of brothel guidebooks and other related ephemera.

Under Utamaro’s hand the representation of the Yoshiwara courtesan underwent a considerable transformation. In the first instance the information in his pictures became more complex and comprehensive, and more explicitly, if still very subtly, indicated. This is evident, for example, in the means of identification of both Takao and Tomimoto Toyohina and of recognizing their particular knowledge of music, painting, dress, *bonsai* and entertainments, in the first image of Utamaro’s *Chūshingura mitate* series (Plate 1). For the remainder of the series the identities of Utamaro’s women were clearly stated, either by the inclusion of a *mon* or associated emblems in their dress, - the courtesan Hanaogi, for example, could be identified by the ornament of flowers (*hana*) and fans (*ogi*) that formed a pun on both her own name and that of her employer (*Ogiya*) – or by their name, or sometimes by the inclusion of a rebus that reflected Utamaro’s own fondness for poetic games. In one example from a 1795 series of ‘picture riddle’ portraits of courtesans,
Utamaro has constructed a rebus for the name of the courtesan Tomimoto Itsutomi which might read:

‘I’ (well), ‘tsuto’ (package), ‘mii’ (straw basket), ‘horor’ (hood), ‘ci’ (flatfish), ‘soro’ (half of an abacus, soroban), ‘heko’ (sleeping child), ‘ro’ (oar), ‘bi’ (fire, hi with a voicing mark), ‘ka’ (mosquito), ‘kama’ (sickle), ‘ru’ (thread), ‘hanashi’ (four flowers – flower, hana + four shi). This would mean: ‘The story of when Itsutomi has got a little drunk and will soon keel over and fall asleep.’

Later, both a public demand for a greater degree of realism in ukiyo-e portraits and Utamaro’s own concern for representational fidelity led to changes in the form and appearance of ukiyo-e prints. The formal change came with the introduction of the okubi-e ‘big head’ format – close up studies of the upper half of the body, or even of head and shoulders only. The stylistic change came in an increasing preoccupation with the representation of physical likeness both of named individuals (as in both his portrait and mitate-e images of Itsutomi or Hanaogi for example) and of generic types (witness Utamaro’s series Fujin sōgaku juttai – Ten Types of the Physiognomic Study of Women, of c. 1792 – 1793).

The function of representations of Yoshiwara beauties was not confined to the promotion of individual courtesans or their specialist skills. Underlying these specific representations was a broader promotion of Yoshiwara itself. The officially sanctioned brothel quarter may have enjoyed a legal advantage over its less favoured competitors in other parts of the city, but it was also far more expensive and exclusive in its habits. It was reliant on a consistent programme of public promotion, and ukiyo-e prints performed this function. Just as the theatrical promotions of the Torii painters had relied on a theatricality of stylistic character to compliment that of the theatre, the Yoshiwara representations of Harunobu, Kiyonaga and Utamaro were reliant on a certain sensuality of stylistic character to promote the sensual nature of Yoshiwara. Thus Harunobu’s youthful courtesans dance lightly and playfully in a free translation of the light and playful manners of the courtesans of his day (Aki no kaze, Autumn Breeze, 1760s, Plate 20). Kiyonaga’s elongated figures reflect not only very iki habits of dress, but also a languid and graceful suspension of time, implicitly sensual in character. Utamaro’s women are even more explicitly sexual – most obviously so in the shunga-e, but also in the (again restrained and iki in character) repeated glimpses of naked flesh, an ankle here, a breast there, the nape of a neck here, sometimes seen through a subtle opening in the clothing, sometimes through the filmy gauze of the mosquito net (see Kitagawa Utamaro, Kaya – Mosquito Net, from the series Model Young Women Woven in Mist, Plate 21). Beyond the representation of individual courtesans, Utamaro’s own life became so intimately enmeshed with that of Yoshiwara that his ukiyo-e prints became concerned with the representation of sensuality itself.

In Kunisada’s representation of a standing actor (Plate 14) the individual actor is not named. The character he was playing at the time the print was published is named in the characters at upper right; they read as ‘Shirocho’. Shiro was a valiant mythical warrior, often shown astride of and killing a boar at the hunting party at which the Soga brother’s revenge was enacted. The heroic status of the warrior is indicated not only by the actor’s stoic and upright stance, but also by the band of sakura, cherry blossom, in the background.

In the later theatrical portraits the identity of the actor was usually indicated by the inclusion of his name, in a small cartouche, or by a mon or emblem. Though here the actor
is not identified by name, every contemporary viewer would have recognized him easily. The portion of the obscured mon on the breast of his kimono is that of the Osaka branch of the Narita-ya – the theatrical identity most closely associated with the Ichikawa family of actors. This theatrical dynasty, the most famous in kabuki history, was instituted by Ichikawa Danjūrō I (c. 1651 - 1705), the originator of the aragoto, ‘bravura’ style of acting in the kabuki theatre. Danjūrō I and the successors that carried his name right to the present day adopted as their mon the mimasu design of three concentric squares – a design founded on the wooden boxes used for measuring rice.

There is no sign of this logo in this image. Instead the actor’s kimono is decorated with the stylized representations of images of lobsters or prawns. The lobster – ise-ebi – was the emblem adopted by the actor Ebizō. The first actor to assume the name Ebizō was Ichikawa Danjūrō II. This shumei, or adoption of a new name, occurred in 1735. The best known of the actors who adopted the name was Ichikawa Danjūrō V (1741 – 1806). He passed the name Danjūrō on to his fifteen-year-old son, and adopted the name Ebizō III from 1791 – right at the height of his career.

This portrait is not of Danjūrō V however. He died in 1806. This print is signed by Kōchōrō Kunisada – Kunisada I, who later, from 1844, signed his name Toyokuni. Kunisada had assumed the go name Kōchōrō as early as 1829, and he used it consistently from 1833. This indicates that the actor represented is neither Danjūrō V nor his relatively unsuccessful successor Danjūrō VI. It is a representation of Danjūrō VII, also known as Ebizō, the actor who revived the Danjūrō family fortunes. Danjūrō VII had assumed the name of Ebizō from 1832. A print of this nature was published specifically to celebrate the shumei, or change of name.

Like the illustrators of ukiyo-zoshi, the designers of ukiyo-e theatre and brothel district prints rarely worked alone; they worked by contract – formal or informal – with a complex web of other figures. Even in instances where a pictorial project may have been initiated by a particular artist, the art-world transactional relationships involved a range of different people and institutions, each with different interests or expectations of pictures, and each able to make some contribution to the picture-making process.

As with book-Illustrations ukiyo-e prints were developed out of relationships, sanctioned by formal contract, between publisher, artist, designer, block-cutter, printer and bookseller. The other key formal relation was between student and master artist. Less formal relationships were forged in different ways. In the first instance they were developed between artists and their peers. Within schools these types of relation were implicit in the mutual roles of fellow students. Later, however, as practicing artists, they were able to give such relations a more explicit shape, as in the collaboration between Toyohara Kunichika and Kawanabe Kyōsai for example (Plate 17). Such collaborations were commonplace during the nineteenth century, and were often forged to allow artists to combine the skills for which they were especially popular – the landscape of Hiroshige for example, with the figure images of Kunisada.

The second less formally negotiated relation was between artists and their pictorial subjects. In representing actors or courtesans in popular prints, artists were operating from a unique position: the character of their representations of these figures directly influenced the ways their public perceived them. Government bodies were acutely aware of the
implications of this, and this is why they ensured the representation of themselves remained prohibited. For actors and courtesans it was critically important that their representation should be, at the least, both recognizable and flattering; at best it should actively promote their own interests and careers. One outcome of this was the forging of close social relationships between individual artists, actors, and courtesans. This is also why Toyokuni, for example, was so insistent on the careful observation of realistic detail in representation of actors, not just in his own works, but, through the models he provided (see Toyokuni’s book of nigao, Plate 11) for his numerous pupils to copy from. This practice not only ensured the maintenance of a consistent house style, but it guaranteed also the maintenance of a positive relationship with the figures who featured in the images.\textsuperscript{44} Ukiyo-e artists were absorbed into, and became participants of the floating world culture that they represented in their pictures. From this privileged stand-point they were able to represent their subjects with an increasing degree of accuracy.

The third implicit relationship was that between print designers and their audiences. \textit{Ukiyo-e} pictures were, perhaps, unique in appealing to a broad range of audiences. The Edo population itself comprised people from both \textit{samurai} and \textit{chōnin} backgrounds, and within the latter group were numerous subgroups – merchants, craftsmen, service people and so forth. \textit{Ukiyo-e}, in different forms, appealed not only to this whole spectrum of newly affluent and literate towns-people, but also to the people from the provinces who regularly visited the city.\textsuperscript{45}

This heterogeneous mix that constituted the audience for \textit{ukiyo-e} had widely divergent expectations of its images. The highly educated literati expected the representation of literary or historical subjects, rich with allusions to earlier Chinese themes, or the history of Japanese verse. This audience generated the demand for the highly allusive \textit{mitate-e} or \textit{surimono}. Provincial visitors purchased views of Edo, or of traveller’s stations along the Tōkaidō or Kisokaidō highways as souvenirs of their travels.\textsuperscript{46} Their demands were a catalyst in the development of the landscape print. \textit{Kabuki-e} appealed to a much broader spectrum of the population – \textit{kabuki} audiences appear to have comprised people from most sectors of Edo society – and so formed a correspondingly important part of the \textit{ukiyo-e} enterprise.\textsuperscript{47} The same might be said about images of the \textit{mizu shobai}, the ‘water trade’ of sexual services that included the activities of Yoshiwara, but within the broad audience for these prints can be identified a range of expectations. For fashionable (\textit{fūryū}) young women, images of Yoshiwara courtesans were exemplars of fashions in dress and deportment; for visitors to Yoshiwara they were guides to specialties in sexual favour and social deportment; for most citizens they provided a voyeuristic glimpse of a world to which they could not gain admission. In each instance the representations had a different focus: on fashionable couture; on sexual and social behaviours; on personalities and reputations. Some audiences were wealthy; many more were relatively poor. The former group created a demand for \textit{ukiyo-e}-paintings, the latter for the more easily affordable popular art of \textit{ukiyo-e} prints. The result of this diversity of audience expectations was a corresponding diversity of pictorial outcome, most obviously in terms of pictorial format (painting or print for example) or in terms of pictorial subject, but equally in terms of stylistic character. The audiences for \textit{kabuki-e} demanded bright colour and dynamic composition; those for landscape required a fair degree of representational verity, the literati expected subtlety. Seen as a whole, the works of \textit{ukiyo-e} were thus far more varied in character than those of any other school of Japanese painting or design.
II

One of the principal functions of ukiyo-e lay in the telling of stories – in the representation of historical, mythical or literary narrative in pictorial form. This is not surprising, given the narrative function of earlier scroll painting formats, or the historical evolution of the illustrated book. The horizontal painted scroll and the ukiyo-e block-printed book established precedents for a number of conventions that were sustained in single-sheet prints.\(^{48}\) The scale of single-sheet prints remained fairly consistent with that of the double-page spread of an opened out illustrated book for example. The relation of pictorial sequence to that of the literary narrative, as well as to page sequences, chapter structures and volume arrangements (most early books were published in numerous small volumes) was preserved in the conventional pictorial modes of serial sets, pictorial albums or polyptych formats. In more complex ways, the conventions for spatial organization within the page format, for the spatial integration of pictorial and textual content, and for calligraphic consistency between written character and pictorial motif that had characterized the illustrated book were preserved in the single and multiple-sheet ukiyo-e print.

The characteristic format of the ukiyo-e woodblock print was the single-sheet print, typically of chūban or ōban size. In order to convey the continuities of the literary narrative, these were conceived and published as pictorial series or sequences of images. Each series comprised a logically ordered sequence of individual images, each of which illustrated a particular episode of a story. Once drawn up, each image was then printed and published separately, sometimes in sequential order, sometimes not.\(^{49}\) Seen as a whole, and in order, each series can represent something of the narrative continuity of the story it illustrates; equally, each individual print can work successfully as a discrete art work.

This function of the representation of literary narrative through the serial print format was particularly important for kabuki. Kabuki scripts were fragmentary, and often the lines were re-invented by individual actors during each new production of a play. Indeed, the articulate and dramatic skill of highly successful actors like those of the Ichikawa line was largely founded on their ability to extemporize in ways that preserved the traditional form of the play (kabuki was a repertory genre) while imbuing each production with a novel character. Kabuki audiences were thus unable to obtain and enjoy a written script of a favourite play in the same way as, say, Mozart’s audiences could access a libretto, or as a film today can be enjoyed also in written form as a novel. Prints, published as illustrated books or albums, or individually in series, performed the function of telling the stories of the theatre to its public.

One of the most popular kabuki plays during the Tokugawa period, and even today, was Kanadehon Chūshingura – the Treasury, or Copybook, of Loyal Retainers. It has been performed, in one form or another, and under a variety of titles, in almost every season since its first presentation in 1706. Its early popularity was probably due to its oblique representation of actual, and scandalous, events of the time, news of whose publication through the normal channels was prohibited. Its popularity was sustained through its unequivocal focus on the classical samurai values of chū, (loyalty), giri (duty) and on (debt to one’s superiors or forbears).\(^{50}\) The epic story of the forty-seven loyal rōnin was equally popular with the public for ukiyo-e prints; in almost every season the theatrical productions
were accompanied by the publication of series of prints. During the off-season audience enthusiasm was sustained through the publication of illustrated books both of the *Chūshingura* narrative and, more fancifully, of many off-shoot sequences or parodies of the original story. Some artists, like Hokusai, illustrated the tale repeatedly, both as pictorial series and in book form.\(^{51}\)

The last of Hokusai’s serial representations of the *Chūshingura* tale was that published by Senichi on 1806. In this sequence each of the eleven prints of the set represents a single point in the action of each of the eleven acts that normally make up the play.\(^{52}\) Thus the first print (Plate 22) is a representation of a scene from Act I of the play, *Tsurugaoka shinzen* (*Before the Shrine at Tsurugaoka*). The Kamakura coast is visible on the right, and Fujiyama rises above the horizon in the distance. The Great Pine of Kamakura extends the full length of the picture at left. To the right of the tree, in the foreground, the evil Moronao delivers his love poem to the politely demurring Lady Kaoyo, wife of Enya Hangan. To the left of the pine tree, watching the scene, stands the figure of Momonoi Wakasanosuke, close friend of Enya. Just behind him, to the left, is the Ashikaga *mon*. In the middle ground Lord Ashikaga Tadayoshi, younger brother of the *shōgun* Ashikaga Takauiji, ascends the steps of the new shrine followed by Enya Hangan and another attendant.

The fourth image in the series (Plate 23) is set in the home of Enya Hangan. In the foreground at right Enya’s wife Kaoyo and three attendants are arranging cherry blossoms from a large pot. In the background at left Oboshi Rikiya receives Ishido Umanojo and Yakushiji Jirozaemon, the two envoys of the *shōgun* who have arrived to announce, and supervise compliance with, Enya’s sentence. The scene thus refers only obliquely to its titular subject, *Hangan seppuku* – *The Suicide of Enya Hangan*.

The final image of the series (Plate 24) represents the scene from Act XI, *Gishi yōuchi* (*The Night Attack of the Loyal Samurai*) in which forty-six of the loyal *rōnin* attack Moronao’s mansion. At left the giant figure of Owashi Bungo holds a great mattock high in the air, moments before breaking down the doors.

Told as a sequence of images, each a ‘snapshot’ of a single moment of its corresponding act in the play, the *Chūshingura* narrative doesn’t really make sense. By comparison with a dramatic presentation, the pictorial representation is disjointed and fragmentary, and, while the actions represented in each image are easily recognizable, it is difficult to establish just why each is taking place – why is Kaoyo present in the illustration for Act 1, for example, and why is Moronao handing her a letter? Why are the dignitaries assembled outside the Tsurugaoka shrine? Again in the fourth image there is no direct reference to Enya Hangan’s *seppuku*, nor is there any reference to the eleventh hour appearance of his chief retainer, and the hero of the tale, Oboshi Yuranosuke. And while the final image conveys much of the drama of the *rōnin*’s initial assault on Moronao’s mansion, it tells us nothing of the subsequent events, the search for and execution of Moronao, and the eventual and inevitable mass *seppuku* of the retainers themselves.

In fact, each act of the *Chūshingura* narrative is a complex and lengthy episode, containing not one key scene, but several which could, with equal success, have been represented by the *ukiyo-e* illustrator. A representation of a scene from the first act, for example, might equally have focused on the *Kabuto aratame* (*Examination of the Helmets*) scene of Act I of the play (Plate 25). Utagawa Fusatane’s representation of this scene from
earlier in this act is set in a similar environment to that of Hokusai – the forecourt of the new temple at Tsurugaoka. Several details are similar – the confinement of the space for the celebrations by a blue and white pavilion bearing the Ashikaga mon for example, the decorated trunk of the Great Pine at Kamakura, the shrine itself, and the glimpse of the seas off the Kamakura coast in the background. And like Hokusai, Fusatane has represented Tadayoshi and his retinue ascending the steps up to the shrine in the upper right corner.

The central scene represented in the foreground is, however, quite different from that of Hokusai’s composition. Fusatane has chosen to include four, rather than three, key figures: Lady Kaoyo, in red, seated at left; her husband, Enya Hangan, in blue, and recognizable by his mon of crossed feathers; kneeling before him, in yellow, with a mon of four squares, is Momonoi Wakasanosuke; standing at right, in a black kimono decorated with the character ‘Taka’, is Ko no Moronao. Enya Hangan is holding a military helmet, and this object lies at the crux of this point of the narrative, and explains the actions of several of the characters. The helmet had belonged to Nitta Yoshisada, recently defeated in battle by the Ashikaga forces. As a gesture of respect for the honourable end of his enemy, Tadayoshi, Takauji’s younger brother, has announced that the helmet is to be enshrined in the newly completed Hachiman shrine. Moronao is outraged at the decision – hence his representation here as an indignant figure turning away from, and rejecting, the central group. Having objected, Moronao has claimed further that Yoshisada’s own helmet cannot be readily recognized. Lady Kaoyo had, at an earlier stage, served in the court of Yoshisada, and could be expected to be able to identify the correct helmet. She does so, distinguishing it from forty-six others, by identifying the subtleties of aroma of the incense that Yoshisada had burnt in his helmet prior to the battle. Immediately following this scene Enya will follow Tadayoshi and his retinue into the shrine to install the helmet, and the events represented in Hokusai’s composition will take place.

Both Hokusai and Fusatane chose to represent their respective scenes from Act I much as one might expect to see them arranged across the whole of the kabuki stage. They have tried to contrive as comprehensive a depiction as possible. This has required them to employ certain devices, for the spatial arrangement of the figures for example, and in the scale relationships between figures and environment, that are consistent with the theatrical conventions, and which simply allow them to include a complex range of information. Alternatively an artist might choose to represent one very narrow aspect of a particular scene from any given act. Utagawa Kunisada II, for example, has focused very closely on the figures of Lady Kaoyo and Wakasanosuke in a composition that describes Wakasanosuke’s role as protector of his close friend’s wife, while simultaneously emphasizing the fraught tension of the scene immediately following Moronao’s indiscretion (Plate 26). The presence of anyone else is implicit only – both figures stare towards the right – and the place at which the action takes place is indicated only by the Ashikaga mon behind the figures, and the bunches of pine needles hanging from above.

In one sense ukiyo-e prints were thus at a disadvantage to the actual kabuki performance. Where each act of the play presented the audience with a continuous narrative in which a myriad sequence of events was melded into a single entity (admittedly a very long one), each print was limited to the representation of a single point in the narrative. This meant that, in order to understand the print fully, the viewer needed a sound prior knowledge of the play. To achieve anything approaching the comprehensive narrative thread of the play the ukiyo-e artists would have had to produce many printed images for
each act. They did not. By far the majority of printed representations of Chūshingura were limited to eleven images – one for each act of the play. In some instances, as in Hokusai’s illustrations for Acts III, V, VI, VII and X, a multi-narrative composition that allowed the representation of more than one point in the story within a single composition, but in most instances as artists confined themselves to the representation of a single scene.

While this limitation compromised the ability of printed images to tell the story of Chūshingura or any other literary narrative in any really comprehensive way, graphic representations were able to do some things very well. In the first place, they survived the performance of the play, which was seasonal, and served as a more or less permanent reminder of the key events of the story, especially of remarkable characteristics of a particular production or the performance of a particular actor.  

The function of representing theatrical narrative required ukiyo-e artists to work in particular ways. Working in series was obviously one of these, but the requirements extended to determining the ways artists represented theatrical scenes, in the articulation of pictorial space for example. Print designers were also required to compose quite convincing equivalents for the spatial relations of the kabuki stage. Fusatane for example has used the grid of the foreground plane to construct a graphic equivalent of the forward sloping timber stage of the nineteenth-century kabuki theatre (today’s stages tend to be wider, and deeper, and are sometimes multi-leveled). The flat shapes of the trunk of the pine and of the side of the stone-walled stairway beyond echo the flatness of stage-set props, and the image of the pavilion, the shrine and the sea beyond this are similar to a painted backdrop.

In a similar way ukiyo-e artists could contrive graphic equivalents to that hallmark of kabuki acting, the mie pose, in which each actor adopts a highly expressive (often rather melodramatic) posture and holds himself in that pose, in absolute stillness, for a few pregnant moments before re-establishing the momentum of the narrative. In the composition of Hokusai’s illustration for Act I for example, this is achieved, between the two central figures in particular, by the contrivance of a taut spatial tension between the stooping doubled up figure of Moronao and the opposed and sweeping curve of Kaoyo’s rejection. In order to achieve the theatricality of gesture of the stage version, Hokusai has employed, as graphic equivalents, the conventions of the stage.

In Fusatane’s image the four foreground figures have been represented in just such a frozen moment, in a hippari mie, or group-mie, arrangement in which the attitude and role of each character is fixed quite exactly. In Kunisada’s account of the protective movement of Wakasanosuke and the recoiling turn of Kaoyo, the frozen stillness of the mie pose has again been reproduced in a graphic form. In this instance both the dramatic tension of this point in the narrative and the spatial tension generated between the poses of the two figures have been achieved in pictorial form through the directional opposition of the two figures, and the tension generated in the contrast between the sweeping curve that extends downwards from Kaoyo’s head, through the edges of the front of her kimono, the arm and the sword hilt of Wakasanosuke, and the stacked angular and alternating edges of Wakasanosuke’s robe and the lined pavilion behind the figures. Thus, beyond simply representing the two figures at this point in the narrative, this composition could serve effectively as a long-term reminder of the dramatic tension of a particularly volatile point in the play.
Implicitly therefore, the function of *ukiyo-e* representations of *kabuki* narrative was not to tell the whole story of any particular play; they could do this only in a limited or dislocated fashion. Prints could on the other hand serve different purposes. In the first instance they were a key medium for the promotion of the theatre, essential tools in the intense competition between the four principal theatres of Edo. They could do this explicitly, by representing particular performances of the play, promoting the novelty or invention of each new production, or by representing the principal characters of the play. They could do this also by reproducing something of the intense experience of colour and pattern and movement of the theatre – from the period in which the *nishiki-e* (brocade picture) was perfected in the later 1760s, right through to Meiji period, *ukiyo-e* artists, block cutters and printers were preoccupied with the representation of the intricate relations of colour, line and pattern in woodblock prints in ways that were increasingly commensurate with the colour and movement of the stage. Later prints proved to be a key device in the transition from a taste for the representation of characters to one for the representation and promotion of individual actors. More implicitly, *ukiyo-e* prints helped to maintain the popularity of particular plays over long periods of time, during the *kabuki* off-season and beyond. They were a more or less permanent reminder of the transitory experience of the play itself.

*Ukiyo-e* prints, like the *kabuki* plays themselves, also performed a more subtle social function: they helped to maintain particular models of social relations through the preservation of values like *chū, giri*, and *on*. During the Tokugawa period these values were fundamental conditions for the maintenance of order in a rigidly organized social hierarchy. They were also becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Traditionally these values were embraced into the fundamental ethos of *samurai* culture. During the lengthy Tokugawa peace however, the huge urban *samurai* population had experienced a singular displacement in their social function. Their *bu*, or military function, had been steadily eroded, and their *bun*, or civic, bureaucratic function became the principal component of their activities. In the climate of uncertainty that these changes generated both theatrical and graphic representations of *Chūshingura* provided examples of appropriate social values and proper social conduct. This didactic function is implicit even in the title of the play: *Kanadehon* translates literally as ‘syllabary’ or ‘copy-book’. The *kana* syllabary was taught and learned in copybook fashion. In the same way, the actions of the forty-seven loyal *rōnin* were to be seen as an example for the behaviour of young Japanese men. Like the retainers, incidentally, the *kana* syllabary is contrived of forty-seven characters. The content of other *kabuki* themes was equally didactic in character. As the two cheapest and most immediately understandable mediums of the period, the *kabuki* play and the *ukiyo-e* print were particularly suitable formats for performing this didactic function. Performing this function, in consequence, required prints to possess a particular visual character; it required images to be direct, easily understandable, and consistent with both the narrative content and the theatrical character of the plays they illustrated. Hence the commitment in *ukiyo-e* *kabuki-e* to the bright and clashing colours of the stage, the maintenance of iconographic conventions by which individual characters and actors could be identified, and the development of graphic equivalents for the highly dramatic relations of the theatre. In this sense the brightness and variety of colour, and the dramatic intensity of gesture and compositional structure of *kabuki-e* was generated in the service of the theatre.
The functions of landscape, *bijin-ga*, literary images or history pictures were quite prosaic – they informed, they promoted, they taught. Two *ukiyo-e* forms in particular seem to have served no such practical function. While *mitate-e* and *surimono* may have employed devices common in other domains, particularly to poetry, both forms were quite unique to *ukiyo-e*. Their pictorial functions were defined less through the service of outside ends, and rather more ‘internally’ within the enterprise of *ukiyo-e* itself. They validated the *nishiki-e* woodblock print as an art form, and they served as an outlet for, and generator of, a particularly esoteric blend of sensual and intellectual pleasure. Other contemporary manifestations of *ukiyo-e* were considered to be, at best ‘popular’ art forms, or even simply utilitarian objects – broadsheets, ‘posters’ and so forth. In its day, for example, Andō Hiroshige’s *Goyū, tabibito tome-onna* (Plate 18) possessed a status little different from the souvenir value of today’s picture postcard. Kunisada’s *Danjūrō VII as Ebizō* (Plate 14), Kuniyasu’s *Courtesan* (Plate 7) or Yoshiiku’s *Geisha Ariwara at Inamotoro* (Plate 13) had a status and function similar to today’s posters or magazine illustrations of stars of stage and screen.

One of the reasons these forms occupied a position outside the mainstream schools of visual arts lay in their directness, their relatively high degree of realism. While some of these works may appear complex or allusive today, in their own time they were easily understood, straightforward representations of popular, well known themes. The paintings of the Tosa or Kanō Schools, on the other hand, were all distinguished from *ukiyo-e* prints by their subtle, sometimes complex, allusions to themes, events or ideas beyond, or much older than, the picture itself – in references to early Chinese mythical figures or ethical values, for example, or to ancient Japanese themes, or to morally uplifting or socially responsible values or behaviours.

In *ukiyo-e* it was in the forms of *mitate-e* and *surimono* that a high degree of allusion was achieved. Where an understanding of Kunisada’s *Ebizō* portrait could be founded on only a couple of facts, common knowledge for everyone in Edo at the time, a thorough understanding of, say, a *mitate-e* required knowledge not only of the figures or objects directly represented in the picture, but also of much earlier historical events, or esoteric literary references, or sophisticated social or ethical concepts. By requiring this knowledge *mitate-e* stood apart from the popular order of *ukiyo-e*; far from constituting a ‘popular’ art form, *mitate-e* and *surimono* became the exclusive preserve of the *tsū*, the educated, urbane and articulate patrons of the floating world. Their own ability to understand the complexities of these forms helped them to distinguish themselves from the ordinary men and women of Edo.

For most observers, *mitate-e* has been most easily defineable simply as ‘parody pictures’. In some the notion of ‘parody’ is defined quite specifically – as, for example, ‘facetious depictions featuring pastiche, allusion or parody.’ Other definitions are more comprehensive. Christine Guth, for example, describes *mitate-e* as:

(a)...playful device...in which a contemporary ‘equivalent’ was substituted for classical subject-matter, giving the resulting work multiple layers of meaning. *Mitate* lent legitimacy to representations of contemporary subjects, and as the people of Edo increasingly took pride in their urban culture, local artists’ representations of time-honoured secular and even religious themes became more and more satirical.

For Hayakawa Monta *mitate* refers more precisely to the act of:
comparing one thing to something else.’ In the case of mitate-e pictures, codified motifs are used to encourage you to look at a present world superimposed on a world of the past.59

David Waterhouse’s interpretation is more literal:

The term mitate literally means ‘witnessing with one’s own eyes’; hence it is used of making judgments or choices; seeing off a traveller; and making comparisons. In the last sense it became a technical term in linked-verse competition (renga) when a following verse would give a new twist to the meaning of the first one. This usage and this practice prompted the many mitate prints seen in ukiyo-e, in which a classical or otherwise well-known theme is re-interpreted in some new way, often facetiously, and often by being given a modern application.60

The most consistent characteristic of the range of definitions of mitate is their reference to a parodic function. This understanding is founded on two notions. The first is that of establishing a ‘likeness’ between a contemporary scene or figure and an older theme or event. In this sense mitate could be associated with the concept of furyū, or ‘up-to-date fashionableness’. The notion of ‘likeness’ here is not the same as metaphor or simile; it can sometimes be impossible to find any real similarity between the objects associated in this way. The second notion is that of playfulness, not so much in the sense of ‘poking fun at’ something as in the sense of playing with knowledge or ideas.

Timothy Clark explains the notion of constructing likeness in relation to the etymology of mitate thus:

The noun mitate and the related verb mitateru are given a total of some eight or nine definitions in the largest standard dictionary of the Japanese language, the Nihon kokugo daijiten. These begin with the earliest appearance of the term in Kokijì (compiled by AD 712), when the God and Goddess Izanagi and Izanami descend from heaven to conduct their wedding ceremony, and ‘set up [choose?] a pillar to be the pillar of heaven’ (ame no mi-hashira o mitate) so as to sanctify the hall. The basic meaning here, according to the dictionary, involves a sequence of ‘looking’ (miru), ‘selecting’ (sadameri), and ‘erecting’ (tateru). Other meanings for mitateru include ‘to see someone off’ (mi-okuru), ‘to assist’ (sewa osuru), or ‘to nurture’ (yōsei suru), and ‘to liken one thing to another’ (betsu no mono ni nazoraeru koto).61

Clark finds literary origins for mitate in the referential devices of poetry that had been well-established by the tenth century and which had become commonplace by the Muromachi era:

During the Muromachi era, the overriding importance of ‘precedent’ (senrei) and ‘congruity’ (junkyo) in all aspects of life encouraged techniques of ‘likening one thing to another’ (nazoraeru) in many of the arts. The Muromachi idea of ‘nazoraeru’ shares many elements with Edo period mitate, though not perhaps mitate’s wit and preoccupation with the novelty of the artistic ‘devices’ (shukō) employed.62

The key characteristic of mitate may thus be defined as the finding of ‘likeness’, or congruence, between things, and, beyond this, in establishing a connection between contemporary experiences and those of earlier eras. Kobayashi Todashi sees precedents of this way of operating in the broader context of Oriental art in general:

In premodern Japan (for that matter in the Orient in general, including China and Korea), artistic creation consisted of adding a cautious amount of personal expression to sample
works chosen from the revered paintings of the past. New works of art were much like *honkadori* in poetry, which relied on allusive references to classical Japanese poems. In accordance with the *Analects* of Confucius (‘I am a transmitter, not a creator’) it was considered a virtue to cultivate and propagate the seeds sown by the great masters and ancient sages. In contrast, the attempts by minor personalities of later generations to recultivate self expression were despised as heretical behaviour.\(^{63}\)

The notion of drawing a ‘likeness’ is exemplified in the conceit of Shunshō’s representation of Mount Fuji without snow as actors without make-up. A more complex example of both the aspect of likeness and that of temporal referencing can be found in Kitagawa Utamaro’s *The Courtesan Tomimoto Toyoatomo as Kaoyo; Act I* from the series *Komei bijin mitate Chûshingura, juninai Tsuzuki* (Plate 1). Three layers of interconnected reference were described for this picture in Chapter 2. In the first instance the image is a representation of two Yoshiwara courtesans; in the second it refers to the first act of the kabuki drama *Kanadehon Chûshingura*; in the third it refers to the historical events of the ‘Akō affair’. All eleven compositions in Utamaro’s series translate both the literary precedent and the historical event into contemporary guise, substituting the figures of well-known courtesans for the heroes of the past. The final work in the sequence even includes a self-portrait of Utamaro. There is only one oddity in the series, and it pertains to the standing figure in the first print. By the time Utamaro was having this work published, the ‘Takao’ *myôseki* had been extinct for seventy-five years. Why include, amongst a parade of well-known contemporary figures, a figure long-since dead? By representing the courtesan Takao Utamaro was able to add yet another layer of reference to the picture.

Of the eleven women listed as belonging to the *Takao myôseki* by Santō Kyôden in 1804, three were able to escape their indenture by being purchased by *daimyô* as concubines. The *daimyô* who released Takao V was Asano Inabanokami Naganaru.\(^{64}\) The standing courtesan at the left of Utamaro’s composition thus refers to Asano Naganori, Lord of Akō, who had attacked Kira Yoshinaka in 1701 and initiated the events that led to the revenge of Asano’s forty-seven retainers twenty-two months later. Thus, far from representing the *Chûshingura* character Ko no Moronao, as tentatively suggested in the second chapter, this woman in fact represents the character Enya Hangan, honourable husband of the kneeling Lady Kaoyo. The presence of the third person of Moronao in this act of the play is suggested only by the *kimono* Takao/Enya is holding.

Takao is relevant in this image in a more general sense. *Tayû*, the very highest rank of Yoshiwara courtesan, were the ones who, more than any others, established the standards of behaviours and manners, dress and deportment, both within the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters and, through their huge impact on the broader Edo population, throughout the city. *Tayû*, like the members of the Takao line, defined fashion and style, both amongst women and amongst *tsû*, the urbane, articulate, stylish and refined male participants of the floating world.\(^{65}\)

While a key device employed in *mitate* is reference to things, actions or figures of the past, the observation of up-to-date fashionability was equally important. The word that most closely approximates the notion of up-to-date elegance is *fûryû* – a word regularly included in the titles of *mitate* series or individual prints.\(^{66}\) *Fûryû* emphasizes the contemporary aspect of *mitate* prints, the side that was most immediately appealing to their floating world audiences. Intimately related to the notion of *fûryû* was that of *fûzoku*. As Timothy Clark notes, in some instances the two words could be almost synonymous; in others – Clark cites Kiyonaga – *fûzoku* was used more in the sense of ‘customs’ or
‘fashions’ as in the series title Fūzoku Azuma no nishi ki. In some such instances, Clark claims, mitate images can focus solely on the contemporary, making no reference at all to earlier themes.\textsuperscript{67}

Suzuki Harunobu chose to employ the word fūzoku rather than mitate or fūryū in the title of his 1768 series Fūzoku Mu-Tamagawa – ‘Customs’, or ‘Fashions’ of the Six Tama (Crystal) Rivers. This was a classic theme in Japanese art, and one which Harunobu and others illustrated several times. Settsu Kinuta-no Tamagawa (Kinuta Crystal River in Settsu Province), (Plate 27) is one image from this series. Like Utamaro Harunobu employed here the device of representing an old theme in contemporary guise. Rather than setting the scene in a Yoshiwara brothel, he has chosen a simple domestic interior with two women beating clothing over a rock. Behind them, through a window at right, is a view to a persimmon tree. At left, on the wall of the alcove, are pasted two small woodblock prints. These two prints, together with the poem in the cartouche in the upper centre, provide the clues to the picture’s allusions to its classic theme. Both smaller images are of river scenes – the one at left represents a moonlit scene of a figure standing on a verandah beside the water; that at right depicts a figure poling a boat towards a river bridge. The poem, by Toshiyori, reads:

The sighing of the pine branches sharpens the autumn loneliness, where they beat cloth by the banks of the Tama River.\textsuperscript{68}

Each part of Harunobu’s contemporary equivalent for this theme represents some aspect of the classic theme as represented in both the poem and the smaller images. The persimmon tree outside replaces the pine branches; their autumn ripening fruit indicate the season referred to in the poem. The women beating cloth replace the washer-women of the poem. This iconographic convention is sustained in Tamagawa mitate series executed by Hiroshige almost eighty years later, in a sequence of landscape representations of the theme. The traditional moonlight setting of the scene, graphically indicated in the smaller image, is alluded to in Harunobu’s print by the inclusion of a small oil lamp mounted on the pillar beside the alcove.

The same references are maintained, albeit in the guise of a different scene, in the corresponding print from another Tamagawa mitate series completed by Harunobu within the next two years.\textsuperscript{69} Here the evening setting is indicated in the night attire of the standing single figure; she is represented on a verandah setting like the figure in the smaller image included in the earlier composition; and both the poem and its classical poet are included in cartouches in the upper part of the composition.

The notion of ‘likeness’, or of ‘having some discernable relationship’, so fundamental to most mitate-e – as in the Utamaro example – can equally be found in the notion of yatsushi. As Clark explains, yatsushi is a complex notion, which involves a sort of ‘measuring down’ of the elevated – the lofty character of classical themes is represented in the altogether more mundane guise of contemporary experience.\textsuperscript{70} He suggests, as a broad equivalent of yatsushi, the term ‘reworking’ which can be used in the sense of ‘fūryū yatsushi’, or ‘elegant reworking’.

‘Elegant reworkings’ did not need to be reworkings of historical themes in contemporary guise. This was a central mode, but the references could as easily be ‘internal’ reworkings of ukiyo-e subjects or themes. Harunobu’s reworking of Masanobu’s
illustration of *The Immortal Fei Zhangfang* and its earlier incarnation as a portrait of Ding Lingwei (see Chapter 3) is a case in point.

Harunobu regularly reworked earlier themes or re-employed earlier pictorial devices in this way. Clark cites as an example the composition of two women, their clothes blown into disarray by the autumn winds (*Ake no kaze – Autumn Breeze*, Plate 20). For this work Harunobu has redeployed figures from earlier works by two other artists. The figure on the right has been appropriated from an illustration by Ishikawa Toyonobu for a book published ten or eleven years earlier. The figure at left has been transferred directly from a much earlier (1729) book illustration by Nishikawa Sukenobu. For knowledgeable viewers, one of the pleasures Harunobu’s work afforded lay in being able to identify his pictorial sources, but the delight was in fact more subtly complex than this purely pictorial reference might suggest. Harunobu’s composition is suffused with a gently playful sense of eroticism, evident explicitly in the decidedly *iki* character of the suggestive but coy relation between the two women. This general sense of erotic potential is easily apprehended by most viewers, but a more precise understanding of the work is entirely dependent on a knowledge of the two earlier works:

This intimate familiarity with ukiyo-e, on the part of both artist and audience, is suggested by another intriguing example (here Plate 21) in which Harunobu combines one figure from a Sukenobu picture book with a second figure from a Toyonobu picture book. This is done in order to illustrate a saucy *haikai* verse which appears in the Toyonobu image, but is not represented in Harunobu’s design. The Harunobu print in question is now given the modern, descriptive title *Autumn Breeze* (*Ake no kaze*). The relevant Toyonobu illustration is contained in the *haikai* anthology *Otoko-zakari suetsumuhana* of 1756, and the poem puns the names and appearances of autumn plants with the intimate regions of female anatomy it suggests might be glimpsed when the woman’s *kimono* is caught by the autumn breeze. In order to make this more explicit, Harunobu adds a female figure derived from an illustration in Sukenobu’s *Ehon iōwa kagami* (1729) whose legs are indeed revealed by the breeze in just such a manner. Furthermore, he adds the autumn plants mentioned in the *haikai* poem but not actually depicted in Toyonobu’s illustration. So to appreciate fully the nuances of each detail of Harunobu’s image, the viewer would have to be familiar with the content of the poem, in Toyonobu’s version of some eleven or twelve years earlier. In addition, Kobayashi Tadashi has suggested that the women depicted may be Kasamori Osen (left) and Moto-Yanagi Ofuji (right).

In another example Harunobu’s *Lovers Sharing an Umbrella* (Plate 28) makes a double reference, to the general painting category of black and white painting through its alter-ego theme *White Heron and Black Crow*, and to the notion of fidelity between lovers represented in the theme ‘mandarin ducks in snow’. As Kobayashi Tadashi explains:

> Among Harunobu’s *nishiki-e* are several prints resembling this design and depicting a man and a woman sharing an umbrella. One such print shows a couple gazing at a pair of courting mandarin ducks. Above them is inscribed the following poem:
>
> My heart aches
> And is filled with jealousy
> If only we could promise ourselves
> Such tender feelings.
>
> In many instances in Chinese painting, a pair of birds displaying deep affection is shown beside a stream under a willow or in the snow. While *Lovers Sharing an Umbrella* was
probably designed as a mitate of black and white imagery and ‘Crow and Heron’, it also
sings the praises of young love following Chinese tradition.\(^2\)

Employing a delightful sense of irony, Harunobu extended the allusions further. In
a slightly later hashira-e composition, Main Entrance of Yoshiwara, he employed the same
combination of a black hooded male and a woman, though in this instance the woman is
bare headed. Where Lovers Sharing an Umbrella is a declaration of constancy in love, this
reincarnation is a representation of precisely the opposite – the temporary nature of
arranged sexual liaisons indicated in an image of lovers parting at dawn.\(^3\) The irony is
extended even further in a 1766 print called Sagimusume.\(^4\) Here only the white-gowned
right-hand figure of the earlier print is represented, now standing alone, in the snow,
staring disconsolately down into the waters of a stream. ‘Sagimusume’ refers to a kabuki
dance on the theme of lost love, in which the solitary dancer, dressed in white, acts out the
movements of a lone white heron.\(^5\)

In one further, and even more ironic, version of both the original theme of lovers in
the snow and Sagimusume, Harunobu represents the same setting, a snowy landscape with
willow branches, and the original two figures; even the karazuri embossing on the white
kimono of the woman is identical with that of the woman sharing the shelter of an umbrella
in the earlier print. In this later work however, the woman dances the most literal
interpretation of the heron dance, lifting her left leg high into the air and perching
precariously on the one geta-clad foot. Far from dancing the dance of the dispossessed
lover however, in this print the woman has raised her leg in order to straddle the swollen
member of the black hooded man behind her.\(^6\) For his contemporary fans, Harunobu was
offering the opportunity to trace, over a period of time, a sequence of subtle visual
relationships to which only those with an intimate knowledge of his work could gain
access.

Right at the heart of mitate lie notions of fashion, knowledge, urbanity and
playfulness. In Harunobu’s works in particular, audiences were presented not just with
images of the most fashionable women of the day, dressed in the most up-to-date fashions
of the day, but with prints whose technical innovation and stylistic flair generated an
immediate awareness of the ‘fūryū’ status of Harunobu himself. They were buying the
most ‘modern’ of pictures. Beyond this, they were buying something not unlike a game,
and indeed, mitate had its contemporary recreational equivalents, both in renga, or poetry
competitions, and in various parlour guessing games where fashionable tsū could
demonstrate their depth of knowledge, articulacy and wit. Mitate-e required similarly
athletic mental skills to find one’s way through their often complex webs of reference; and
since they often depended on the ability of audiences (and artists) to draw relationships
between objects, persons or events that might otherwise seem completely unconnected, an
appropriate interpretation could require considerable imaginative flexibility and élan. In
this sense mitate functioned as a playful focus for the imaginative and intellectual wit of
the most sophisticated of floating world participants, and in doing so functioned also to
distinguish them from their clumsy, uncouth or vulgar yabo counterparts.

The sophisticated intricacies of cross-reference, and the esoteric nature of many of
the literary or historical references of mitate required a correspondingly sophisticated and
informed mind of its audiences. Its appeal was, in consequence, confined to a relatively
narrow group of patrons. Surimono (literally, ‘printed things’) were equally exclusive.
They were privately published prints, usually conceived and made in very small editions,
as gifts to be passed amongst close acquaintances – members of exclusive poetry clubs for example. Their publication might celebrate the New Year, or some other auspicious occasion like a birthday or a change of name, or might coincide with, and include verses composed during a renga. Indeed, the relation between surimono and written verse was very close, and many surimono can be distinguished by their inclusion of sometimes extensive tracts of verse, sometimes from the pens of several different contestants, sometimes from, or conforming closely to, the classic collections. By the nineteenth century several characteristics distinguished the surimono from other Japanese print genre: they allowed artists to explore subjects in ways that may otherwise have been impossible; they were stylistically different from other types of print, and they employed the very finest of technical skills and devices; and their circulation was confined within a small and privileged group of cognoscenti.

Within the broader practice of gift or exchange surimono performed three more specific functions: commemoration, celebration and promotion:

…including surimono of kabuki actors, surimono commemorating the dead and to announce changes of name, surimono to celebrate old age, and surimono to announce musical and dance performances as well as painting and calligraphy parties (shogakai). Surimono also served as advertisements when produced as New Year’s greeting cards by businesses.77

What separated surimono from other types of Japanese print was the exclusivity both of their design and craftsmanship and of their circulation:

Surimonos are among the most seductive marvels of Japanese art. The problems which they solve are so clearly beyond what has been essayed in comparable productions elsewhere that no comparison can be sustained. The subjects of these prints, meant for a refined public, are of a subtle, imaginative kind. We are watching a duel between grace and wit, ingenuity and poetic feeling, engaged in by people of taste.78

The principal patrons for surimono were the Edo literati, a highly literate and discerning audience, thoroughly familiar with the classics of Chinese and Japanese verse, and with contemporary forms of poetry and theatre. They included, in particular, members of poetry clubs who met periodically to exchange kyōka which were characterized by high levels of allusion and punning word play.79 By the nineteenth century many such groups had been formed in Edo – the Hanazono Club, the Hisakataga Circle, the Taikogawa Poetry Club, the Katsushika Group, the Asakasa Club and the Sono Group were typical of many others. The language games that typified their kyōka were reflected in the pictorial allusions of the surimono that these groups so often commissioned. Because they passed the prints amongst themselves, surimono rarely reached a broader public, except in rare instances where blocks cut originally for surimono were recycled into a more commercial production. The exclusivity of surimono was ensured also by the very small scale of their print runs. Editions tended to be limited, often as low as fifty, rarely, if ever, exceeding five hundred. Ōta Nampo, in Zokuju kosui (1786) notes what appears to be a typical instance the publication of three kyōka surimono to commemorate a kabuki performance by Ichimura Kakitsu (Uzaemon IX) on the eighteenth day of the second month of 1785 as limited to two hundred copies of each.80

The earliest surimono, printed during the twentieth century, established the close link between surimono and verse. These ‘haikai surimono’ were printed sheets of poems,
mostly without accompanying illustration. They were usually intended as gifts, particularly for celebrating the New Year.\textsuperscript{81} The development of \textit{surimono}, and of its distinctive visual character, was preceded, and later accompanied by, the development of \textit{egoyomi}, or ‘calendar pictures’. \textit{Egoyomi} established early precedents for a number of \textit{surimono}’s distinctive characteristics. In the first instance, they were the earliest print form to require fine colour multi-block printing, well before the development of the \textit{nishiki-e} ‘brocade print’ during the later 1760s. The earliest use of two colour blocks on single sheet prints would appear to have been applied in the production of calendar prints published in spring 1742.\textsuperscript{82} Though \textit{egoyomi} remained smaller and less ornate than \textit{surimono}, they continued to be distinguished by the fineness and invention of their craftsmanship. In the second instance, \textit{egoyomi} established a precedent for small editions and confined distribution. Since calendar production was sustained within a highly regulated government monopoly, privately produced calendars were distributed outside the regulated channels. Their circulation was thus confined to small groups of patrons. Thirdly, \textit{egoyomi} established precedents for some of the subject interests explored in \textit{surimono}, especially for complex rebus references to zodiacal signs or numeric sequences. One specific outcome of this relationship was the retention, in many \textit{surimono}, of clues to year and date, or explicit references to the New Year or to the changes of the season.

By the mid-eighteenth century three broad categories of \textit{surimono} had been established: \textit{haiikai surimono}; \textit{kyōka surimono}; and calendar \textit{surimono}.\textsuperscript{83} Within these broader categories lay a range of types in which pictorial subject was dictated by the particular function to which the production of the \textit{surimono} was dedicated – the commemoration of an event, or of a death, for example, or the specific themes explored in a \textit{renge}. Since many \textit{surimono} were commissioned by the star actors of the \textit{kabuki} stage, to announce a new performance, a new interpretation of a favourite role, a name change, or their presence at a special public occasion, theatrical subjects, particularly portraits of actors in role, were popular. Landscape compositions were also included in the \textit{surimono} repertoire, particularly where they could provide a pictorial context for the representation of literary or mythical subjects. Images of flora and fauna were also popular, particularly \textit{kachō-e}, or ‘bird and flower pictures’. These were even more popular when linked, along with representations of festivals, to changes in the seasons or the calendar.

\textit{Surimono} gave \textit{ukiyo-e} artists the opportunity to explore three subjects in ways that were different from those of the \textit{ukiyo-e} mainstream. One of these was the representation of mythical and literary subjects of both Chinese and Japanese origin. In most instances the subjects depicted were consistent with those circulated in the broader marketplace – themes like ‘The Seven Gods of Good Fortune’, for example, or ‘The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove’. Where the commercially produced prints, especially those of the nineteenth century, tended to be couched in the theatrical and melodramatic idioms of \textit{kabuki}, however, \textit{surimono} representations of these themes generally tended to be smaller, quieter and more intimate in nature. In some instances they could allude to these themes simply by representing the attributes associated with characters from mythical narratives, for example; in others they simply focused very closely on one aspect of the narrative, often in isolation from any background or contextual information.

The legend of the ‘Golden Boy’ Kintaro (Kintoki), for example, gave artists plenty of opportunity to indulge in the theatrical or the sentimental. Kintaro was said to be the illegitimate son of an officer, Sakata Kurando, and his lover Yaegiri. He was born at Ashigara Mountain and raised by the wild mountain woman Yamauba. Even as a child
Kintaro was possessed of a Herculean strength, which he demonstrated in numerous exploits with his animal friends the boar, the deer, the hare and the monkey. His strength was immense – he could uproot trees from the ground and wrestle large animals. His chief attribute was his woodman’s axe, a gift from his mother. Eventually Kintaro became a famous warrior, the epitome of strength and bravery.84

Commercially produced prints of Kintaro often tried to relate some aspect of the legend to some broader allegorical or literary theme. Thus Utamaro’s mitate representation of Kintaro grinding a rat under a brick relates his actions to a second mythical theme, the slaying of the Nue, while drawing both themes into the contemporary realm through the portrayal of Yamauba in the person of a fashionably slim and disheveled courtesan (Plate 6). Utamaro sought to build a complex set of references around the central image of Kintaro. A surimono representation of Kintaro by Utamaro’s student Kitagawa Tsukimaro (Plate 29) focuses on no less violent a representation – the strong child forces the giant eagle into submission beneath the head of his axe. Where Utamaro’s composition comprised three quite separate pictorial elements – Kintaro, Yamauba and the inset cartouche – Tsukimaro focused only on the one action, and represented it in isolation from any other pictorial indication of context. The result is a tension drawn between the violence of the scene on the one hand, and the intimacy of its representation on the other.

In a similar way subjects like Shinsai’s ama scene (Plate 3) gave ukiyo-e artists the opportunity to explore genre subjects in new ways. Though a preoccupation with the representation of genre scenes is certainly one of the distinguishing features of ukiyo-e, it is usually confined to genre scenes of the floating world – images of courtesans, their attendants and clients, of actors, or of street scenes in and around the theatre or brothel districts. These scenes are represented in surimono also, but artists also explored a wider range of the more ordinary and everyday of scenes: rustic peasants at work and play, in images which also heralded the changes of each season; peddlers, street markets and travelers; children at play. Again, where floating world genre scenes might be distinguished by their theatricality or ornate decoration, surimono versions like that of Shinsai are remarkable for the intimacy and candour of their vision.

The most popular of subjects for surimono were those that appeared least often in other ukiyo-e compositions: still-life themes. Arrangements of the most ordinary of objects, food, flowers, sea shells, personal belongings, ‘famous products’ (meibutsu), antiques or musical instruments, reflected the focus on the ordinary, everyday or mundane of many of the kyōka they illustrated. The choice of still life subject might also reflect the particular interests of the patrons who commissioned these works:

A person of means might commission a print to celebrate a prized possession. For example, a literatus might request an image of books and writing implements; the man-about-town his stylish pipe and tobacco pouch; the samurai his sword furnishings; and the courtesan her hairpins and mirror.85

Thus Utagawa Kunimaro’s surimono of a newly unwrapped nō mask (Plate 30) represents the interests of its nō theatre patrons in an appropriately low-key and untheatrical manner. Kunimaro’s still life makes a broad reference to the theme of nō in general. In other instances the components of a still life could constitute a complex and subtle rebus which employed themes apparently quite unconnected with the objects represented in them. John Carpenter describes, for example, one instance in which a still life comprising an inro, an umbrella, and a delivery boy’s noodle box can refer to the
kabuki play Sukeroku. In others images of toys or animals (hare, snake, tiger…) refer to the New Year, or to zodiacal signs.

As objects made for an exclusive audience, surimono possessed a correspondingly exclusive status more sophisticated than that of other printed forms. This was most evident in the very high degree of technical expertise that contributed to their subtle, but often intricately detailed pictorial character. The blocks for surimono were usually exceptionally finely cut. The highest levels of craftsmanship were necessary to cut, for example, the finely articulated contour of Tsukimaro’s Kintaro. This same skill allowed the development of patterned surfaces in the folds of the kimono of Shinsai’s ama, or the textural detail of baskets or hair. In the Kintaro image, it allows the description of the finest detail in the plumage of the vanquished eagle – the finest lines here are printed from the raised edges of wooden lines less than a millimeter long, and even finer in width (see Plate 29a). The cursive and flowing qualities of calligraphy for kyōka and other textual components of surimono required a similarly sensitive hand of the block cutter. Frequently these components were cut on separate blocks, allowing the artists and publishers to later re-deploy the pictorial blocks in different circumstances, for different commissions, often with different backgrounds, and in differing colour combinations.

Surimono were invariably printed using the finest of pigments. This is evident again in the Kintaro composition in the delicate range of red-brown vegetable dyes employed, and the subtle distinctions evident between the body colours of boy and eagle, and, beyond this, in the subtle contrast of paler and more intense pigment in the brown plumage of the eagle, and the conjunction of soft grey and blue-grey in the bird’s tail feathers. The printers of surimono were often the first to employ pigments in innovative ways, using metallic pigments, for example, or ground mica or mother of pearl. There are soft suggestions of metallic pigment in the seaweed patterns on the costume of the ama for example; in the Kintaro image Tsukimaro has employed bronze powder as the pigment for the haft of the axe, and silver powder for the blue-grey of the axe head. Surimono artists could also design colour compositions that required far more extensive numbers of colour blocks than usual; sometimes as many as thirty blocks could be employed for a single picture. They also required printers to exploit a broader range of ‘special effects’ to enhance their prints with more intricate patterns or more subtly articulated surface qualities. Both Shinsai and Tsukimaro, for example, have required the subtlest of bokashi graduated changes of intensity of pigment in the backgrounds of their compositions to provide an almost imperceptible shift from the ground upon which their figures are arranged up to the background beyond. Both artists have also used overlays of transparent pigment, Shinsai in the patterns on the ama’s garment and on the feet of the abalone; Tsukimaro in the thinly applied veil of grey pigment that extends, halo-like, around the edge of Kintaro’s hair. In other instances bokashi was used to describe the three-dimensionality of figures or objects, as in the basket in the Shinsai composition, and effects like karazuri (‘blind-printed’ embossed patterns and textures), or kimedashi (‘convex embossing’ of larger shapes) were used to enhance decorative pattern or contour in combination with particularly subtle colour combinations.

Surimono were also distinguished from other genres of print by the much higher quality of paper employed for printing. This was necessary partly because the use of much larger numbers of blocks than usual, and the application of technical tricks like karazuri, required a tougher than usual paper. The paper employed was the heavy-weight, unsized (and therefore much more absorbent than sized papers) but soft mulberry hōsho
‘presentation’ paper. Its high degree of absorbency and its relative opacity allowed for the most subtle of colour effects.

The appearance of surimono is distinguished by a far broader range of pictorial character than was common in other print types. In the first instance, there is a far greater diversity in size of surimono than in other single sheet prints. The range extended from images printed on the full hōshō sheet size (420 mm. x 570 mm.) to a tiny 100 mm. x 140 mm. size. The larger prints, ohōshō zenshi-ban (‘whole ōhōshi sheet print’), were commonly folded along their central horizontal axis; this allowed a long, narrow pictorial composition to be printed in the upper half, and extensive bodies of textual content to be printed separately in the lower half. Alternatively, the format could be folded in half horizontally, then in thirds vertically, to produce a ‘packaged’ note for sending to someone, and coincidentally establishing a format for three smaller pictorial compositions. The most common format became the almost square shikishi-ban first popularized by Kubo Shunman, and especially common from the Bunka era (1804 – 1818) onwards. The most common size for shikishi-ban was about 210 x 190 mm. After 1800 even smaller formats – kokonotsugiri-ban for example – were popularized, demanding increasingly finer cutting of blocks to preserve the already intricate conventions for pattern and surface treatment.

Surimono were distinguished also by stylistic character that conformed more closely to the subtleties and fineness of the drawn and painted image than any other printed format would allow. In the Shinsai composition this is evident in the broad and easily flowing range of thickness of the linear contour of the woman’s garments; it is evident also in the employment of a soft grey pigment, rather than the customary jet-black, to print the key-block. The use of grey for the printing of key blocks was typical in surimono – Tsukimaro has also employed it here – and it allowed artists to articulate a more subtly unified relation between linear contour and colour surface than would otherwise be possible.

Mitate-e and surimono had several characteristics in common. In the first place, their popularity and circulation was not as broad as that of other printed genres, and with surimono in particular seems only rarely to have extended beyond the most knowledgeable and articulate participants of the floating world, the literate and urbane tsū. In a sense, it was the ability to access the more private world represented in these prints that helped define the difference between the tsū and other Edo citizens. Secondly, the specificity of their pictorial functions required and encouraged considerable invention, often well beyond the parameters one might normally associate with ukiyo-e, in pictorial structure, stylistic character or technical procedure. One outcome of this was a feedback into the ukiyo-e mainstream: the pictorial invention of mitate-e, for example, or the unusual technical innovations of surimono, quite quickly became adopted as the standard within the broader ukiyo-e enterprise. Finally, with both modes, one particular, and defining, characteristic was their preoccupation with play, and with playfulness. In a sense, this was a characteristic of ukiyo-e in general – it was often frivolous, entertaining, and certainly well removed from he realities of everyday life and work. Mitate and surimono were remarkable for the way they forged a particularly symbiotic relation between the artist and the viewer in this respect; their success was as completely reliant on the knowledge and ability of the viewer to play the visual game as it was on the power of the artist to construct, and work within, the parameters of the game.
sures of modern society, are seen as the indisputably human characteristics of deeply felt

1 Paul Duncum describes this as a pictorial function in itself: ‘The fifth function cum motive is personal expression. Personal expression is often thought to be the special function of fine art and high culture. This specialization of function was a contribution and a response to the driven impetus of a society characterized by utility, economic rationality and technological omnipresence. Fine art is seen as a champion of what, under the pressures of modern society, are seen as the indisputably human characteristics of deeply felt experiences and idiosyncratic responses.’ Paul Duncum, ‘Articulating a Cultural Literacy Curriculum’, Australian Art Education, 1991, Vol., 15, No., 2, Winter, p. 34. Elsewhere in this article Duncum explains the four other principal functions of art as: substitution, where ‘images stand for what they represent by standing in for what they represent’ (p. 31); narration ‘...serving a number of social functions; to stimulate and provide pleasure; to inform and instruct, especially by framing social ideas, attitudes and beliefs; allowing wishes and desires, often of a socially disapproved kind, a vicarious indulgence; to help work through fears and establish identities; and, in general, to help maintain a stable social order based on power and domination’ (p. 32); embellishment, ‘...the enhancement of artifacts so that they are both identified and related to human experience’ (p. 33); and commitment/persuasion, in which ‘Images convey the commitment of the artist to an idea or action and attempt to convince others.’ (p. 33).

2 ‘...the artist paints in order to produce a certain experience in the mind of the spectator...’ Richard Wollheim, Painting as an Art, London: Thames and Hudson, 1987, p. 44.


4 Of two hundred ukiyo-e paintings held in the British Museum, three illustrate proverbs or sayings, three are portraits, ten are genre scenes, one a domestic scene, ten are of plants or animals and fifteen are landscapes. One hundred and seven however are images of courtesans, geisha or their attendants, and a further thirty-four are focused on the cultured accomplishments of the pleasure quarters. A further eleven paintings are devoted to the representation of actors or theatrical themes. Timothy Clark, Ukiyo-e Paintings in the British Museum, London, British Museum Press, 1992.

5 While some ukiyo-e art works seem to have been very expensive (paintings and handscrolls for example) woodblock prints had always remained very affordable: ‘It is known that in the early nineteenth century colour woodblock prints cost about 20 mon per sheet and that the authorities tried to reduce this to 16 mon (about the same price as a cup of buckwheat noodles in a restaurant) to curb the luxury of prints during the Tempō Reforms in 1852’. Timothy Clark, 1992, p. 126.

6 Seigle, 1993, pp. 67 – 68.

7 Seigle, 1993, pp. 68 – 69, describes the development of textile technology in Japan during the seventeenth century and the subsequent role of the kimono as signifier of status, wealth and taste.

8 See Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988 edn., p. 11 for the differentials in status and significance of various pigments, within the European context.

9 Bowie, 1911, pp. 44 – 45.

10 This is very approximate. Clark’s source is a record of an exchange of art works with creditors to settle debts of these amounts. Clark, 1992, pp 26 – 27.


14 Contemporary commentary of the floating world of Edo was provided by Santō Kyōden. Among the five qualities he suggests characterize the typical Edokko chōnin were: ‘He is not attached to money; he is not stingy. His funds do not cover the night’s lodging’, and ‘He has iki (refinement) and hari (strength of character.)’ The first implies the ease with which the Edokko could commit himself beyond his means. The latter suggests something of a melding of the newly developed social knowledge and manners of the new capital with values that had long formed a foundation for the social codes of the samurai. Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 42.


16 The other, less popular, sizes, at c. 1390 x 1110 mm., and 310 x 560 mm., lie either side of these two groups. Shimizu Yoshiaki, ed., Japan: The Shaping of Daimyo Culture 1185 – 1868, Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1988, pp. 56 – 89.
This is not to say that all Edo houses were smaller than those of Momoyama. The great mansions of the aristocracy, particularly those occupied by the Tokugawa ruling elite and their retinues, still existed, but these figures did not form the principal patrons for **ukiyo-e**. Both the scale and the architectural character of housing for the rest of Edo's population was very carefully regulated, however, and, while in most cases citizens experienced marked improvement over earlier conditions in space and facility in their housing, for the **chōnin** houses were still quite small. From 1643 even the reception rooms of houses of the Bangashira (chief officers in a clan) were limited in depth to 2½ ken (about 15 feet). Later restrictions became even tighter: one official regulation of 1699, for example, ordered: ‘Those with incomes of from 3000 koku to 1000 koku are not to build houses exceeding 2½ ken in depth. And in future no carving, bracketing, or lacquering of the rims or beams of the tokonoma is allowed.

Walls set with stones are not allowed. But a **no-tsura** (rough stone wall) may be permitted where necessary. For those below 1000 koku income 2 ken deep is the limit for rooms, and in future frieze beams, cedar doors, built in Shōin windows, carving, bracketing and lacquering of the **tokonoma** beams, and the use of Chinese paper for the **fusuma** is prohibited.’


Though sometimes this line block was printed in a dull red colour, and sometimes either black or red-printed line block images were overlaid with hand-coloured elaboration, or hand-written sutras. Munsterberg, 1982, p. 14.

The generic term for ghost is **obake** – ‘transforming thing’. The genre embraced the three principal categories of **yōkai** (‘bewitching apparitions’, which included **tengu**, the long-nosed mountain goblin, **kappa**, the scaly-beaked river monster, and **rokurokubi**, the long rubber-necked female succubus), **yūrei** (faint spirits) or **oni** (demons or ogres). Timon Screech, ‘Japanese Ghosts’, in *Mangajin*, No 40, November 1994, pp. 14 – 69. Stephen Addiss suggests that the principal functions of representations of supernatural themes in **ukiyo-e** include the spreading “…of folk beliefs and legends which are often local to the Japanese populace”, and the rationalization and ‘mitigation’ of the awesome power of supernatural and malignant entities. The huge mid-nineteenth century growth in the popularity of these themes reflects the gradual disintegration of cultural control of the elite, and the increasing recognition of popular demands of art. Stephen Addiss, ‘Supernatural Art of Japan’, *Orientations*, June 1985, pp. 18 – 29.


Hillier acknowledges both the range of block-printed illustrated books that lie outside the province of **ukiyo-e** (**kanshobon**, **akahon**, **ninjobon**, **bukan**, or **danjobon** for example), and the allegiance of individual book illustrators to other schools during this period, including the Rimpa, Nanga, Maruyama, Shijo and Kanō schools. Hillier, 1987, Vol 1, pp. 22 – 23.

Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, pp. 64 – 75.


Hillier, 1987, Vol 1, pp. 317 – 329. Though note that Tim Clark argues that the first really successful **nishiki-e** were actually completed by Katsukawa Shunshō more than a year before Harunobu’s first calendar prints of 1765. Tim Clark, ‘Katsukawa Shunshō and the Revolution in Actor Portraiture’, *Orientations*, June, 1992, pp. 53 – 63, see p. 55.

Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 221: ‘Before the advent of modern mass media, only cheap woodblock prints known as **kawaraban** provided the Japanese public with a modest supply of news’.


Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997 pp. 221 – 222.
Besides the Ebizō shumei, Danjūrō at the same time adopted a new poetic name of Hakuen – like Ebizō a name that had also been assumed by his family predecessors, from Danjūrō II onwards, but now indicated in characters that also read ‘white monkey’. Donald Jenkins, ed., The Floating World Revisited, Portland and Honolulu: Portland Art Museum and the University of Hawai‘i Press, 1993, pp. 79 – 82.

Danjūrō VIII, also known as Ichikawa Ebizō, is recorded as having performed in Edo as early as 1840, while Kunisada was still using the Köchōrō go. Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, p. 265.

The history of succession of the Danjūrō name, together with a translation of the broadsheet published by Danjūrō VII to announce the passing of the name to his ten year old son, henceforth known as Danjūrō VIII, and of his own shift to a new identity, is included in Theodore Bowie, Art of the Surimono, Indiana: Indiana University Art Museum, 1979, pp. 100 – 102.

Tim Clark notes that nigao-e translates literally as ‘picture that resembles the face’. He points out also that in an early (1768) explanation, ‘… nigao’ is written with substitute kanji characters in two ways – as shashin (‘copy the truth’) and as shinzu (‘true picture’). Clark, 1992, p. 53. Two other conventions acknowledged by Clark for conveying a greater sense of realism in actor representations include the habit of representing them off-stage, in ‘informal settings’, and the development of okubi-e to allow the inclusion of more detail. As an example of the former Clark cites: ‘An important indicator of the public’s growing fascination with the lives of actors offstage was Shunshō’s illustrated book Yakusha natsu no Fuji (Actors: Mt Fuji in Summer), dateable to the winter of 1780. The conceit behind the title and the main intent of the book was to show leading actors as they looked without their make-up, like Mt Fuji in summer without its mantle of snow. Clark, 1992, p. 59.

Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, acknowledges that the phenomenon of ukiyo-e was Edocentric, and notes that it ‘…emerged from a social milieu that centred on publishers and groups of cultured individuals who lived in the shitamachi area, particularly around Nihonbashi.’ (p. 64). He notes both the habit of travelers purchasing azuma nishiki-e (Eastern brocade pictures) or Edo-e (Edo pictures) to take back to the provinces, and the appeal of ukiyo-e to literati and scholars, publishers and writers, artists, doctors, calligraphers and artisans as well as the broader categories of samurai and chōnin that characterized the population of Edo (Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 1997, pp. 64 – 75).

There is also some evidence to suggest that landscape series such as the Tōkaidō or Kisokaidō series performed the function, albeit in a rather oblique way, of maps. Maps appear not to have had wide currency, and were, indeed, classified as ‘secret’ until the later nineteenth century at least, as two notes in the journals of contemporary Western visitors confirm: ‘After an incredible amount of difficulty the Japanese have given me a map of Yedo. I am not to give it away or suffer it to be copied’. ‘The prince of Shinano tells me that the person who gave maps to von Siebold did not perform the hara-kiri but was crucified; and that a number of persons lost their lives by their conduct on that occasion’. Townsend Harris, from The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris, 1930, in Bernard Rudofsky, 1965, pp. 84 – 85.

Timothy Clark and Ueda Osamu acknowledge the complex range of groups that comprised the chōnin audiences for ukiyo-e, but note also, citing the example of Lord Yanagisawa Nobufuku (1724 – 1794) the existence of aristocratic fans of kabuki and ukiyo-e. Timothy Clark and Ueda Osamu, The Actor’s Image: Printmakers of the Katsukawa School, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago and Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 11 – 30.

Pictorial scrolls were rarely constructed as a single, exceptionally long, image. More commonly they comprised a series of linked, but separate and discrete apprehended episodic images. The scroll was laid on a table-top and opened on one image at a time, each view being rolled up as the next one was revealed. Scrolls established precedents for single-sheet serial forms: their height was usually about thirty-two centimetres, the height of the oban sheet size, and they typically began with a colophon text component, as did many serial print publications. See Shimizu Yoshiaki, ‘The Shigisan-engi Scrolls, c. 1175’, in Herbert Kessler and Marianna Simpson, eds., Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Washington: National Gallery of Art Centre For Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, 1985, pp. 115 – 129.
throughout (Nos. 16, 29, 46, 48, 54, 58, 66, 94, and 100), rather than comprising a final group of the last works in the series. Only twenty-seven of the sequence were eventually produced in woodblock print form, and not all of these were ever published. Those that were, though positioned in the first three-quarters of the sequence, were scattered throughout it rather than printed sequentially. Approval for publication would appear to be founded on Hokusai’s (and his publisher’s) satisfaction with the pictorial resolution of each individual composition rather than by adherence to the traditional publication order of the poems they illustrated. Peter Morse, *Hokusai: One Hundred Poets*, London: Cassell, 1989.


52 The eleventh act is that in which the final victorious revenge of forty-six of the rōnin is enacted. In some kabuki productions, and in some ukiyo-e representations, a twelfth act or print is included in which the final hara-kiri of the rōnin is represented.

53 The ‘Taka’ character in white on black by which Moronao’s identity was customarily indicated is an abbreviation of ‘Taka’ui’. Ashikaga Takaui was the ruling shōgun at the time the play is set, and Moronao was portrayed as his chief councilor.

54 It was customary to burn incense in one’s helmet prior to battle to ward off evil spirits and bad fortune.

55 *Ukiyo-e* prints were sometimes produced independently of kabuki productions, but increasingly, through the Torii, Katsukawa and Utagawa Schools, publication became closely linked to specific dramatic productions.

56 As, for example, in Kita, 1996, p. 165.

57 Lane, 1978, p. 303.


64 Seigle, 1993, p. 248 n. 10.

65 Seigle, 1993, Chapter 5, and especially p. 136 for the example of Takao IV in this respect.

66 See Clark, 1997, p. 11 – a survey of the 6,806 prints listed in the British Museum catalogues shows the inclusion of the word fūryū in print or series titles to outnumber the use of the word mitate by six to one.


68 This translation is in fact that of the equivalent poem in a later version of this subject by Andō Hiroshige, included in Basil Stewart, 1912, p. 151.


70 Clark, 1997, p. 12.


75 Fahr-Becker, 1999, p. 60.


79 Kyōka = ‘mad verse’ compositions of five lines in 5-7-5-7-7 syllables.

80 Asano Shūgō 1998, p. 21. See also pp. 22, 32.

83 Asano Shūgō, 1998, p. 27.
5 THE PICTORIAL MEANS OF UKIYO-E

I

Artists are problem solvers. The last chapter examined the ways in which ukiyo-e artists confronted the problem of how best to make pictures perform particular tasks or functions. Thus the development of the serial print format was a response to the problem of representing a narrative in pictorial form; the development of okubi-e was a solution to the problem of having to make actor or courtesan portraits more realistic both in appearance and expressive mien; the sweeping planes and arabesques of Torii artists were a response to the problem of having to find in the still, small medium of the woodblock print some accord with the dynamism of the theatre. The previous chapter looked at the problem of balancing requirements of conformity to rule with a will to invention. In the next chapter I will explore the problem of how these artists worked within the constraints and affordances of their material medium. There I will examine the way artists’ pictorial invention was tempered, sometimes defined, by the properties of the materials they worked with, and by the ways their medium encouraged particular formal characteristics in ukiyo-e, in qualities of line, colour, pattern and shape.

For this chapter I will focus more closely on the way ukiyo-e artists solved problems to do with one very particular issue: the articulation of pictorial space. For Edo artists during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the management of pictorial space was a key issue. They were confronted by some pictorial problems that had not really been faced by earlier artists: the ukiyo-e focus on genre subjects, for example, obliged artists to integrate figure arrangements within other pictorial contexts – landscape, stage, architectural interior – in ways that were quite novel, and which required the development of new pictorial devices. The demands of their Edo audiences also called for novelty in the management of pictorial space. Edo patrons demanded the representation of a much broader range of subjects than their predecessors – landscape, genre, still life, theatrical images, historical, mythical and literary subjects. Diversity of pictorial subject required versatility of pictorial means. For woodblock print artists the medium itself posed a spatial problem: the standard width of a cherry wood block imposed a condition for scale and format for ukiyo-e compositions. Ukiyo-e artists were often expected to make pictures that were heavily allusive, particularly in the ways in which they referred to pictorial devices from other contexts. Thus Hokusai made pictures that employed Kanō school spatial devices, and Harunobu employed the kumogata schematic cloud devices and floating spatial fields of Chinese painting that had been sustained through both the Kanō and Tosa painting schools. Edo audiences also demanded increasingly naturalistic representations of their favourite subjects. This in turn required the development or adoption of appropriate pictorial strategies. As artists became increasingly adept at representing three-dimensional space, however, a certain tension developed between this representational three-dimensionality and the flatness of the pictorial support, both as printing block, and as paper surface. If ukiyo-e can be associated with a particular spatial characteristic, it can be located in this tense relationship between three- and two-dimensionality.
A problem underlies the ways many historical accounts have considered the spatial character of *ukiyo-e*. They often assume that underlying the history of *ukiyo-e* there is a developmental trend, from schematic and stylized conventions for spatial arrangement to realistic and naturalistic ones. The development is seen as being from Chinese-styled idealized spaces, in which land masses, for example, are arranged in vertically disposed layers in shallow space, and asymmetrical compositions, through a period in which conventions like schematic projections of parallel planes were employed for the representation of architectural environments, towards a Western model that is more prosaic, which favours the construction of illusions of depth, and the horizontal format for landscape. The spatial development is accompanied by one in colour, from monochromatic to naturalistic colour, tonally modulated. These developments are seen to be from a ‘primitive’ state to a ‘sophisticated’, and more informed one. Though it conforms to these broader trends throughout its development, *ukiyo-e* can be distinguished from both its *Yamato-e* and Chinese precedents and its *shin-hanga* and later successors by its highly contrived colour systems, and the complexity and precision of its spatial arrangement.

This development could be seen to be fortunate or otherwise, depending on one’s point of view. From one position, for example, the adoption of western-style linear perspective was clear evidence of the growing sophistication of Japanese art during the nineteenth century. The roots of this trend towards sophistication could be located early, in the confrontation of Dutch and Portuguese models evident in *Nagasaki-e*, and its zenith can be found in the single-minded trend towards a western style modernity in Meiji Japan. An opposing view saw early *ukiyo-e* as an example of a relatively ‘pure’ Japanese art form, rooted in precursor schools like *Yamato-e*, and protected by the years of isolation enforced by the Tokugawa government. During the nineteenth century in particular this distinctively Japanese way of working became increasingly polluted by the adoption of Western pictorial devices like linear perspective; the ‘decadence’ of *ukiyo-e* was a consequence of this transition into western-styled realism.

These views are inappropriate; the explanations they offer are only strictly correct for particular selections of works, and are inconsistent with the evidence of other sequences or bodies of work. The development of *ukiyo-e* did not follow as unswerving a linear path as they describe. Some examples of *uki-e* perspectival pictures were completed very early in the history of *ukiyo-e* for example, and the isometric schematic architectural views and ‘floating field’ compositional environments remained popular modes until well into the nineteenth century. Some artists, like Hokusai, could not only move easily between these different modes, but could, and regularly did, combine devices from all three within the same composition. In a similar way elements of Chinese origins are apparent in the tendency to asymmetry and in the adoption of ‘floating’ spatial arrangements in the works of the earliest exponent of *ukiyo-e*, Iwasa Matabei; devices with the same origins were used regularly in the mature works of Hokusai, one of the later masters of the field.

A more appropriate explanation of the spatial character of *ukiyo-e* might state that by the early nineteenth century three broad modes for articulating pictorial space co-existed, some in several different variants; some were favoured by particular artists, different ones by others. Some could perform a particular function, realistic representation for example, while others were more suited to quite different tasks, literary allusion, theatrical promotion or whatever.
Similarly the notion that a ‘primitive’ and specifically Japanese form became ‘improved’ through contact with the West is, at best, only a part truth. Certainly, throughout the Tokugawa peace, despite a claim to isolationist policy, the government allowed the maintenance of trade relations with the West through the port of Nagasaki. Equally certainly, this trade included the importing of examples of European landscape paintings, particularly Dutch works, in the form of engraved prints. These images, and the perspective conventions that were developed in Europe during the seventeenth century, were easily embraced by Japanese artists like the scholar-artist Hiraga Gennai (1729 – 1779) and the daimyō Satake Shozan (1748 – 1785); the albums of the latter artist include a range of diagrammatic instructions to perspective construction. Later Shiba Kōkan, the student of Suzuki Harunobu, committed himself not just to the adoption of Western pictorial conventions but also to the exploration of European media like copperplate engraving. Aōdō Denzen (1748 – 1822) adopted the copperplate etching technique to reproduce European subjects ranging from textbook illustrations to veduta compositions from Germany, Holland or Italy as well as a variety of detailed perspective views of contemporary Japan.

The adoption of perspectival models by Edo artists can also be related to European models. An early example by Utagawa Toyoharu (1735 – 1814) from the 1770s, for example, is a direct copy of a copperplate print by the Italian engraver Visentini of a view of Venice by Canaletto. Toyoharu was better known for the composition of carefully contrived single-point perspective descriptions of Japanese architectural scenes, particularly of theatre and street environments. For later artists like Andō Hiroshige however, it is much more difficult to establish a direct connection with European models. Hiroshige’s earliest works are consistent with Chinese rather than Western precedents. In his mature works he embraced perspective systems wholeheartedly, often experimenting with quite daringly innovative devices. These works are rarely, if ever, dependent on identifiable European models however; by the early 1830s Hiroshige’s particular choices of perspectival conventions were entirely integrated into his own independent exploration of specifically Japanese themes. For Hiroshige, the independence from European models was not just a matter of parochial subject choice, but also a consequence of the selectivity he exercised in choosing pictorial devices. He chose, for example, to employ radical scale differentials, overlapping planes and aerial perspective, devices that were all quite consistent with the visual character of the environs he was depicting; equally, he chose not to use the types of linear architectural construction that characterized so many Western models. Hokusai seems to have been quite familiar with Western conventions. Only a handful of his works betray anything of that knowledge however. In his mature works his independence from European convention is secured both by a highly selective choice of Western-type pictorial devices, and by their cohesive integration with a variety of other devices much more consistent with earlier and more typically Japanese models. His retention of the isometric view for representing architectural forms, of medium to high viewpoints, and of devices like the highly stylized kumogata cloud forms, are all distinctly Japanese modes of working. Similarly, his manga contain page after page of figure and animal studies in which objects are arranged across an empty floating field in a manner entirely consistent with the early example of ukiyo-e painting, the Hikone Screen.

While the mature ukiyo-e artists did employ conventions then current in the west, they did so in an entirely local way. Even where perspective systems were embraced by ukiyo-e artists, they did not displace other conventions. Just as Hokusai retained local devices even (perhaps especially) in his very last works, the very last artists of ukiyo-e
continued to employ devices developed not just early in the development of *ukiyo-e* but sometimes centuries before. The distinctive isometric projection of parallel planes for representing architectural spaces, viewed slightly from above, often with essential architectural features (roofs, walls) removed to make narrative illustration easier, was an established graphic habit as early as the twelfth century. It was particularly popular for the representation of architectural interiors, especially the closely defined planar constructions of *kabuki* stage sets, in the much later works of artists like Utagawa Yoshitaki (1840–1899) (see *Kabuki Scene*, of 1883, Plate 32).

II

Thus one distinguishing feature of *ukiyo-e* spatial organization lay in the wide range of options for spatial arrangement available to its artists. *Ukiyo-e* artists were sophisticated spatial problem solvers, able to select from a range of different modes both for the representation of three-dimensional space in pictures and for the two-dimensional disposition of pictorial information across the picture plane. Their repertoire was much more varied than those that Tosa or Kanō School artists were allowed to employ. In some instances artists learned the conventions they employed from the works of earlier artists; in others they learnt them within studios or schools; in others they learned them from their peers; in some they explored or developed pictorial devices independently and inventively. Also, they used spatial devices with a sense of purpose: pictorial devices were tools that could achieve particular pictorial ends. Broadly speaking, the ‘categories’ of principles for spatial organization from which *ukiyo-e* artists could choose include exemplars directly inspired by models in Chinese painting and related ‘floating field’ systems; *Yamato-e* isometric projections; and perspectival systems.

Spatial arrangements consistent with Chinese models were more commonly to be found in the works of Kanō and Tosa School artists. They also occur in *ukiyo-e* however. This is not remarkable, since many *ukiyo-e* artists, from Iwasa Matabei through Katsushika Hokusai, had received some, occasionally all, of their training through these schools. Matabei’s adoption of Chinese spatial convention was grounded in a thorough training in Chinese inspired modes of painting and in the world of Chinese scholarship. In his screen paintings in particular he represented genre scenes in settings comprising the classic iconographic repertoire of rocky crags, knotted pines and rustic cottages. Like the Chinese painters Matabei ‘stacked’ his pictorial motifs, from bottom to top, in horizontal layers, in such a way that the motifs at the top of the composition seem as near to the viewer as those at the bottom. In some works, a suggestion of depth is indicated in these layered, stacked compositions of complex, crowded pictorial information by strong networks of diagonal lines set at forty-five degrees to the horizontal; but the scale principle remains unchanged – the objects at the top of the compositions are represented on the same scale as, and thus as close to the picture plane and to the viewer, as those at the bottom. The indeterminate spatial character engendered in Chinese paintings by the layering of misty veils of transparent monochromatic pigment are indicated in Matabei’s *Harvesters* by softly painted horizontally disposed layers of cloud In other works it is suggested by more stylized *kumogata* cloud forms layered, and interspersing the other objects in the composition – architectural structures, figure groups or animals – in horizontally disposed seams or strata. In most of Matabei’s compositions the apparent shallowness of the pictorial space is complemented by a typically Chinese asymmetrical arrangement of pictorial subject.
The Chinese painters favoured landscape. Where figure groups were included they were often tiny, almost invisible, camouflaged amongst the fluid detail of vegetation or water features. This being the case it is not surprising that characteristics of Chinese painting appeared in works by the much later ukiyo-e artists who specialized in landscape composition, Hiroshige and Hokusai. In Hiroshige’s works it is evident in some early compositions for which even the titles clearly assert their Chinese origins: *Mountains, Pines and Waterfall With a Border of Dragons and Sacred Jewels, in Chinese Style*, for example. In this particular work the typically Chinese hanging scroll format, that was by then a commonplace in Japanese painting, also was adopted. The Chinese reference is fixed by the decorative border motifs of dragons. Hiroshige stacked the pictorial elements of the composition vertically, tree upon tree in the group of pines in the lower half of the picture and extending up to the mid-field at left; sheer cascades of rock in the mountains that seem to be seated right on top of the trees. The verticality of the composition is emphasized by the long vertical fall of the waterfall at right. The resulting flatness, or extreme shallowness of the pictorial space, is emphasized by a peculiarity of technique. Not only has Hiroshige chosen to print this work in a flat, softly transparent, monochromatic grey, but, rather than describing the trees and hill forms with the finely articulated black line we normally associate with the key-block print, he has worked in ‘negative’. The linear features are described in white, cut away from the broader printing surfaces of the block. The effect is as flat as the decorative pattern of the border.

The composition of Katsushika Hokusai’s *Mountain Landscape in the Chinese Style* (Plate 31) is almost a mirror reflection of Hiroshige’s early work. Hokusai has combined the three principal elements of groves of trees, a rocky mountainous setting and a large precipitous waterfall, in this instance with the torrent to the left of the composition, and placed lower, and with the trees, represented in far greater detail, climbing much higher on the landscape. The key difference between the two works lies in their place within their respective artists’ oeuvre: where Hiroshige’s is a very early work, and suggestive of the artist’s early encounter with Chinese conventions, Hokusai’s is a mature work. Not only was it completed well into his career, but it is closely related to a broader group of mature works that explore this subject, including the well-known series *Shokoku taki meguri (A Tour of Japanese Waterfalls)*, 1833 – 34). For Hokusai these works are not so much evidence of the young artist working through conventional modes on the way to finding a more idiosyncratic way of working, as the adoption of a variety of conventions, including the Kanō inspired transparent wash quality and calligraphic mark, in the sustained confrontation of a given pictorial problem.

A number of pictorial devices contribute to the shallowness of the pictorial space in Hokusai’s composition. In the first place, he has chosen a vertical format, and has arranged the pictorial components down the full length of the pictorial space. Although both the mountains and the bridge in the upper part of the picture are clearly more distant than the rest of the composition, the remainder of the subjects are positioned parallel to, and very close to, the picture plane. A number of features contribute to this sense of shallowness. Just as there is no extremely distant background zone, there is no close up foreground. All of the main objects of the picture lie on the same near-middle-ground plane. The skyline is high, as is the viewpoint. Differences in scale relative to distance are minimized – the more distant upper group of cottages, for example, are represented on much the same scale as the lower, nearer ones. The marks with which the water, the texture of the rocky surfaces, and the structure of the trees are described, are, if not precisely vertical, certainly on axes
consistent with both the verticality of the support and the waterfall and rocky precipices. The sense of shallowness is emphasized further by the almost monochromatic colour scheme employed, and by the unrelieved flatness of the subtly disposed surfaces of grey and rose-pink.

The shallowness apparent in Hokusai’s pictorial space does not prevent it from describing the effects of depth, or its audiences from perceiving some degree of pictorial depth in it. The earlier Chinese canons for pictorial composition had been founded on highly codified standards for the representation of three-dimensional space:

The traditional Chinese ‘rule of the six recessions’ stated that the ‘recession of height’ should be expressed in the dimension of up and down, the ‘planar recession’ should be expressed in the horizontal dimension of right to left, and that the ‘recession of depth’ should be expressed in the dimension of front and rear. To these were added the ‘recession of breadth,’ the ‘recession of illusion,’ and the ‘recession of haze.’ In East Asian pictures the point of view was always high above ground level. The upper elements were distant and the lower elements were near, and thus the term ‘up and down perspective’ was also used. In practical application these principles were normally blended harmoniously within a single composition. The point of observation was raised or lowered at will, and thus a highly subjective attitude towards painting and a spiritual emblem had been emphasized.11

Similarly, though Hokusai has contrived a shallow pictorial space, this has not been at the expense of impressions of volume or solidity in the objects he described. The little cottages are represented as simple cuboid masses, clustered at a variety of angles in such a way as to emphasise their three-dimensionality. The surface texture of the walls of rock are described with sloping collections of nervous, staccato brushstrokes arranged in opposing planes to describe the particular direction of the slope of each side of the hill or rocky outcrop. The nervousness of these calligraphic marks contributes also to the sense of movement that suffuses the composition; not just a movement implicit in the repetitions of shapes or tactile elements, but, more closely consistent with the shallowness and verticality of the composition, a vigorous cascade of glittering light and dark. In these ways Hokusai is able to devise some degree of convincing representational verity which tempers the contrived character of his pictorial space.

Though Chinese spatial modes used in painting were characterized by verticality and shallowness of pictorial space, they also possessed a somewhat indeterminate spatial quality generated by the transparency and monochromaticism of their washed-on layers of watery ink. The indistinct, hazy, misty atmosphere of Chinese ink painting is replaced in the Hokusai work by thin, almost imperceptible films of grey and pink, by the use of a transparent darker grey rather than dense black for the key block printing, and by the ‘unfixed’ ‘floating’ appearance of many of the brush marks. The result is the generation of a trace of the sense of yūgen we associate with brush painting. This quality may be less evident in Hokusai’s work than in those of the Chinese-style painters, but in other ways, in the maintenance of a shallow pictorial space, and the emphasis on verticality, rhythm and movement, Hokusai is entirely consistent with the approaches of his Chinese precursors.

Related to these shallow-space models, and also of Chinese origin, was the ‘floating field’ convention in which pictorial objects were arranged across an otherwise empty pictorial space. This model was quickly adopted by ukiyo-e artists, particularly the early illustrators of ukiyo-zoshi like Moronobu; at least one practical function of the empty spaces for these artists was to provide areas for the insertion of text. It was the mode
adopted very early in the Tokugawa period, by the painter of the *Hikone Screen* (Plate 2) for example, and it was sustained, in Eishō’s *Two Courtesans* (Plate 5), in Utamaro’s *Courtesan Tomimoto Toyo hina as Kaoyo* (Plate 1) and *Mitate Yamauba to Kintaro* (Plate 6), in Kuniyasu’s *Courtesan* (Plate 7), Kunisato’s *Two Kabuki Actors* (Plate 8), to works as late as Kunisada’s *Two Actors in Role* (Plate 15).

Though the notion of an empty spatial field may imply a certain simplicity of spatial problem or a casual compositional structure, these ‘floating field’ compositions were in fact usually quite complex. The painter of the *Hikone Screen* for example established three precedents for precision in spatial design for ukiyo-e. The first was for the habit of arranging pictorial objects, in his case fifteen figures, a dog, assorted objects (a sword, tea tray, letters), and a painted Chinese screen, across an empty, apparently indeterminate space. The key spatial referents in this composition are the rectilinear edges of the individual panels, and those of the screen as a whole.

The second precedent was for the construction, within the flat plane of the screen, of a very shallow pictorial space. The ‘front’ of the picture, that part apparently nearest the viewer, is the picture plane, indicated both by the vertical and horizontal edges of the panels and by the subtle grid suggested by the overlapping edges of the small squares of gold leaf which cover the entire spatial field. The rear of the pictorial space is indicated by the positioning of the Chinese painted screen high in the composition and therefore farthest away, and clearly overlapped by the figures of the *samisen* player and the *suguroku* competitors. The relative positions of the figures within this space are indicated in two ways. Firstly by their position on the picture plane: the lowest figures, the two young girls placed at either end of composition, and the woman reading a letter at centre, are the closest to us, the figures arranged higher up, in front of the Chinese screen, are the most distant. Secondly, they are placed in relation to one another. In the right hand three panels this arrangement is across the pictorial space; the only figure who is slightly farther away than the others is the man at center. In the left hand panels this arrangement is much more markedly from close positioning to distant. The head of the woman in white, at the far left, just overlaps the knee of the man behind her. This, and the invasion of a field of flat gold in the remainder of the space between them, suggests a clear distance separating them, perhaps as much as a metre. A similar spatial relation is devised between the right hand *samisen* player and the *suguroku* group. A much closer relation is contrived between the members of this group, the precise distance between them indicated both by the scale of the gaming table that separates them and by the much greater degree of overlap between the figures. A similar relation has been constructed between the two figures to the right of this group.

The spatial relations between the figures are thus neither casual nor indeterminate; on the contrary, each figure is placed with immense precision in relation to the other figures, in relation to the dimensional constraints of the individual panels and the composition as a whole, and in relation to the rectilinear grid of the gold leaf. In this design the open spaces, far from simply being ‘empty space’, perform a vital spatial function, indicating exactly the distances between the figures, emphasizing their gestures, and establishing a unified plane upon which their various activities can be described. The ‘empty’ spaces are as vital constituents of the composition as the objects themselves. Beyond their purely structural function, they allow for, even encourage, the exercise of the viewer’s imagination in interpreting the nature of the relation between the figures in the painting.
The third convention established for *ukiyo-e* by the painter of the *Hikone Screen*, and again one founded in precedents in Chinese painting, was the adoption of asymmetry as a structural principle. This quality is evident in the overall distribution of the figures. The three panels to the right, for example, are sparsely populated, whereas those to the left are occupied by more, and more tightly grouped figures. Apart from the edges of the individual panels there are no pictorial spatial references to the right; to the left an internal geometric space is established by the inclusion of the Chinese-style painted screen. The disposition of each figure on a different axis, each facing in a subtly different direction, contributes further to this sense of imbalance. Where we can find some interaction between pairs or groups of figures they are also characterized by imbalance or opposition rather than symmetry. An asymmetrical tension, for example, has been drawn between the broad lines of the gesturing figure at right, and the coy turning-away curve that runs through the woman at left of him. The three figures playing *suguroku* not only turn their faces away from one another, but have been placed at different heights so that no close engagement between them is possible.

The painter of the *Hikone Screen* adopted this asymmetrical principle of pictorial arrangement for four reasons. In the first place, he employed it because he was accustomed to it; it was by this time an established convention in both Chinese and Japanese painting. Secondly, it helps to generate the sense of pictorial tension that characterizes the relations of the figures across the picture plane. Thirdly, and related to this, together with the repeated juxtapositions of rhythmic curves it helps to generate a varied sense of movement – sharp and nervous amongst the *suguroku* players, gently languorous in the pair to their right, dance-like and coy in the figures to the right of them – across the composition that lends it its playful, light-hearted character. Fourth, it contributes to a degree of realist verity. An asymmetrical structural principal accords with the viewers’ experiences of perceiving complex figure groups.

The array of spatial devices combined in the *Hikone Screen* formed a fruitful source for subsequent *ukiyo-e* artists. It is the combination of an asymmetrical arrangement and a large body of empty space below the belly of the horse in Shunei’s *Samurai on Horseback* (Plate 9), for example, that lends the composition its sense of powerful, driving, soaring movement. In some – Kuniyasu, Plate 7, Kunisato, Plate 8 – the empty background is left unprinted. In others – Shunei, Kunisada, Plate 15 – a flat colour field emphasizes the pictorial presence and structural function of the otherwise unrelieved areas. In others again, a softly graduated *bokashi* colourfield suggests an atmospheric transition from the ground beneath the pictorial objects into the empty space behind them; Shinsai has employed this device in his *ama* composition (Plate 3), and Seitei has devised the most subtle, almost imperceptible gradation to describe the atmospheric blue sky background (Plate 12).

Kuniyasu’s composition of a single standing courtesan employs devices similar to those of the *Hikone Screen* to describe the recession of a very shallow pictorial space. In the small assemblage of objects to the right – two albums of *shunga-e* and a pipe and a lacquered tobacco container – the books are clearly closer to the viewer and the tobacco box farthest away. This is indicated by their relative positions: the books are lower, the smoking paraphernalia higher in the picture plane. It is indicated also by the overlapping of one book over the other, and by the very slight overlap of the stem of the pipe over the lower, and nearest, corner of the box. It is indicated also by the alternating diagonal disposition of each of these objects. Kuniyasu has employed a similar overlapping device.
to contrive some depth in the figure also. The hem of the woman’s *kimono* is closer to us than the length of her figure. This is indicated both by the lines that describe overlapping folds of volumes of cloth, and by the diagonal disposition of their striped pattern. The woman’s upper arm is closer to the viewer than the lap dog, and the dog is closer than the woman’s head – each overlaps the form behind it. Though these devices indicate a slight spatial recession that depth is tempered by a peculiarity of scale. Each of the objects to the right is represented the same size in relation to the other objects that it would normally have; there is no diminution of scale according to depth. Similarly the woman’s broad shoulders and large *shimada* coiffure subtly contradict the sense of depth achieved by the overlapping of forms. Just as, in the *Hikone Screen*, the artist has fixed the rear of the space with the image of the Chinese screen, Kuniyasu has here fixed the front of the pictorial space, or the picture plane, with the flat rectangular forms of the two albums at upper left.

The habit of ‘sandwiching’ the figures of a composition between a clearly but subtly defined front and rear plane became a commonplace feature of later *ukiyo-e*. In Kunisato’s composition for example, the picture plane is clearly indicated by the frieze of *sakura*, or cherry blossom, arranged across the upper edge of the composition, and emphasized by the columns of calligraphy arranged down either side of the figures. In Harunobu’s image of strolling lovers (Plate 28), the nearer plane is established by the upper border of snow-laden willow fronds, the farther plane by the delicately mottled blue/yellow ground behind the snowy rise on which they walk.

In Utamaro’s Yamauba and Kintaro composition the picture plane is indicated both by the vertical line of the tall black edge of the lacquered screen at the extreme right of the composition, and by the closest corner of the lacquer tray at the bottom. The isometric projection of the tray draws the eye back into the pictorial space. The tray overlaps Kintaro, Kintaro overlaps Yamauba. The successive depth of each part of the picture is clearly indicated. The rear of the pictorial space is in this instance indicated by the diminutive scene of the inset cartouche, though in most compositions a cartouche would be more likely to be employed to indicate the picture plane.

Though artists were able to employ a range of devices to indicate some degree of volume, depth or relative positioning of pictorial objects within these ‘floating field’ compositions, the preoccupation with empty space, both in older Chinese precedents and in *ukiyo-e* examples suggests a motive for artists other than the solely representational:

> Nature is not ‘idealized’…yet it is much more than a reflection of nature, or what mere observation can do. Art is concerned with relations rather than with objects. By placing an object in relation to another object, or to mere space, the object becomes transformed; it can change its colour, modify its shape, receive an access of significance. It is a passage from the world of fact into the world of idea.\(^4\)

In other words, the preoccupation of *ukiyo-e* artists with ‘empty’ spatial field composition indicates both a particular and abiding preoccupation with the issue of spatial arrangement, and an acute recognition of the ways the relations of pictorial components can generate understandings more complex and more subtle than the objects themselves might generate.

In many later examples the close arrangement of figures between a simple foreground and background plane was sustained. In Toyohara Kunichika’s bust portrait of Onoe Kikugorō V (Plate 33), for example, the closer, or picture plane, is marked by almost
abstract slabs of colour or pattern. This is provided by the plane of floral decorated fabric that overlaps the figure on a diagonal right across the lower side of his body. The farther plane is indicated simply by a flat surface of the most intense aniline red. The intensity of this colour field prevents the background from receding; indeed, where it meets the broad olive green shoulders of the actor’s costume, the background plane seems almost closer than the figure itself. Kunichika has ensured the closest of relationships between near and farther planes by including accents of the same red both in the floral decoration of the foreground plane and in the undergarments of the actor, visible at the cuffs and the neck.

In constructing the spatial arrangement of Kaya (Plate 21) Utamaro has used the figures or objects themselves to construct his shallow pictorial space. The nearest object, and the one that confirms the picture plane, is the figure that enters the composition from the right. The picture plane is confirmed also by the title cartouche at upper left. Directly behind the nearest figure, and overlapped by her so much as to be almost obscured, is a black lacquer frame and picture. This in turn overlaps, and therefore stands before, the green field of the mosquito net. The position of the net is emphasized by the flat surfaces of the decorative obi hanging from above. The second figure is seen to be behind the net by being overlaid with the fine pattern of vertical and horizontal lines of the mesh, and by being overlapped by the two vertical yellow strips of canvas reinforcing. A precisely defined pictorial depth is thus indicated by a sequence of planes, each disposed exactly parallel to the picture plane. Within each of the figures some degree of three-dimensionality is indicated, again by overlapping. Thus it is actually the hand of only the right hand figure that marks precisely the picture plane. The hand overlaps the bundle of tissues it holds, placing it slightly back. The tissues overlap the obi, placing it farther behind again. In the rear figure this same recessive sequence is established between fan, hand, kimono, and shoulders. In both figures any more extreme demonstration of solidity of form is avoided by the insistence on flat, unvaried layers of colour, and by the flat network of horizontal and vertical lines of the mesh of the mosquito net.

Like Kuniyasu, Utamaro has tempered the effects of depth by constructing a peculiar contradiction of scale. One might assume that more distant objects could be shown to be so by being represented on a smaller scale than nearer objects. This is the strategy employed by Utamaro in his portrait of Tomimoto Toyohina and Takao (Plate 1). In this instance however, Utamaro has drawn the farther away figure on a subtly larger scale than the closer one; the distance from the tip of the chin to the top of the head (though not to the top of the elaborate shimada coiffure) is slightly longer than that of the same part of the nearer figure. The combined width of the shoulders and fan of the farther figure is more than twice that of the partly obscured shoulders of the closer figure. The effect is to suggest that the figure which every other part of this composition tells us is further away, appears to be actually nearer than, or at least as close as, the standing figure at right. In employing this apparently paradoxical construction Utamaro has ensured both the shallowness of the pictorial space, and the closeness of the pictorial relation between the two figures.

The same principle has been employed in Utagawa Kunisada II’s Chūshingura composition (Plate 26). Through the exaggerated overlaps of shapes of clothing, limbs, and pavilion he has constructed a very precisely defined shallow pictorial depth. The apparently contradictory scale relations are provided by the two large circular shapes of the mon on the pavilion and the much smaller circular mon on the costume of Momonoi Wakasanosuke. An even shallower pictorial depth has been constructed by Utagawa Kunitsugu in his portrait of a seated archer (Plate 34). Here the front of the pictorial space
is indicated by the vertical placement of the bow, which extends from top to bottom of the composition, and the rear is marked by the legs of the lacquerware stool on which he sits. The limbs of the archer himself, and particularly the angular, overlapping planes of his armour, are arranged, like an assemblage of flat, overlaid plates, all placed parallel to the picture plane. The pictorial depth is a fraction of that an actual figure would displace.

Not all *ukiyo-e* compositions are characterized by the shallowness of pictorial depth evident in all of these pictures. *Ukiyo-e* artists could be interested in describing greater pictorial depth, and could draw on a range of resources to do so. By and large, the devices they employed to this end belong to two categories: isometric projection, and perspective construction.

In the isometric projection the pictorial object is represented with receding parallel planes and orthogonals set at $30^\circ$ to the horizontal. All vertical lines and planes are drawn on a vertical axis. All dimensions are in scale ratio, so all parallel orthogonals are drawn in parallel, rather than as converging. In the European tradition the closest vertical axis is often placed at the center of the lower edge of the construction; the projection then extends back to either side of it. In Japanese variants the commitment to asymmetry generally requires the nearest vertical axis to be drawn from the lower edge of one side or the other of the composition. The isometric projection is the most commonly used spatial schematic in Japanese drawing. In early *ukiyo-e* and in *Yamato-e* precedents, the axonometric projection, in which receding planes are set at $45^\circ$ to the horizontal, and for which a correspondingly higher viewpoint was employed, was used. In many of these earlier constructions the closest plane is drawn parallel to the picture plane, with receding planes angled off in one direction only, usually to the right.

The isometric principle was eminently suited to the representation of architectural volumes – rooms, verandahs, courtyards, streets, or the cuboid volumes of buildings. It was often used in combination with *fukinuki-yakai*, the ‘open-roof’ device, or cut away wall, which allowed artists to represent the interiors of architectural spaces and the human engagements within them. Both the isometric projection and *fukinuki-yakai* had a long pedigree in Japanese art, stretching right back to the twelfth century:

Of the conventional devices in the Saikaku illustrations (for his novels *Five Women Who Chose Love* and *The Life of an Amorous Woman*) the most striking is one that derives from the earliest *yamatoe* traditions and is already conspicuous in the Genji scrolls. This is the so-called *fukinuki-yakai* (roofless houses) whereby we are shown indoor scenes from above at an angle of forty-five degrees, with the roof and other obstructions conveniently removed. Another traditional convention is to be found in the tufts of cloud or haze which improbably wrap themselves around the characters and which will even chase them indoors, no doubt aided by the absence of a roof or solid walls.$^{15}$

A schematic projection of this type could be contrived from the simplest of pictorial elements. In *Settsu Kinata-no Tamagawa* for example, Suzuki Harunobu has indicated the recession of space from just behind the two women to the rear wall of the room by the projection of the lower frontal ‘foot’ of the *tokonoma* at left at about $40^\circ$ to the horizontal. In his reconstruction of the spatial planes of a *kabuki* set (Plate 32) Utagawa Yoshitaki has employed a single line – the floor panel extending back to the pillar at the extreme right, set leading into the composition at $30^\circ$ to the horizontal – to indicate the depth of the principal volume of the composition.
More commonly however, artists were required to represent more complex spaces, and more extensive sequences of projected space or volume had to be constructed. In depicting the interior of the home of Enya Hangan (Plate 23) for example, as viewed from within its internal courtyard, Hokusai has employed both an isometric projection and a variant of fukinuki-yakai in order to represent a complex assembly of interior spaces within which he can position different interactions of figures. At foreground right he has constructed a combined space, nearest the viewer, of a raised verandah and a chamber that would normally be enclosed by shoji screens like the one on its left-hand side, and delimited to the rear by a painted folding screen. Beyond this are the cuboid spaces of, firstly a covered walkway, which leads back from right to left to a second covered passage, which leads back again in the opposite direction to the rear of the compositional space. Each of these spaces is carefully described as discrete, if linked, volumes. The assembly of these spaces defines in its turn the central courtyard to the left foreground and a second internal space to the right, visible mainly through the open space behind Kaoyo and her attendants. The intensely rectilinear character of this construction is at once emphasized, through the repeated rectilinear shapes of the floor boards, the shoji screen, the balustrades or the tall piles, and at the same time is relieved by the more flowing lines of the gardens, the arrangement of sakura blossoms, the figures and the lengthy intrusions of kumogata cloud form which extend into the composition from the upper left, upper right and lower right hand corners. In a sense the fukinuki-yakai opening up of walls to allow a view of the interior of the buildings here is a little unusual. A verandah, like the one at foreground right, could normally be opened to the elements in any case, as might the covered walkways beyond. The adjoining chamber might easily be opened to the verandah by sliding its shoji screens to one side, though in this instance Hokusai has simply chosen to omit the exterior shutters altogether. The broad opening of the rear of the room is typical of the flexible open plan of many residences of the day.

Constructing a complex set of spatial volumes in this way has enabled Hokusai to establish a convincing spatial context for the narrative events of Chūshingura. The effectiveness of the spatial construction lends credence to the human interactions that take place inside. Each of the two figure groups is situated in a discretely defined space. Thus the foreground scene in which Lady Kaoyo, accompanied by her three attendants, assembles a commemorative arrangement of sakura blossoms, is defined by the planes of the floor and the shoji and pictorial screen. The secondary engagement, in which Oboshi Rikiya receives Ishido Umanjo and Yakushiji Jirozaemon, the envoys of the shōgun who have come to deliver Enya’s sentence and to supervise its observation, is contained within its own clearly defined cuboid space.

Each of these interactions and their respective spatial environs, together with the other architectural volumes described in the picture, is ordered, in logical relation to one another, within the broader spatial logic of the network of planes and orthogonals. These two characteristics, the construction of a convincing substitute for three-dimensional spaces or volumes, and the articulation of a coherent and cohesive pictorial space, were the special strengths of the isometric projection.

For composing his illustration for the final Act of Chūshingura Hokusai’s problem has been almost the reverse of that of Act IV: rather than representing the limits and inter-relations of internal architectural spaces, Hokusai was now required to describe an external view of architectural forms. In fact, Moronao’s mansion, as depicted by Hokusai, is a complex assemblage of interlocking cuboid forms. He was required to represent its solid
stone foundations and patios, its high and sturdy defensive outer wall, relieved by a projecting room at center, an internal courtyard space, and numerous other spatial volumes defined by intersecting rooflines and gables, and supplementary forms of ladders, stairways and viewing platform. As with the internal composition Hokusai has employed an isometric projection to describe the relations of these forms across, and into, the composition, but he has reversed the composition. Thus the nearest vertical line here is to the left, rather than to the right-hand side of the composition; the nearest corner of a volume in fact lies outside the composition, but its closest vertical is indicated by the edge panels of the door, and its related orthogonals extend diagonally upward to the right to describe the upper and lower edges of the roof, the wall structure and the flags of the stepped patio. This construction provides the necessary information for describing the principal volume of the mansion, starting lower left, and extending upward, and inward, across the composition to the right. Contrasting with this volume, and confirming the three-dimensional character of the structure as a whole, are the second set of diagonal lines and planes extending back, and into the composition from right to left, that describe the central extension at the front of the building. Consistent with these are those lines that describe the recession of the farthest end of the building, those of the small viewing platform at lower right, and a complementary set of orthogonals on the patio flags.

Cutting through this solid geometrical structure are a series of contrasting diagonal lines and planes. The angles of the gables, and the verandah rooftops, the large ladder at left, the neighbouring buildings lower right all provide an interwoven counterpoint to the principal structure of the building. Knitting through all of these, the soft snow covered humps of pine bough, the curving, snaking, chaotic procession of rōnin, from their entry point in the lower right corner, up and over the rooftop of the mansion, provide yet another level of contrapuntal contrast – a staccato and rhythmic complement to the solid surfaces of the buildings.

Within this tightly controlled pictorial construction there appears to be one small inconsistency. The principal objects and actions of the composition have been concentrated in a very shallow pictorial space, but in the upper right corner of the composition, and quite inconsistent with this, is a view across the waves to a distant coastal landscape. The diminution of scale, and the shift from a colour key dominated by bright orange, yellow and beige to one of cool greens and greys, both confirm the immensity of the distance from the foreground scene to the horizon. There are two reasons for this. In the first instance, the distant scene provides a geographical context for the nearer scene, and one important to the Chūshingura narrative. In the play, the rōnin travel to Moronao’s mansion by sea, and one important scene is the moonlight landing of the rōnin, in which the name of each man is read out by the narrator. In the second instance, the background scene is not entirely inconsistent with that of the foreground. The apparent flatness of the mauve body of the sea, and of the grey of the sky, find their foreground equivalents in the grey of the flagstones and stone foundations of the mansion, and the horizon line coincides with that of the roof.

The result of these complex spatial interactions, and the distinguishing characteristic of Hokusai’s spatial relations in general, is the generation of an acute degree of pictorial tension. This tension is constructed through the interaction of the two contrasting sets of leading diagonals, the repetitions and interactions of rectilinear patterns, triangles, tilted planes, and especially the myriad rhythms of the round hats of the rōnin, and most of all between the schematic construction of shallow depth and the picture plane
to which this whole construction relates. In many ways, this composition sets the standard for complexity, tension and cohesiveness for Hokusai’s mature career.

The isometric projection had some advantages for ukiyo-e artists. It was a special sort of principle for spatial organization, and ukiyo-e artists were interested in making innovations in spatial organization to a degree few of their Japanese predecessors had been. Geometric projections of this sort were pictorially strong, and clear – they provided a highly organized ‘ground’ for the depiction of a great amount of narrative detail. It was this advantage that had endeared this mode to the early illustrators of Genji, and it offered a similar advantage to ukiyo-e illustrators of genre scenes. Above all, isometric projections allowed ukiyo-e artists to construct spatial relations of great cohesion, in which the rectilinear pictorial masses could lock together soundly, and in which, through the convention of anchoring one side or other of the projection to the picture plane itself, and the emphasis on repetitions of vertical axes and planes, the relation of the pictorial projection to the picture plane was secure.

On the other hand, isometric or axonometric projections also had a disadvantage. Because proper scale relations are maintained between separate volumes or spaces depicted along the projection, the isometric projection in particular offered artists little opportunity to depict deeper pictorial spaces; by the time Hokusai, for example, had represented the three principal volumes of Moronao’s mansion, he had extended from the lower left hand entry into the composition right across to the right.

The provision of convincing representations of pictorial depth had rarely been a problem for artists of the eighteenth century; the interests of audiences tended to be dominated by the immediate attractions of theatrical or other floating world subjects – their personalities. These subjects could easily be represented as figure groups arranged across the pictorial space, rather than receding into it. During the nineteenth century however, audiences increasingly demanded a degree of representational fidelity to subject. Actor portraits were required to look like the actors they represented; courtesan portraits needed to convey not only something of how their subjects looked, but also something of the dignity, allure or provocation of their bearing. The spaces and volumes of buildings and their interiors, and of the landscapes they stood in were increasingly required to accord with the viewer’s own knowledge of the way these things looked in the real world that surrounded them.

For landscapes and architectural subjects, the obvious response to these requirements lay in the adoption of a range of perspectival devices for the representation of deeper pictorial spaces. Earlier examples of perspectival recessions, those by Utagawa Toyoharu for example, employed a fairly rigidly observed but overstated single point perspective projection, in which the depth of architectural interiors in particular became highly exaggerated. Later examples were more subtle, and sometimes more complex, than those of Toyoharu or the Nagasaki painters, and even in the works of Hiroshige, continued to conform also to other ukiyo-e spatial principles – those of asymmetry and spatial tension for example – in a distinctively ukiyo-e manner. The distinctly local character of Japanese perspectival systems generated a particular categorical term for describing them: they were referred to as uki-e, or ‘floating pictures.’

The character of uki-e, and the distinction between it and the isometric projection, is evident in other works from Hokusai’s Chūshingura series. Where the architectural
projections of his illustrations for Acts IV and XI, for example, generated solid, interlocking, immoveable constructions, the perspectival modes adopted for the composition of illustrations for Acts V (Yoichibei oshi) and VIII (Tōkaidō michiyuki) of the same series. Both compositions represent out-of-doors landscape settings rather than architectural ones. In order to achieve some convincing degree of naturalism Hokusai has employed a range of devices associated with linear perspective: objects get smaller, and closer together, with increasing distance; closer objects are represented in greater detail and with greater range and contrast of colour; leading and intersecting diagonals provide pathways for the eye. Despite the adoption of these devices however, Hokusai obtains in neither composition anything of the satisfying mathematical cohesion and order of earlier European examples. This is partly because, though all of the devices he has adopted are quite consistent with his audience’s visual experience of the worlds they lived in, their assembly is not ordered by any underlying perspectival principle of arrangement. And indeed, some of their components – the middle ground pathway at right in each work, for example – seem to defy completely the logic of the perspectival devices adopted elsewhere. This lack of a linear ordering principle, the ‘layering’ of horizontal zones, distinguished in Yoichibei oshi by an alternation of warm and cool colour, and an insistence on a flowing, floating linear quality throughout both compositions confirm the ‘floating’ quality that underlies the category of uki-e.

Though Hokusai could handle these deeper spatial recessions with ease where he had to, they were to attract the single-minded attention of Andō Hiroshige. Hiroshige came to specialize in a particular type of picture: meisho, or ‘famous view’. These included well-known views of the Eastern Capital, views of the various stations, or resting points, in the long journey along the Tōkaidō or Kiso kaidō highways, views of popular tourist destinations – Lake Biwa or Mount Fuji for example – or of distant attractions like the Tamagawa, or ‘Six Crystal Rivers.’ These landscape compositions were much like the European veduta. They were sought out by travellers to the capital as reminders of the sights that had confronted them there (and later, for the same reason, by European visitors). These audiences had two requirements of these pictures: they had to be interesting, and they had to be accurate.

Hiroshige addressed both requirements most assiduously in his last great series Meisho Edo hyakkei (One Hundred Views of the Famous Places in Edo), which he began in 1856.16 This series presented his viewers with subjects not only of geographical interest, but with strikingly innovative compositions and pictorial devices; they were, by and large, convincing descriptions of the spatial character of the landscapes they represented. In a number he attempted as daring an exaggeration of pictorial depth as had been tried before, by fixing the nearest pictorial object on the picture plane itself, and using it to frame other objects that could thus be represented as being a considerable distance away. The effect was most striking in the high-perspectival recession of Ōdenma-chō momendana (Cotton-goods Lane, Ōdenma Chō), the seventh image in the series; in the glimpse of a plum orchard from between the boughs of a blossoming plum tree in Kameido Ume yashiki (Plum Estate, Kameido), No. 30; in Massaki-hen yori Suijin no mori Uchigawa Sekiya no sato o miru zu (View from Massaki of Suijin Shrine, Uchigawa Inlet, and Sekiya), No. 36; in the view past a close-up fish kite to a distant Fuji in Suido Bridge and Surugadai, No. 48; and perhaps most playfully in the view of a river landscape with Fuji in the distance seen through the handle and upper rim of a wooden bucket, with a terrapin suspended into the centre of the composition, hanging on a piece of string, in Fukagawa Mannenbashi (Mannenbashi Bridge, Fukagawa), No. 86.
Hiroshige explored this device in these and many other compositions of the *One Hundred Views of Edo*. In others he employed a range of other perspectival strategies – striking recessions described by converging linear structures; atmospheric descriptions of great distance; overlapping and diminution of scale of pictorial objects. These were to be the most exaggerated of his explorations of the perspectival repertoire however. His earlier endeavours in this field were less extremely contrived, more naturalistic and cohesive in outcome. The illustrations for the 1833 – 1834 series of views of the Tōkaidō, *Tōkaidō gojūsan-tsugi no uchi* (Fifty-three stations of the Tōkaidō), for instance, are every bit as successful, and more consistently coherent in their descriptions of pictorial depth and distance as the works of the later series.

Hiroshige’s view of women – *tome onna* – soliciting travellers in the station town of Goyū (Plate 18), for example, sets its genre content within the context of a fairly convincing perspectival space. Where earlier constructions by artists like Toyoharu had made their architectural components conform rigidly to the convergent ‘rays’ of a single-point perspective construction, Hiroshige has gently alternated the angles of the buildings. Some are set forward onto the street, others a little back; the edges of some point toward vague vanishing point on the horizon, others a little away from this. The result is a general conformity to principles of diminution and convergence, but one tempered by Hiroshige’s own observation of the slightly jumbled, tightly packed arrangements of the buildings, and one which allows him, on the right hand side of the road in particular, to describe a strong curve, firstly inward, and then away to the right into the distance. The depth indicated by the convergence of the buildings and street is complemented by the comparative reduction in the scale of the figures, and by the lighter, greyer, less contrasted colour range nearer the horizon.

A more complex spatial problem is confronted on the thirteenth composition in this series, *Numazu* (Plate 35). In this picture Hiroshige has depicted two figure groups, one near, the other in the distant middle-ground, journeying along the banks of the Kise River towards Numazu. Strapped to the back of the figure at the rear of the closer group is a box containing a mask of the god Suradahiko (the god of the road); this suggests the group is headed towards the Shintō shrine of Kompira on the island of Shikoku, where such masks were used in an annual procession.

The overall depth of the composition is clearly determined in the first instance by the leading diagonals of the Kise River, firstly from lower left across to middle-ground right, and then from there back to the central rear-ground. This sequence is echoed, to the left by the alternating zigzag edges where the bank meets the river, and to the right by the long white path which the travellers follow, where it is complemented by the directional movement of the figures. It is complemented also by the structure of interlocking triangular forms – the grey repoussoir zone lower right, that of trees and land on the far bank opposite left, that of the trees, land and tightly clustered houses extending from middle-ground right back to, and then across, the horizon. The alternating, intersecting character of this structure does much to relieve the severity of the foreground/middleground/background zonal structure that underlies this composition.

These underpinning structural relations are complemented by a range of other devices. The further away the figures are, the smaller they are drawn; in the distance the diminution of human scale is implicit in the small scale of houses and bridge. Similarly,
the row of trees on the near bank get successively smaller as they are placed further away; the densely packed forests on the opposite bank are smaller still, while those of the distant middle ground are smaller again. Coupled with this comparative reduction in scale are subtle applications of the overlapping of forms: the close foreground trees rise high and overlap the distant horizon and skyline; the nearer child in the foreground figure group overlaps the adult just behind, placing both figures quite precisely. The distant group is overlapped by one tree, the houses beyond overlap one another. Overlapped objects are logically held to be more distant than overlapping ones. Closely related to this overlapping device is that of framing farther away objects with close-up ones – the convention that was to so preoccupy Hiroshige in his final series. Here the foreground figure group is framed by the trunks of the mountain cypresses on either side; the opposite bank to the left is framed by the edge of the composition and the left hand tree; the distant figure group and the little selection of views of Numazu are each again framed between the tall trunks of the trees. Each framed group is held to be further away than the framing objects by the successively higher position of its baseline. As objects get further away they get less detailed; the accents of warm colour in the foreground figures are much more subtly applied in the cluster of trees at middle ground, right, and give way to the cool relations of blues and blue-greens in the distance. The harshness of colour contrasts is relieved by the softness of bokashi gradations.

Hiroshige was able to contrive much deeper and broader landscape views than this. In Kanaya – Ōigawa engan (Kanaya – The Distant Bank of the Ōi River, Plate 36) from the same series he has constructed a sweeping panoramic view of the Ōi River bed that marks the boundary between the provinces of Suruga (on the near side) and Tōtomi (in the distance). In the far distance, huddled in a valley in the Kanasayaka hills, is the town of Kanaya itself. In his composition for Numazu Hiroshige had employed a relatively low and close viewpoint, just slightly above the foreground figure group, and a horizon situated about halfway down the pictorial space; this created a view that would approximate that which an actual viewer in close proximity to the scene may have had. For Kanaya he has lifted both much higher: the horizon lies about two thirds of the way up the composition, and the viewpoint is from an indeterminate position suspended high above the valley. The result is to dispense altogether with a foreground. The picture starts in the broadly drawn middle ground expanse of the riverbed. Two features contribute to the sense of depth in this zone: the diagonal sequence of tiny figures extending from lower left, across and back to the middle right, and the diagonal disposition of rivers and banks in the opposite direction, from lower right to middle left. Three devices secure the sense of depth and distance beyond this: the bokashi gradations from the far bank to the misty footing of the hills in the distance; the implicit differential in scale between the figures in the middle ground and the village almost hidden in the hills; and the reduction in graphic detail and tonal and colour range between the nearer hill group and the soft grey zone of those that disappear towards the horizon.

Though Hiroshige employed naturalistic conventions adeptly, he did not confine himself exclusively to working within a naturalistic manner. Apart from the very early reliance on Chinese models he continued to explore related approaches throughout his mature career. Matthi Forrer cites, as an example, the series Eight Views in Ōmi Province as examples of ‘…pure landscapes with an almost classical atmosphere.’ Even in the final Edo views Hiroshige combined perspective devices with older Chinese ones of kumogata cloud forms and vertical stacking.
At the same time it is difficult to ignore an intentive trend towards representational naturalism in Hiroshige’s landscape views. In an advertisement for a number of smaller series that accompanied the 1834 publication of *The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō*, Hiroshige himself described his landscapes as ‘...a series of naturalistic views, with landscapes and people.’ His notes written to accompany the 1849 drawing manual *Ehon tebikigusa* confirm a rejection of Chinese models and a commitment to the representational:

> Paintings are based on the forms of things. So if you copy the form and add style and meaning, the result is a painting...To depict a beautiful view the artist must know how to combine with one another each of the elements that constitute that view.

In other words, Hiroshige was quite insistent on the foundation of his graphic enterprise on direct observation and truth to observation. The notion of fidelity to observation was tempered by an acceptance of the contrivance of pictorial composition; artists could freely manipulate spatial relations through, for example, the selection of a particular viewpoint, real or imagined, selectivity of pictorial content, and adoption of particular pictorial devices or conventions.

The commitment to naturalist representation, and his understanding that it was this that distinguished his own works from those of Hokusai is evident in Hiroshige’s own words in the preface to the 1859 publication *Fujimi hyakuzu* (‘One Hundred Pictures of Fuji-views’):

> Old Man Manji of Katsushika [Hokusai] has already published a book with the title *One Hundred Views of Mt Fuji*. With his customary genius of the brush he has used his artistic powers to depict therein various plants, trees, birds, animals and objects, as well as the manners and customs of the people of the city and the countryside. Fuji was often subservient to his overriding concern for compositional interest [e-gumi no omoshiroki]. My pictures are different. All I have done is to tidy up the large number of sketches I made of what I saw before my eyes. Given the confines of this small book, it is hard to draw a lot of detail and there is much I have abbreviated. Nevertheless, my notations are completely true records of the landscape [shashin no fūkei]. I simply wish for them to be of passing interest for those able to undertake distant journeys: pray forgive the clumsiness of my brush.

Hiroshige’s words confirm his commitment to the practice of *plein air* sketching – ‘what I saw before my eyes’ – and to representational fidelity that could be verified by the tourists who had first hand experience of the places he had depicted.

A glimpse of Hiroshige’s commitment to representation is confirmed also in the habit of drawing as visual note taking as recorded in the surviving fragments of his diaries. These include both written notes and sketches (now lost) made precisely to describe what things looked like. They included notes like:

> ...the lavatories in these houses looked like this: (drawing)...A stream flowed through the village, with small water mills along the edges to shell the rice; they look like this: (drawing)...Then he described the art (of Iainuki) rather like this: (drawing)...a memorial stone can be seen at the former town: (drawing)...arrived at Tanaka, where this memorial stone stands: (drawing)...The portrait of the God looked like this: (drawing)...towards afternoon set off to see the procession from Goko...(drawing of the procession)...
Four small volumes of sketchbooks in the British Museum confirm Hiroshige’s practice of making first-hand observational drawings during his travels:

They afford incontestable evidence that Hiroshige actually visited the scenes recorded in series where we have hitherto had no definite proof of the fact.\(^{22}\)

Even James A. Michener, who did not seem to particularly like Hiroshige, does acknowledge his ability to observe accurately:

He had one constant attribute which offsets these easy criticisms and it is an attribute so rare that it exalts anyone who possesses it. He could see. He had an honest, clean eye. He could see nature’s varied forms and changing climates.\(^{23}\)

While elsewhere Michener acknowledges the fidelity of Hiroshige’s colour fields and atmospheric effects to those of nature, and the degrees to which he went to collect pictorial information at first hand, he also notes the ways in which his views were contrived, to appear quite unlike the equivalent view of those scenes today:

One is tempted to suggest that Hokusai moved the mountains to suit himself, whereas Hiroshige moved himself to suit the mountains; but it is not altogether true, for one of the most instructive experiences any student of art can have is a comparison of Hiroshige’s Tokaido prints with photographs made only a few years later of the exact spots he portrayed. Books offering the prints on one page and the photographs facing are common in Japan and startling, for Hiroshige drew no scene as it actually was. He modified everything. In each change one can see the frantic, searching mind of the artist at work, shifting the landscape about so an honest report on nature can be attained.\(^{24}\)

Hiroshige’s descriptions of landscapes then, are not straightforward transcriptions of observed scenes; he manipulates the spatial relationships of his pictures at will. Nor are they straightforward applications of Western perspectival convention; indeed, the one sort of convention he avoids are the geometries of linear perspective developed during the Quattrocento.

Though many of Hiroshige’s successors adopted perspectival modes for representing pictorial depth in landscape compositions, few did so in such a naturalistically convincing way. Utagawa Kuniyoshi’s illustration for the final act of *Chūshingura* (Plate 16) appears at first glance to observe the rule of linear perspective more faithfully than Hiroshige. Kuniyoshi employed a low viewpoint and a very low horizon. He appears also to have aligned the convergent lines of the buildings towards a single vanishing point on the horizon. This is suggested firstly by the strong orthogonal which starts at the lower left corner, and extends inwards and across the bottom of the building, running three-quarters of the way towards the horizon. This key leading diagonal appears to be complemented, at ground level, by that of the leading lower edge of the large block at right. Both orthogonals are complemented again by the convergent lines of the upper edges of the buildings and the rooflines. The exaggerated depth (this is a picture of Moronao’s mansion under siege, not a central urban landscape) is emphasized by the contrast in scale between trees in the foreground and in the background, and in the succession of figures arranged from the near foreground almost to the horizon.

In fact Kuniyoshi’s composition fails to observe strictly any Western rule for single point perspective; it only appears to do so. If a vanishing point is established on
the horizon by the convergence of the key leading diagonal from lower left with that of the complementary upper edge of the same building, it is a vanishing point reached by none of the other converging orthogonals. The line running along the roofline of this same building, presumably an edge that in life runs parallel to the other two, is barely convergent with any other line in the composition, reaching the horizon away to the right, at a point just above the heads of the warriors about to ascend the ladder right of centre. The other leading diagonals also fail to converge at any common point, and in one decidedly non-perspectival incident, the highest diagonal established along the eave of the upper story of the right hand building runs instead in perfect alignment with the downward sloping facet of the turret roof top of the distant building on the horizon.

The exaggerations and inaccuracies of linear perspective evident in Kuniyoshi’s composition are evidence neither of ukiyo-e artists’ ignorance of the geometrically ordered systems employed by European predecessors, or of their inability to organize space intelligently and cohesively. Kuniyoshi’s organization, like Hiroshige’s, achieves precisely what he wants it to: it represents the theatrically dramatic climax of the Chūshingura vendetta in a way which perfectly represents the scale of the challenge that confronted the rōnin; the contrast of the huge scale of Moronao’s retreat with the tiny figures conveys something of the apparent impossibility of their mission.

In fact, many Japanese artists were very familiar with, and had adeptly absorbed into their own enterprises, Western modes of representing three-dimensional space. For may of these artists, particularly draughtsmen like Kōkan Shiba, the superiority of Western examples lay precisely in the greater degree of realism attained by their artists:

…a picture that does not represent reality faithfully is not well executed…Eastern pictures have no accuracy of detail, and without such accuracy, a picture is not really a picture at all. To paint reality is to paint all objects…exactly as the original objects appear…No technique other than that of the West can achieve this feeling of reality.25

Kōkan’s commitment to Western modes was quite extraordinary, and led him to reject the body of knowledge he had garnered as a slavish follower of Suzuki Harunobu, and to go to quite considerable lengths to absorb that of this new way of working:

Seeking further training in Western-style art, in 1788 Kōkan made the more than 800-mile journey to Nagasaki – mostly on foot – in the expectation of finding a teacher at the Dutch settlement there. But the Dutch in Nagasaki were traders, not artists, and in the event Kōkan had to learn what he could from illustrations in Dutch books such as the Groot Schilderboek (‘Great Painters Book’) by Gerard de Lairesse, first published in Amsterdam in 1707.26

A great deal of the knowledge of Western conventions for the articulation of pictorial space was acquired from sources like Lairesse, and carefully transcribed into Japanese documents. Satake Shozan’s understanding of Western models was recorded in three albums of drawings and notes which contained two treatises, one:

…titled Gahō kōryō (‘A Summary of the Principles of Drawing’) and Gato rikai (‘On the Understanding of Painting and Drawing’)…The first essay stresses the representational function of painting, while the second explains the principles through which representation is to be accomplished. The underlying principle is that one paints only what one can see, an attitude reminiscent of the nineteenth-century French realist Gustave Courbet.27
This commitment to the graphic representation of what is seen informs Shozan’s advice on the use of tone to describe three-dimensional form, and on the description of reflections and the effects of atmospheric perspective. Surprisingly, given that one of his sources appears to have been the mathematical dogmatist Abraham Bosse, and given the illustration of his writings with a number of carefully transcribed geometric diagrams, Shozan’s summary of linear perspective is succinct, and based entirely on the notion of recording subjects as the eye perceives them:

The eye sees near things as large and distant things as small…when the distance becomes several leagues, the eyes fail and the object cannot be seen. This point of disappearance is at the horizon line, and the disappearing point is at the center of the sphere of vision, which becomes the basis for the picture.²⁸

Both his advice and his example (Shozan produced albums of drawings, including transpositions from Dutch and neoclassical European models, as well as painted landscapes of European scenes) were followed by later painters in Nagasaki, and much of his fundamental commitment to representation seems to have been embraced in the work of mid-nineteenth-century Edo artists. Certainly it is evident both in drawn studies and in technical diagrams included in Hokusai’s Manga. Hokusai’s notes and diagrams draw together a curious combination of his observations of Western modes and ideas that appear to be of his own devising. As a general principle for the arrangement of landscapes, for example, he suggests:

The law of 3-way division: if the drawing is 3 sun in height (1 sun equals something over 1 inch), make the sky 2 sun and the earth 1 sun, as shown here.²⁹

In other words, place the horizon one third of the way up the picture plane. Hokusai’s diagrams contain examples for the diminution of scale, and diagrammatic exemplars of a principle of convergence, but with the latter, there is something of a curiosity. Where in Western single-point perspective compositions all parallel lines would meet at the same vanishing point on the horizon both of Hokusai’s diagrams suggest employing two vanishing points, both on the same horizon – one point for those lines converging from the left hand side of the picture, the other for those lines converging from the right. The gap between the two vanishing points is precisely one third of the width of the picture plane. This device allows Hokusai to sustain the principle of thirds by which he placed the horizon in his arrangements across the pictorial space as well. The result is an expanse of space across the horizon between the two vanishing points.

It would be easy, and rather glib, to argue simply that Japanese scholars and artists had failed to understand European perspective. These men were highly knowledgeable, highly skilled, and well respected in their field: their forte was spatial articulation in pictures. The explanations for the peculiarities of ukiyo-e applications of perspectival principles are more complex. In the first place, it is important to acknowledge that whatever models of European art Japanese artists were able to see, the principal means of transmission was through Dutch engravings and texts, rather than by earlier exemplars more closely founded on tightly cohesive mathematical principles or systems. By the beginning of the eighteenth century there were two mainstreams of practice evident in Dutch landscape painting. One was founded on the highly contrived constructions of Italianesque landscape painting in the tradition of Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. The other, and by far the more popular, was the indigenous naturalistic school of landscape
painting that culminated in the misty atmospherics of painters like Jan van Goyen. With the notable exception of painters like Pieter Saenredam, the Dutch conventions for constructing convincing three dimensional landscape compositions were founded principally on ways of making records that were consistent with what could be seen. Interestingly, one of the key Dutch texts, Lairesse’s *Het Groot Schilderboek*, suggested to artists, rather than the adoption of mathematical method, ways of ‘framing’ the way they saw the landscape in pictorial formats, using convex mirrors that were:

…very convenient for drawing all Sorts of large Works in narrow Places or Streets…”Tis also useful for Landskip-painters in their Country Views: They may take whole Tracts of Land, with Towns and Villages, Waters, Woods, Hills, and Sea, from East to West, without moving either Head or Eyes. ‘Tis likewise proper for those who are ignorant of Perspective.\(^\text{30}\)

De Lairesse’s final sentence adequately distinguishes his own enterprise, and that of his Japanese students, from the earlier European notions of linear perspective.

Secondly, though the European conventions adopted by Japanese artists may well have met public expectations for novelty in picture making, paintings and prints still had to perform the same functions, narrative, allusive, decorative or promotional, that had previously occupied them. This meant that, with the exception of the Nagasaki developments, for the majority of Japanese artists Western pictorial devices were combined with Sino-Japanese conventions, to describe predominantly Japanese subjects set within Japanese environs. In this sense Japanese artists were not simply adopting foreign conventions, but were melding them together with their own to create, by the mid-nineteenth century, a completely new hybrid genre for spatial organization. This new mode did not displace earlier ones, but coexisted with them.

In some instances artists combined quite different pictorial devices in the most ingenuous, and pictorially unsatisfying, of ways. Utagawa Fusatane’s illustration for Act VII (*Ichiriki agarayeya*) of the *Chūshingura* drama (Plate 37), for example, combines devices for three different kinds of projection. The tall structure at right which leads the viewer’s eye into the composition is in isometric projection. The corresponding fence structure to the left is arranged according to the steeper angles of the axonometric projection. The verandah set directly behind the centrally placed figure of Oboshi Yuranosuke is presented in isometric projection, but the teahouse interior beyond is presented in striking single point perspective. A similar inconsistency is evident in the large building beyond and to the left: the verandah boards are set on two differing, and incompatible, projections; the near side of the building is set parallel to the picture plane; and the receding wall is presented in a perspective projection whose lines converge, against expectation, at a vanishing point on the same horizon line as that of the interior at right. Fusatane’s amalgam of apparently inconsistent schematics was not accidental. In this composition, as in others of the same series, he employed separate spatial conventions to contrive compositions made up of a number of discrete pictorial spaces. This allowed him to construct multi-narrative compositions comprising a number of ‘sub-pictures’ that could convey more of the *Chūshingura* story than a single image would be able to. Like other *ukiyo-e* artists Fusatane was simply manipulating pictorial devices to particular pictorial ends.
Thus far the spatial character of ukiyo-e has been defined in terms of three key qualities. The first is the wide range of spatial options with which ukiyo-e artists could choose to work. Ukiyo-e artists, more than the designers of any other Japanese tradition, were eclectic and divergent manipulators of pictorial space. The most articulate, like Hokusai, didn’t choose to specialize within a single one of the choices their repertoire offered, but could choose freely from the range, combining conventions from different contexts, Chinese, Yamato-e or European, and tying their selection together in coherent, cohesive pictorial constructions. The second quality of ukiyo-e spatial character was a commitment to asymmetry as an underlying principle for pictorial arrangement. The third was a tendency to favour shallow-space constructions, though some later artists, like Hiroshige, were to follow quite different pathways in their pictorial investigations of deep space.

Underlying all three of these qualities was one further spatial characteristic that distinguished the compositions of ukiyo-e artists from those of other Japanese painters. Typically, even in the apparently casual arrangements of the Hikone Screen or in the relaxed disposition of Utamaro’s courtesans, ukiyo-e compositions are tightly, cohesively controlled; each element of the composition is melded perfectly into the whole. This element of spatial cohesion is a fundamental quality of good composition in most pictorial genres; the distinguishing characteristic of ukiyo-e composition is the dependence of spatial cohesion on a quite remarkable degree of spatial tension.

In pictures discussed earlier in this chapter – compositions like Utamaro’s Kaya, Kunichika’s portrait of Onoe Kikugoro V, Yoshitaki’s kabuki scene or Kunisada II’s representation of a Chūshingura scene, this pictorial tension is generated by the extreme shallowness of the space in which closely layered planes of colour, pattern or textural surface are stacked. The very proximity of these planes generates an iki-like frisson or tension. Later artists, like Andō Hiroshige, were able to do this by contriving a strong complementary contrast between the considerable pictorial depth afforded by perspectival conventions and the shallow-space arrangement of objects across the picture plane.

In his small Tōkaidō scene of the port station of Kuwana (Plate 38), for example, Hiroshige has, expectly, employed several instances of diminution of scale consistent with perspectival thought. The strongest of these are between the large stone and timber structure of the foreground wharf area and the middle ground buildings at right. The foreground and middle ground zones are clearly and cleanly separated by the crisp edge of the far side of the wharf. This is in turn echoed in the distant span of the horizon beyond. The scale of the figures and bundles of packaging on the dock contrast powerfully with that of the two small boats heading towards the port.

These strong indications of pictorial depth are, however, countered by a range of devices that emphasise instead the shallowness of the picture, and the flatness of the picture plane. The first of these is Hiroshige’s construction, from the top of the composition downwards, of a series of horizontally disposed layers of colour. At the top is a bokashi band of intense blue; this fades into a broad band of white; this, in turn, changes into a bokashi layer of rose-pink just above the horizon. The blue band of the sea cuts across the composition below this, and the flinty grey of the dock below this again. In the foreground a more complex band of activity is established. This is constructed from the

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opposing angles of the architectural planes, which cumulatively contrive a subtle directional movement from lower right up slightly to the left. Contrasting directly with this is the climbing procession of the highly patterned shapes of the figures, upwards, and arranged parallel to the picture plane, moving from left to right. The whole interaction is built on a foundation contrast between grid-like horizontals on the one hand, and a network of diagonals on the other.

The tension of this spatial relation is supplemented by other contrasts in the composition: by those between warm colour and cool for example; between rectilinear shapes and more fluid forms; in the repetitions of colour in the sky, the sails and the cargo, and in the contrasting dispositions of these against the patterned complexities of the figures. Besides these elements Hiroshige has chosen, characteristically, to emphasise the tension of the whole with the playful introduction of a spatial paradox. Stretched tautly across the picture plane, from upper right down to the opposite edge of the picture at lower left, is a single length of rope. The rope thus cuts right across the front of the composition. It marks the flatness of the picture. Positioned a little further back, and apparently extending downwards behind the dock, is the mast and rigging of a boat. Where it passes behind the central figure and the wharf, this structure is very clearly set back within the picture space. Where it crosses the horizon and is seen more starkly against the sky, however, it appears to pull forward, strongly, towards the picture plane. Indeed, by placing the very apex of this structure right on the rope itself, Hiroshige is almost implying that the position of the two is contiguous. The rigging is thus both up close to, and removed from, the viewer. Pictorial paradox generates pictorial tension.

For Hiroshige it was imperative that the two-dimensional construction across the geometry of the picture plane remained consistent with his representations of pictorial depth. With Hokusai, while this seems often to be the case, it is less obviously, and less frequently, so. One can easily locate a naturalistic impulse within Hokusai’s work. He could, and did, construct convincing perspectival spaces, as some of his Chūshingura illustrations testify. Similarly, in the thousands of sketches of figures, animals, insects, plans, landforms, buildings and all manner of machinery, there is clear evidence of Hokusai’s trying to contrive a considerable degree of truth to subject. Though he was able to construct such images with apparent ease however, by and large he chose not to. As often as not Hokusai chose instead to occupy himself with exploring pictorial devices which would have been seen, by most of his contemporaries, as positively archaic, or in exploring new combinations of motifs and conventions in ways which other artists, including his Katsukawa masters, found incomprehensible. In many ways Hokusai’s spatial project was quite different from those of his contemporaries or successors. Where Hiroshige, for example, occupied himself with naturalistic representation of real-place landscapes, Hokusai seems to have been more interested in the problem of spatial construction itself, and many of his landscapes bear little, if any, resemblance to any actual place. This abiding interest in pictorial composition as an interest in itself accounts to some degree for the broad diversity of interest apparent within Hokusai’s oeuvre. Underlying the bewildering variety of subject and pictorial device, however, is a constant, repeated application to one problem in particular: the articulation of pictorial tension was as fundamental to Hokusai’s most informal studies of figures and animals as it was of the most complex compositions of the Fuji views or the illustrations to the Hundred Poets.

For the composition of Bushū Tamagawa (Plate 39), Hokusai has forcibly distanced both himself and his viewer from the landscape below. He achieves this by employing a
high and indeterminate viewpoint. This would generally emphasise a sense of pictorial distance; in one sense it does so here, but it also has the effect of drawing the viewer so far back from the landscape that it becomes difficult to perceive it as recessional. We see, instead, stacked wavy, flat bands extending from one side to the other across the picture plane. The slight downwards tilt across the picture plane, from upper right downwards towards the left, and the placement of Fuji to the right of center confirm a typically asymmetrical foundation for the composition. This is subtly emphasized through the contrast with the symmetrical form of Fuji itself.

Depth is indicated in this composition by the high viewpoint, high horizon combination. This is reinforced by differentials in scale, between the foreground trees and those at the foot of Fuji for example, and in the relative scale of the land masses, between the twenty-five metre span of the near river bank and the broad slopes of Fuji.

A larger number of devices are deployed to counter this sense of pictorial depth. The apparent distance of Fuji, for example, is tempered by its breadth where it meets the misty dawn haze that obscures its lower slopes; the width of the mountain at this point occupies over a third of the width of the picture. Fuji in fact lies about ninety kilometres to the West of Tōkyō Bay into which this Tama River empties. Although it may well have been visible from various vantage points in this vicinity it would have appeared to be much smaller in relation to the surrounding landscape.

Hokusai has contrived inconsistencies also in relations of reducing scale. The two figures in the ferry on the far side of the river for example, are as large as the small figure on the nearer river bank. Though there is a slight compacting of the wave patterns from left to right, the effects of this are tempered by the consistency of scale from the bottom, or near side, to the top, or opposite side of the river. This is sustained in the embossed patterns of waves that decorate the nearer, unlinked, body of water. This insistence on shallow, rather than deep, pictorial space is most evident in the colour relations of the composition. Despite the haze of cloud arranged along the lower slopes of Fuji, there is little evidence here of the application of Hokusai's knowledge of aerial perspective. The greens of the trees and the intensity of the blue on Fuji are as intense and strongly contrasted as those of the foreground. The grey of the close river bank is reproduced with almost precisely the same degree of intensity as the corresponding layer of grey in the distance. The warm browns of the foreground are repeated in the subtle tints of colour in the distant mists.

The effect has been extended further by the way in which the colour has been laid on. Hokusai has made extensive use in this work of bokashi gradations of tone and colour. In the sky, for example, it has been used to describe the transition from an intensity of blue up high, down to a pale blue at the skyline. This is entirely consistent with what one would expect to see in nature. In other areas however Hokusai has laid down his bokashi in ways that are quite inconsistent with what we might encounter in actuality. In the mist, for example, the colour is most intense in the upper layers of cloud; it would normally be expected to be darker below. On the river, which might be expected to appear lighter with distance, Hokusai has indicated quite precisely the opposite: he has used the lightness of completely uninked block for the nearer waters, and has coloured the distant waves intensely blue. On the closer river bank the fluctuations of brown and grey might be expected to conform to undulations in the earth; here the shift, from left to right, emphasizes the verticality, rather than the horizontality, of the land. Allied to these bokashi
effects, the broad expanses of unprinted paper in the clouds and in the river assert, in the most physical sense, the presence of the picture plane.

The overall effect, and the one that recurs as a common thread throughout Hokusai’s entire career, is not so much just one of shallow space, nor is it simply a highly skilled amalgam of Chinese and European spatial devices, so much as a carefully articulated pictorial tension generated from the complementary opposition between pictorial depth and the flatness of the picture plane. Hokusai understood, more than any of his contemporaries, the degree to which the art of naturalistic picture making was more than just representation; that the whole point of articulating a pictorial arrangement, whether according to notions of perspectival construction, or in accordance with the conventions of the Chinese sages, lay more in the forging of some degree of harmony of line, colour and space than in simple mimesis.

A second type of pictorial relationship complements the spatial constructions of *ukiyo-e*. This is the tension drawn between static and dynamic elements in the composition. In the Hokusai this is a quiet relation between those qualities suggestive of movement – the gently undulating rise along the river bank, the more intense busyness of the wave patterns, the downward swooping curves on either side of the mountain – and those that evoke a sense of stillness – the horizontal and vertical limits of the support, the flat layers of mist. Even the ferry, whose exaggerated curving hull has it bobbing down almost above the surface of the water, is fixed, by the rectilinear relations of its stern and the pilot’s pole, in a poised, brief moment of stillness.

This sense of dynamic tension is, in one way or another, fundamental to most *ukiyo-e* representations of actors, theatrical characters, courtesans or genre street scenes. The precise flavour of the tension may differ: in a Torii actor print the stillness of a *mie* pose may be emphasized by contrast with a construction of sweeping, interlocking arabesques; in Utamaro green house scenes the languid movements of his women may be contrasted against the rectilinear stillness of architectural frameworks. In each instance however, the images are characterized by the same fundamental quality: the tautly articulated interrelations of complementary opposites.

In his portrait of the tragic hero Tomomori (Plate 4), Katsukawa Shuntei constructs this dynamic tension by placing the violent movements of the human interaction in opposition to the stability of the grid structure of the composition. The principal elements of the grid are clearly apparent in the structures of the wharf: the central horizontal axis of the composition coincides with the lower structure of the balustrade behind Tomomori; the vertical left edge of the canvas-covered structure at right marks a key vertical. The upper edge of the balustrade provides a second horizontal structure. The other components of the grid are indicated less explicitly; the central vertical axis underlies the alternating sequence of directions that seem to run down through Tomomori’s quiver, the back of his head, the apron of his armour, and down the back of the thigh of the crouching retainer; a third vertical runs down through Tomomori’s right arm, the balustrade, the head of the retainer, and through the junction where their legs overlap. This junction also places the final horizontal which extends across through the outstretched calf of the retainer. The grid is complemented by the rectilinear outer limits of the support, and by the steeply raked axonometric projection of the decking boards. While grids like this may seem only implicit in the final composition, almost hidden beneath the actions of the figures, they were quite
commonly employed by artists in the earlier stages of designing prints, and for transferring images.

Two types of movement are arranged in tense contrast with this grid. The first is a rhythmic repetition of curvilinear shapes throughout the composition. This sequence is established in the upper part of the composition in the rolling movements of the waves (whose unusual placement at the top, rather than the bottom, of the composition does much to emphasise the shallowness of the pictorial space), and in the powerful curving flukes of the anchor. The curves are repeated, through Tomomori’s head, the curving, hinging bend of his mid-torso, the sword scabbards, the decorative escallops of the armour, his calves, the head and shoulders of the retainer, and the coil of rope at lower right.

Intermeshed throughout this rhythmic skein are a second, more staccato set of movements. Again these are established in the first instance in the upper part of the composition, in the very subtly offset placement of the haft of the anchor. They are then repeated, most intensively through the raised arms, spread legs and complex edges, patterns and lines of Tomomori’s armour. Every one of these edges, lines, stripes or grid patterns is set in opposition both to the horizontal or vertical structure of the grid and to the 45° diagonals of the deck. The result is a tightly forged dynamic tension in which Tomomori stands as poised and as motionless as he might in the theatrical performance of his final melodramatic mie pose, held for just a moment before he throws himself to his death.

The greatest pictorial tension is often that generated by the most economical of means. In Katsukawa Shunei’s print of a samurai on horseback plunging through space (Plate 9), the static element is provided by the most minimal of structures: the rectilinear format of the support, and the unrelieved flatness of the yellow background. Every element of horse and rider is arranged in opposition to this stable foundation. The fundamental force of movement of the composition is from upper right, slightly downwards and across to the left – the motion of the horse appears to have been captured in the downward phase of a huge leap. This directional impetus is indicated by the overall axis of the horse’s body, and complemented by the directional displacement of its legs, the line sweeping downward through the warrior’s katana and the bridle of the horse, and by the headlong forward tilt of the whole of the warrior’s frame.

The huge curves of the billowing emblem attached to the warrior’s back establish the key to a sequence of repetitions that extends throughout the composition. This major, circular movement is repeated in the fan and its mon of a red moon on a black ground, repeated in the armour over his thigh, in the neck and mane of the horse, in its tail, its haunch, its shoulders. Finer rhythmic repetitions echo through the waving decorative clusters of braid that are hung over the haunches of the horse, across its breast, and from its bridle and saddle. As in the Tomomori image these sets of rhythms are complemented by the alternating staccato sequence of sharper, edgier lines, planes and patterns of the samurai himself, which extend downwards from his extended arm, through the flying slabs of armour protecting his shoulders and hips, through those of his legs.

Some points of horse or rider in Shunei’s composition contact the edges of the support above, and at both sides, but not at the bottom. The result is, on the one hand, a tangible relation of the movement of horse and rider to the structure of the support, and on the other a sense of momentary suspension in space, the whole complex of horse and rider
hovering just above the bottom of the pictorial space. The empty space below functions, as Binyon had insisted it should, as a fully productive component of the composition. In articulating such a tensely and finely wrought arrangement Shunei has constructed, in graphic terms, not just a single, complex movement, but the suspension of time.

In a sense, this notion of representing a suspension of time can explain also the apparent paradox in Hokusai’s works. Hokusai’s landscapes are at one and the same time naturalistic, and highly contrived; convincing, yet impossible to identify with any degree of certitude. They are convincing because the drawing of his myriad scurrying figures is founded on an astute observation of people living and working in the real world; because his landscape projections are founded on a clear understanding about the way objects are perceived in real space. They are contrived because perspectival devices are combined with others that challenge the depth they describe; because archaic devices like kumogata cloud formations or vertically stacked layers of pictorial content are combined with keenly observed details of landform and architectural setting; because perfectly recognizable landmarks are combined with constructions entirely of Hokusai’s own invention. In constructing such views Hokusai was able simultaneously to respond to the demands of his viewers for a high degree of recognisability in pictures, and to his own personal requirement for a degree of harmony and cohesion in his compositions that really drew them beyond the simply representational. In this sense Hokusai’s project centred on the construction of an idealised world whose interests lay beyond those of time.

1 ‘…the maker of a picture or other historical artefact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution.’ Michael Baxandall, Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 15
2 The adoption of Western spatial conventions, subjects and techniques by these and other artists is documented in Masanobu Hosono, trs., Lloyd Craighill, Nagasaki-Prints and Early Copperplates, Tōkyō, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1978.
5 At least one source asserts that Hokusai apprenticed himself to Shiba Kōkan in the 1790s in order to learn oil painting and copperplate engraving; the third volume of the Manga contains diagrammatic examples for linear perspective derived from Gerard de Lauresse. Masanobu Hosono, 1978, p. 126.
6 Most notably the landscape precursors to the famous ‘Great Wave’ composition Kanagawa oki nami ura completed during 1797 (Enoshima shunbō), 1799 (A View of the Island of Enoshima), and 1800 – 1805 (Kanagawa oki Honmoku no zu), illustrated in Matthi Forrer, Hokusai: Prints and Drawings, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991, plates 8 – 10.
8 See Harvesters, in Sandy Kita, 1999, figs., 33 – 42.
9 See Fumiaki Screens, Kita, 1999, Fig., 71, p. 171.
12 The Chinese origins of this mode, and its role in the exercise of imagination, are described by Laurence Binyon: ‘I have already alluded to the spacing of Chinese design as its most original factor. Lao Tzǔ’s dwelling on the power of emptiness – the hollow of a clay vessel alone makes it serviceable – gives explicit expression to an inbuilt tendency of the Chinese mind, which discovered in painting and in poetry the value of reserves and silences, the invitation to imagination in the thing left unexpressed. As formal design we find this developed into a system of spacing which makes of the empty part of the picture not something left over

13 ‘…we notice that the principle of symmetry is deserted. Western art is haunted by the human form, our supreme motive, with its symmetrical members: but the Chinese, with their eyes turned outward on the world in which man is placed, have looked rather at the tree which, unsymmetrical in its growth, stands in perfect poise.’ Binyon, 1935, p. 12.


18 Hiroshige, in Forrer, 1997, p. 18.


20 Timothy Clark, *100 Views of Mount Fuji*, London: The British Museum, 2001, p. 21

21 Hiroshige, 1841, in Walter Exner, trs. Marguerite Kay, *Hiroshige*, London: Methuen and Co., 1958, pp. 48 – 69. Though note, as Edward Strange observed in 1925, the originals of some of these diary fragments, with their accompanying sketches, were destroyed by fire in 1923 and are known now only through transcriptions. The last of the three known fragments of the diary has survived, and is ‘…filled with charming sketches in ink’. Edward Strange, *Hiroshige’s Woodblock Prints: A Guide*, New York: Dover, 1983 edn., pp. 71 f.

22 Strange, 1983, p. 117.


24 Michener, 1954, p. 221.


26 Clark, 2001, p. 15.


30 de Lairesse, 1707, in Kemp, 1990, p. 199.

31 See Plate 27 for example. See also Jack Hillier, *Hokusai: Paintings, Drawings and Woodcuts* London: Phaidon, 1957, figs., 22, 30 for *uki-e* spatial constructions that observe faithfully Western conventions for linear perspective constructions.

6 Ukiyo-e and the Material Conditions of Medium

I

The articulation of pictorial space is a particular instance of the broader issue of the way artists work with the medium of their discipline. Medium refers to the resources at an artist’s disposal, which they may apply or manipulate in their preoccupation with pictorial projects. The most tangible understanding of the medium of the graphic artist is that of the materials (pigments, binders, supports), material processes or techniques and procedural methodologies with which they work. It also refers to the ways in which artists manipulate qualities of line, colour and surface in relation to one another in pictorial space. Artists would rarely, if ever, think of medium like this, in terms of separate or individuated properties. When they are working with paint, for example, they are working with colour. The substance they paint or print colour with can have a more complex identity – chalkiness or fineness of surface, or transparency or opacity. For the artist, manipulating properties of materials through technical processes cannot be divorced from the issues of articulating spatial relations of colour, shape or pattern.

This is a given condition for all graphic artists. The characteristics of medium establish the conditions within which artists work. They also afford possibilities by which artists can invent, or forge new directions in their work. For the artists of ukiyo-e the enterprise was subject to some quite specific conditions of medium. For the ukiyo-e printmakers for example, the physical characteristics of the wooden printing block, the printing process, the paper and the pigments were all factors that conditioned the shape and character of artistic outcomes. In addition, the procedural methodology of ukiyo-e printmaking was founded on a clearly defined division of labour which itself constituted a conditioning factor for ukiyo-e prints. Similarly, the material conditions of ukiyo-e painters were markedly different from those of other, or earlier, schools, and encouraged, or allowed, new and different pictorial outcomes.

The wooden blocks employed in the manufacture of ukiyo-e prints influenced the pictorial character of these works in the most fundamental of ways. Firstly, it was the block, more than any other aspect of the process, that conditioned the scale of ukiyo-e prints. Images were generally cut into, and printed from, the surface of plank-cut timber, generally cherry wood. Shiro-yamazakura (Prunus mutabilis), the single petalled white mountain cherry was favoured. Kachiya-nagi, or Japanese willow, and end grain of tsuge, or Buxus Japonica (boxwood) or tsukaki (Camellia Japonica) were also used.¹ The most common size of printing block was the ōban format – approximately 38 x 25 cm. Though the length of the block could be varied with some freedom, up to 75 cm. for hashira-e for example, the width of the ōban format was about as broad as a block could be made to perform reliably.² To print larger images artists had to design multi-block polyptych compositions – diptychs, triptychs, or even assemblages of up to six prints glued together in two rows, three ōban sheets above, and three below.
Secondly, the close-grained smoothness of cherry wood had other advantages. It allowed the block-cutters, who engraved the images in to the surface of the block, the freedom to work closely to the linear requirements indicated by the artist on the hanshita-e that was glued face down on to the block. With a coarsely-grained timber like pine, or a porous one like mahogany, the grain would tend to ‘steer’ the cutter’s chisel longitudinally, away from the drawn line, and the grain of the timber would also be evident in the printed image. The timber of the Japanese cherry wood block, however, was fine enough to allow the cutter to work both with and across the grain, and, unless the printer chose to exploit the qualities of grain in the print, it need not otherwise be evident. Its density allowed the finest of details to be cut – in order to achieve the same fineness European cutters were forced to use timber (generally limewood) cut across the end grain. The dense hardness of cherry wood also allowed the finely detailed raised printing surface to withstand the rigours of printing large, sometimes immense, editions.3

Using timber that was plank-cut had other advantages for the Japanese printmaker. The plank grain was sensitive to the combination of rice-starch paste, powdered pigment and water that was hand-painted onto its surface with broad flat brushes. It absorbed just enough to ensure a reasonable degree of consistency of ink quality between each impression. At the same time it had sufficient resistance to absorption to allow the printer to modulate the quality of pigment mixture prior to each printing; this allowed the printer great latitude for adjusting the relative transparency or brightness of hue, or in contriving colour effects like the bokashi gradations of tone and colour. It also allowed a considerable number of prints to be pulled during a single session, before the expansion of the blocks due to the absorption of moisture began to affect the successful registration of each set.

The highly skilled block cutters of Edo could carve the most finely detailed textural qualities or linear patterns, especially in details of hair or eyebrows of figures, or the elaborate brocades of rich textiles, or the flowing cursive characters of written script. Carving with such detail and finesse was a time-consuming process however, and the print industry was highly competitive; blocks needed to be cut quickly and efficiently. In order to meet the urgent needs of both publishers and audiences, therefore, block cutters employed a range of strategies to contrive economies of production. The image blocks of many prints – even surimono – were often saved to be redeployed with different text blocks, or different figure or portrait sections, for later contracts.4 In some instances, a set of blocks made to represent a particular person could be reemployed with a substitute face or head to represent a different figure. More commonly, where stock figures and faces were used, the colour or pattern of garments was simply changed to give the figures a complete new identity. Utamaro, despite his avowed interest in physiognomics, used this latter procedure regularly.

A common economy was to use a set of blocks cut to portray a single pictorial setting, a landscape for example, or an interior, for several different compositions, using supplementary sets of blocks printed through a ‘window’ in the original composition to provide the necessary differences for each new composition. Lawrence Bickford describes an uki-e composition by Katsukawa Shunshō, printed in the fourth month of 1784, in which a crowded sumō stadium is represented, with a contest between the two stars Tanikaze and Onagawa taking place on a raised and covered dais.5 During 1784 this print was republished several times, in each instance with an image of a different set of wrestlers inserted by means of a separate set of blocks ‘plugged’ into the original set in the area of the covered dais. In these later ‘revisions’, the publication, originally by Tsuraya, became a
joint venture with Matsumura, and the printed names and seals were changed accordingly. The ‘revisions’ included the publication, in the eleventh month of 1784, of a representation of a bout between Kashwadō and Kajigahama; another during the same month of a bout between Myagino and Fudenoumi; in the third month of 1791 of a bout between Tanikaza and Onagawa, and with credit for the composition now awarded to the artist Shunei; and in the eleventh month of 1791, and again ostensibly by Shunei, of a bout between Raiden and Jinmaku.6

The most significant characteristic of the printing block, however, lay in the flatness of its printing surface. The flat quality of the surface of the block insinuated into every facet of the production of a print. It is evident, for example in the application of the hanshita-e, painted in sumi on the thinnest minogami paper, to the surface of the block prior to cutting. It is reinforced by the thin, evenly flat layer of pigment and binder that is brushed right over the block, and in the flatness of the heavier printing papers. It is emphasized by the vigorous circular motions of the baren used to burnish the paper against the printing surface of the block, to literally pull the pigments into the paper. The flatness of printed ink that is so characteristic of the ukiyo-e print was relieved only by bokashi gradations of tone or colour. But even the application of these effects remained consistent with the flatness of the block. It was difficult, and extremely time-consuming, for the printer to use tonal variations to describe the three-dimensionality of form of complex objects like figures – impossible to achieve with any degree of consistency. Colour needed to be applied swiftly, smoothly, and uniformly, so bokashi effects were applied, like the pigment for any other block, with broad horizontal strokes of the brush drawn across from one side of the block to the other.

The flatness of the printing block is emphasized in the flatness of colour of even the most complex folds of fabrics; in the flatness of the colours of the component shapes of human forms; in the flatness of textile patterns that appear not to conform in any way to the movements or natural folds and falls of clothing. It was emphasized most clearly of all in ukiyo-e backgrounds. Though complex pictorial backgrounds became popular during the mid-nineteenth century, during most of the Edo period artists preferred to position the objects and figures of their compositions on flat, unrelieved backgrounds of plain colour, printed from a single block. In early prints this flat colour ground was provided simply by the natural colour of the paper. Later, a field of soft pale mouse grey was employed. Harunobu experimented with rose-pinks, or deeper crimsons, and with yellow, sometimes dividing the background into two or more vaguely defined zones or shapes of differing colour to provide the barest suggestion of a particular setting. Utamaro and Sharaku experimented with the sparkling effect of a flat background field of powdered mica, and Kunisada resorted to dark, inky greys to enhance the sense of mystery and melodrama in his theatre representations. Even in the most complex of Hokusai’s compositions, where detailed surroundings were established for his figure groups, the tendency is to confine the background detail to horizontally disposed strips, or zones of flat, soft, unobtrusive colour. In fact, in his mature work, in compositions like Mount Fuji in Clear Weather (South Wind at Clear Dawn ['Red Fuji']) from the series Fugaku sanjūrokkei: Kaifū kaisei – Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji) or in the broad expanses of cloud or river in Bushi Tamagawa (Plate 39) this flatness of background seems to be Hokusai’s principal concern. Whatever the choice of colour or its pictorial role, the one characteristic remained constant: flatness.

The second material condition of special importance for the ukiyo-e printmaker, and one whose flatness was complementary to that of the printing surface of the block, was
the development of suitable papers. The paper adopted for use for nishiki-e prints was the soft hōsho paper manufactured from the bark of the paper mulberry tree (kuwa). The whiteness of this paper ensured the maximum luminosity of colour, its absorbency ensured consistency and fastness of colour, and the toughness lent by the long felted fibres of the mulberry ensured each sheet could withstand the rigours of repeated printings necessary for the production of a polychrome print.

The standard manufacturing sheets size of papers determined not so much the scale as the format of prints. The standard sheet was approximately 39 x 53 cm. An ōban sheet was precisely half of this sheet; the chūban was exactly half of this again. Chū-tanzaku was a one quarter strip section of a full sheet; ō-tanzaku one third (see Appendix 2). The standard print formats were those that could be produced with the greatest economy. Rarely, as with the prints of the Kaigetsudō artists, sheets could be glued together to make a larger format. The principal advantage for the printmaker of the fine hōsh paper lay in its sensitivity to the pigments and binders used to print each image. Dampening the paper softened and dissolved some of its starch content, rendering it more sensitive to the finest nuances of the relief block, and increasing its absorbency. This allowed the pigment to be absorbed right into the paper – so deeply that in many prints the colours are as intense seen from the back of the print as they are from the front. The result was intensity and luminosity of colour. The combination of damp paper and moist ink facilitated an evenness of colour over large surfaces. It allowed for the overprinting of two or more areas of transparent pigment to form secondary or tertiary colours. It also allowed for the soft blended transition of bokashi colour shifts from one colour to another, or from an intense band of colour into a more dilute zone that were so useful for representing the extremes of colour associated with dawn or dusk, or the dissolving light effects of atmospheric perspective. The particular thickness and softness of hōsho allowed for the printing of special effects, especially those of karazuri, or ‘blind-block’ printing of uninked blocks to produced embossed patterns and linear effects.

One key condition was imposed by the damp paper printing process. It did not lend itself to an 'assembly line' printing procedure in which each block would be printed for the whole edition before moving on to the next. If this procedure were adopted, the paper would dry out, and shrink, between each application of colour. Though it would expand again on re-dampening, it became impossible to maintain the fineness of registration demanded by artists, publishers and audiences. Thus for each impression, all of the blocks were printed in sequence, to complete a finished print, before moving on to the next impression. The result was the appearance of variations, sometimes subtle, sometimes quite marked, in colour intensity or distribution engendered by variations in pigment application or pressure of the baren. Sometimes these variations were more radical, as printers experimented with changes in colour combinations, patterned surface or special effect. These differences were even more marked between earlier and later editions – in later re-publications of Hiroshige series, for example, publishers saved time and money by omitting several of the colour blocks.

The third distinctive material condition of the ukiyo-e print, and one whose characteristics needed to be quite specifically matched to the requirements of the printing process, was that of pigment. By the end of the eighteenth century ukiyo-e printmakers were able to choose from a variety of colours derived from mineral or vegetable sources. These pigments were bound in a paste made from rice starch and water, and were thinned with water as they were brushed on to the printing block. The range and type of pigments
available for printmaking changed throughout the Edo period. Indeed the changing character of the *ukiyo-e* print throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in many ways determined by the developments in pigment technology throughout the same period.

The earliest woodblock prints were monochromatic; linear images, sometimes accompanied by text, printed in black on off-white paper. The pigment used then, and throughout the Edo period, for the manufacture of *sumi* ink was *yuen*, or carbon black – what was known in the west as lampblack. *Yuen* could be manufactured from the soot of burned pine, but the finest quality pigments were made by burning the oil of *yama-giri* nuts, or wood from the *kiri* paulownia trees. This pigment was stable and intense. Its fine-grained (approximately 1 micron) and uniform particle size allowed it to be absorbed into the paper. Variations in intensity could be contrived simply by thinning the pigment and binder with water. The extra lustre of *urushi* could be achieved by laying glue over *sumi*-printed areas.\(^8\) Indeed, a broad range of differing pigment effects could be achieved – in Hokusai’s words:

> There is antique black and fresh black, shiny black and matte black, black in light and black in shadow. For antique black, red should be mixed in; for fresh black, add blue; for matte black, add white; shiny black is obtained with an admixture of gum; black seen in light should be given a grey reflection.\(^9\)

Colour was added by hand to monochrome prints from as early as the mid 1620s. The printed volume *Shishō no Uta-awase* (*The Poetry Contest of the Four Living Things*) was coloured with three different pigments, *tan* (red lead, combined with sulphur and saltpetre), *roku* (a mineral-based green pigment) and a pale blue (possibly the fugitive vegetable *aigami* derived from the dayflower).\(^10\) The red/green colouring of the *Soga monogatari* published in 1646 established a precedent for hand colouring in books and single sheet prints for the next century.\(^11\) Early colour ranges were confined to the *tan-e* and *roku* combinations, sometimes with the addition of the relatively coarse *gofun* ground oyster shell white to the palette. By the early eighteenth century yellows and pinks had been added.\(^12\) In many instances the colour was daubed on quickly or roughly – brush marks and unevenness of pigment were clearly visible, and there were regular inconsistencies, and even significant variations between different impressions of the same print. Colours were coarse, sometimes chalky and opaque.

Most commentaries on the development of the polychrome *nishiki-e* print argue that its invention was dependent on the development of the *kentō* system for ensuring precise registration of the several blocks that needed to be printed in perfect alignment. The assumption is generally made that this development took place some time between 1744 and 1764, and that its adoption quickly led to the flowering of *nishiki-e* during the late 1760s.\(^13\) Jack Hillier, however, suggests that the development of colour printing began a little earlier than this.\(^14\) He cites the publication of *Jinkō-ki* (*The Eternal Record*) in its first colour edition in 1631. He records the use of a *kentō* registration system as early as 1644 for the alignment of two colour blocks (red-brown and blue-grey) against the *sumi*-printed key blocks for the illustration of *Senmyō-reki* (*The Xuan-ming calendar*), noting the untrimmed page edges on which the printed evidence of the *kagi* and *hikitsuke* *kentō* marks survive. Though multi-block colour printing was by no means common during the seventeenth century, it was certainly used for the printing of some texts. Hillier cites, for example, in 1657, *Kakuchi sansho*, a mathematical text; between 1658 and 1660, *Gumpō Goku Hiden Sho*, a volume about military tactics; and, in 1667, *Shunsen O-hiinagata*, a
book of *kimono* designs in which each line illustration is overprinted in a single colour, red or green.

These texts only hinted at the intricacies that were to characterize colour printing of the later eighteenth century. By the 1740s multi-block colour printing was becoming common-place. It was at this stage, Bickford suggests, that printers were able to employ pigments that were stable and intense, and fine enough to be absorbed into the paper. The principal colours employed in single sheet prints during the 1740s were *beni*, a soft rose-pink derived from the safflower blossom (*Carthamus tinctorius*), and *rokushō*, a green generated from the treatment of copper with hot vinegar to produce what we know today as verdigris. This combination suited artists and their audiences very well; in their complementary pairing the two colours were bright and intense, but the very close character of their tonal values ensured this intensity was moderated with some restraint.

During the same period ventures in polychrome printing seem to have been more progressive in the publication of illustrated books. Hillier notes book covers from 1725 that were printed using up to four colour blocks, the use of between five and seven blocks in illustrations for Ōoka Shumboku – Minchō Seido Gaen (The Living Garden of Ming Painting, 1746), and the ‘coming of age of colour printing in Japan’ in the publication of *Kaishen gaden* (the Japanese edition of *Jie Zi Yuan Hua Juan – The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*) between 1748 and 1753.15

By the 1750s woodblock printers were certainly able to choose from a wider palette, which included *ai*, the blue derived from indigo that had already been in use for dyeing textiles, and *ki* (alt. *shio*, or *kusa shō*) or yellow from gamboge. By the mid-1750s not only had the palette broadened, but printers were able to contrive secondary colour mixtures by printing one colour block over another. Thus, when printing, say, areas of blue-grey and of yellow, the printer could overlay the blocks in some parts of the composition to produce a green. By printing *ai* over *beni* they could produce purple. In early ventures into mixing colour by overprinting the results could as easily be muddy as clear and vibrant. Successful overprinting was dependent not only on the selection of appropriate colour combinations but also on a fineness of particle size that allowed printers to maintain the level of pigment transparency needed to get a clean mix, while maintaining the strength of hue necessary to maintain a degree of brightness.

Again it seems that the illustrated book was the site of the first perfectly resolved polychrome printed compositions. *Umi no sachi* (*Boon of the Sea*) by Katsuma Ryūsai was published in 1762. It contained a series of naturalistic representations of fish printed from multiple blocks in a range of complex but subtly modulated colour. A key technique for contriving intricacies of colour change or textural detail was the careful overprinting of closely matched layers of colour. In several he has even added metallic and mica dusts to replicate the sparkle of light on water. Three years later Ryūsai had published *Yama no sachi* (*Boon of the Mountains*), which established a mature model for the *nishiki-e* print. As with the earlier volumes, overlays of transparent pigment printed from a succession of blocks ensured the most complex, subtly mixed and naturalistic colour combinations, the suggestion of three-dimensionality of form by indications of *nōtan* (tonal variation), and delicate shifts in texture. The whole complex is organized by clearly defined keyblock printed linear contours.
By the mid 1760s therefore, the Japanese woodblock printers were able to rely on an accurate system of registration – kentō; they were able to employ a range of ways of modulating colour, especially through the overprinting of layers of transparent pigment; and they could select their colours from a fairly broad palette. They could use, in addition to those pigments mentioned previously, ukon, a yellow derived from turmeric; shōenji, a red from St John’s Wort; ki, yellow from orpiment; shidō, red oxide of iron; shu, vermillion from mercury sulphide; aigami, a very fugitive blue manufactured from the dayflower; shio, a bright yellow manufactured from sulphur and arsenic; airō, a delicate blue from Mercurialis leiocarpa; gunjō, or azurite blue; and empaku, a white lead carbonate far more sympathetic to the printing process than the coarser white pigment gofun. They could employ earth colours, including odo, or yellow ochre, and taisha, or red ochre. Beyond these printers could select more finely distinguished variations of colour – kusa, a grass green, or aka, a red. And beyond this again printers could mix colours: cha no iro was a mix of red and yellow pigments, beni-gara a combination of red, yellow and black, and murasaki, a lilac purple mixed from indigo and carmine.16

By the mid-1760s then the pictorial character of the ukiyo-e woodblock print had become determined, in one way at least, by the degree to which printers could successfully contrive to print a large number of colour, pattern and line blocks in combination for a single composition. The result was a profusion of increasingly complex colour compositions, bright, often intensely so, and multi-hued. The results could easily have been garish and crass, particularly in relation to the restrained elegance of the rose-pink and green compositions of the 1740s, or the understated linear economy of the monochrome print. The results however, while more luxurious and dazzling than ever before, were still able to be managed with quiet restraint. It is really this exercise of a degree of tension or equilibrium between luxury and restraint that characterized the work of Suzuki Harunobu, and made him, not the inventor or initiator of nishiki-e, so much as the first artist to design nishiki-e prints with a consistent measure of elegant control. In Aki no kaze (Plate 20) for example, Harunobu is able to temper the effects of both the swirling complexity of movements of figures, kimonos, trees and grasses, and the equally complex colour relations of over ten printing blocks by using a number of different pictorial devices. In the first, Harunobu tempers the intensity or complexity of any given area of colour, pattern or textural detail by aligning it against a complementary ‘opposite’. Thus the intensely coloured, but low detail, patch of green in the lower left corner is placed directly against a profusion of waving grasses and flowers, high in detail, but low in colour. The wave of delicate green willow fronds above the women is placed against the cloud-like layer of bare paper. The complex red patterns of the obi of the woman at right are balanced against the complementary unpatterned green of that of her companion. The smaller streamers of supplementary shigoki obi that are blown out from behind both figures employ precisely the opposite complementary relation.

Binding this complex equilibrium of complementary relations together are a network of gently rhythmic repetitions of line, shape or edge. The dished curve of the pink sash of the woman at left, for example, is repeated in its own flying ends, again in the obi of the figure at right, again in the ends of her green sash, and again in the markedly dished curve of her sleeve. Repetitions like these abound in this composition – between the flowing curves of wind-blown grass and those of the willow fronds, between the neck-lines of the women’s garments, their hand gestures, the placement of their feet, the overlapping
folds of their *kimono*. The effect is a finely wrought network of lightly flowing rhythmic linear relations that knits the composition and its complex of colours into a unified whole.

The third device Harunobu employed was to establish a ‘tonality’, a colour key against which all of the other colour areas and effects could be related. This was generally, as in the case of *Aki no kaze*, managed by placing the complex linearity of the figure interactions against a larger background zone of much quieter colour. Here he has employed three quiet, and closely related fields, all variations on yellow: the yellow of the lower half of the composition, the buff-grey printed area above this, and the natural colour of the paper in the soft cloud area across the top.

The final device Harunobu used was the most innovative. The development of the *empaku* white pigment manufactured from white lead carbonate offered huge advantages over the chalky, opaque and inconsistent *gofun*. Not only was the new pigment fine enough to be used for printing, but it was fine and consistent enough to mix with other colours to make them lighter or softer. Thus Harunobu was able to experiment with ways of mixing the white lead pigment with *beni*, to produce a soft, opaque and controllable pink, or with *sumi* and mica, to produce the translucent pearl-grey (*nezumi-iro*) that he has used for the central background zone of *Aki no kaze*. This new resource for designing and moderating colour systems of print compositions had significant implications. From this point, rather than simply indicate on *hanshita-e* or transfer proofs what colours might go where, artists and their printers were able to negotiate ways of modulating their colours, to make decisions about the quality of hue, or its lightness or darkness, brightness or dullness, opacity or transparency. It was this ability to control the quality of the coloured surface, more than any other factor, that enabled artists and printers to manage the apparently antithetical relations of luxury and restraint that characterized *ukiyo-e* prints of the later eighteenth century.

During this later part of the century the drive amongst artists, publishers and printers to innovation and novelty encouraged the development of a range of ‘special effects’ that expanded the *ukiyo-e* palette even further. These included, from c. 1790, the addition of *kira*, or powdered mica, that could be applied, usually in conjunction with another pigment. The design of *surimono* encouraged the adoption of gold and silver, used not so much as pigments, but in the form of leaf, or flake, glued on to the print by painting the surface with *nikawa*, an animal horn glue, and sprinkling the metals over this. By the turn of the century the taste for the highly decorative and the novel was widely held, as is evident in the popularity of mica backgrounds in Utamaro works of the period.

By the end of the eighteenth century, *ukiyo-e* print artists certainly seemed to be well in control of colour. The reality was, though, that while by this stage pigment technology was adequate, it was far from perfect, and throughout the nineteenth century changes in the knowledge of pigments continued to contribute to changes in the appearances of prints. The key problem with many pigments at the beginning of the nineteenth century was instability. Many colours, particularly the vegetable dyes, were extremely fugitive. *Airō*, the delicate blue, for example, could be expected to fade quite quickly to a buff colour. *Aibana*, the pale blue manufactured from the juice of *Commelina communis* was equally vulnerable. *Beni* would turn to cream. Mineral-based pigments could also deteriorate. Many were generated from metallic oxides, particularly that of lead, in combination with other compounds – hence white lead carbonate. The lead content of these compounds would turn black under the action of hydrogen sulphate carried in the
atmosphere. Thus two of the most popular colouring agents, ‘red lead’ and ‘white lead’, would tarnish and darken.\textsuperscript{17}

By the end of the eighteenth century the vulnerable vegetable blues had largely been replaced by the darker, more consistent and slightly more stable indigo-based \textit{ai}. It, in its turn, had been abandoned by about 1810, and blue became unfashionable for some time. From 1818 a new, and far more stable, source of blue was developed from powdered azurite. Finely ground it would print as a pale blue, coarser it would print darker. The new development gave printers variety as well as stability. In 1829 Kunisada published the first print employing the new Prussian Blue (\textit{J. Berorin} ie., Berlin). This early synthetic dye, which had been first developed in Europe as early as 1704, offered the Japanese printers some huge advantages over previous pigments. In the first place it was permanent. And it was relatively easy to print – its fine and uniform particle size of approximately one micron was the same as that of the pine-soot black used in the manufacture of \textit{sumi}. It was cheap to produce, and, above all, it could be varied. Its hue and intensity could be varied by adjusting the conditions of its synthesis.\textsuperscript{18}

During the 1830s the Prussian Blue pigment became increasingly popular. The publisher Nishimura Yohachi of Eijudō, for example, encouraged its application, sometimes to the exclusion of all other colours, in prints of Hokusai’s \textit{Thirty-six Views of Fuji} published from 1830. From 1842 \textit{aizuri-e} – blue prints – were printed, using a range of blocks each printing a different hue of blue, in a broad reaction against the government’s sumptuary edicts which discouraged the publication of over-decorative \textit{nishiki-e}.\textsuperscript{19}

Following the introduction of the European developed aniline dyes from 1864, the Japanese printers were able to employ a wide range of stable, reliable, vivid and luminous colours.\textsuperscript{20} The advantages for printers lay in the areas of consistency of print quality, and economy, and, after the Meiji Restoration, the use of what was the most modern western technology in the production of \textit{ukiyo-e} was certainly consistent with the broader official policies of modernization and westernization – the aniline dyes were referred to as \textit{kakushin no iro}, or ‘colours of progress’. The result of the introduction of the new pigments was to effect a further change in the appearance of \textit{ukiyo-e} prints. The new pigments were synthetic – and often they looked it. Many were harsh and metallic, particularly the acidic crimsons and the over-intense violets. Artists had great difficulty modulating these pigments with the elegant restraint Harunobu had been able to exercise with the vegetable and mineral pigments. Colour composition became characterized, not exclusively, but regularly, by garish and unbalanced brightness. The anilines also had a much finer particle size than earlier pigments. This could cause the colours printed from one block to run, or bleed, into areas printed by another. This was not just a characteristic of prints produced for artists of the Meiji period. Publishers continued to own, and have reprinted, blocks designed in pre-Meiji times. They continued to authorize the printing and sale of these images sometimes many years after the death of the original artist. During Meiji it was not unusual to find prints by earlier artists, particularly those of the Utagawa school, reprinted using pigments and colour combinations that bore little resemblance to those that had originally been negotiated; differences could arise where the colour schemes of later re-printings were matched against those of already badly deteriorated examples, or because new printers had replaced the old pigments altogether with the new synthetics.
The material conditions for *ukiyo-e* painting were different from those of printmaking. In the first place, *ukiyo-e* painters appear to have been able to choose their colours from a wider range than those available to printers. Elizabeth West Fitzhugh has identified eighteen different types of pigment used by painters. These included shell white (*gofun*), vermilion, red lead, vegetable yellow, malachite and azurite. Much earlier Henry Bowie listed, besides *sumi*, and *gofun*, a light reddish brown, *ki iro* (yellow-green), *beni* (red), *ō* a yellow, *midori*, green, *ai nezumi*, a dark blue, *sora iro*, a lighter sky-blue, *murasaki*, purple, *uguisu cha*, dark green, *kaba*, orange, *tōbiro*, brown, and *nezumi iro*, grey. Bowie also mentions the use of gold and silver as pigments, saffron red, and the use of a range of earth mineral colours (*iwamono*), including Prussian Blue, light bluish-green, *pea-green*, and light red. In other words painters were able to access a much wider range of colours than printers. This was mainly because some pigments – the naturally occurring minerals malachite and azurite used, respectively, for green and blue, for example – needed to be used in a coarsely ground form to operate properly. When such pigments were ground finely enough to be absorbed into the paper of the prints they lost their intensity. These pigments were bound in various pastes or glues – Bowie mentions that produced from rendered deer horn and diluted with water. The lustre of the painted surface could be varied, from a matt finish (*tsuya o keshi*) produced by adding a little *gofun* to the coloured pigment, or to a higher sheen surface generated, with *sumi*, by the addition of a little *beni* crimson or dark blue. Intensity of hue or tonal quality could be varied by the addition of *gofun* to coloured pigments, or by thinning with water.

*Ukiyo-e* painters were able to access this broader range of colours because the technical conditions by which they worked were not as narrowly confined as those of the printmaker. Where the printer was reliant on a fineness and uniformity of pigment particle size to ensure the pigment would be absorbed into the paper, the painter applied his pigments to the surface of either a less absorbent paper (*tori no ko*; *hōsho* mulberry paper; *tōshi* paper manufactured from rice plant leaves) or, more commonly, silk (*e-ginu*) treated with a size of alum and glue (*dosa*). Since the painters pigments did not need to be absorbed right into the body of the support, a much wider range of particle sized substances could be employed. This allowed the adoption of, in particular, the coarse grained *gofun* and granular earth pigments.

The most obvious outcome for the painter was the broader palette. Certainly the majority of painters appear to have used the colour range available to them quite freely; unlike the soft fluid tonal veils that characterize other schools of Japanese painting *ukiyo-e* paintings are almost always polychrome in nature, their rich and vibrant surfaces of paint tempered only by the straw-gold colour of their *toshi* or *e ginu* supports. This comprehensive and often complex colour mode was known as *goku-saishiki*, or ‘detailed colouring’. This broad colour range opened up even richer opportunities for painters. In the first place, the facility of being able to modulate colours using the opaque *gofun* pigment allowed painters to broaden their colour range even more, and to match colour selections within paintings even more finely, to achieve more subtly complex, but gently restrained, relations of colour in their compositions.

Hokusai, for example, recommended a delicate pale pink for the description of flower petals and the flesh on women’s faces:
This pigment called the smile pigment, Waraiguma, is used on women’s faces to give them a warm-blooded carnation tone and is also used to colour flowers. Here is how to make the pigment: take some shōenji mineral red, dissolve it in boiling water, and let the solution rest; this is a secret painters keep to themselves…for flowers alum is generally added to the solution; but this mixture turns the pigment brown. I use alum myself, but in a different way as a result of my own experience. I beat it at length in a bowl and stir it over a mild flame until the liquid has completely dried out. The matter thus obtained is kept in a dry place, ready to use in a mixture with white. And to obtain this white tinted with just a hint of red, I spread the white out to start with and then, diluting the shōenji in a lot of water and allowing it to precipitate to the bottom of this barely tinted water which is passed over the gouache, I obtain the desired colouring.

Furthermore, the use of water to thin pigment and gofun to modulate it allowed ukiyo-e painters to produce controlled gradations of colour, from light to dark, bright to dull, intense to dilute, in their paintings. Though by and large ukiyo-e paintings are characterized by a quality of flatness of areas of colour and pattern similar to those of ukiyo-e prints, such gradations were used, like bokashi print effects, to create atmospherics in landscape paintings, and, later in the Edo period, to suggest the three-dimensionality of flesh or clothing. More commonly, and more consistently throughout the Edo period, the availability of opaque pigments allowed the ukiyo-e painters to layer paint. Where in printing the layered overprinting of transparent pigment created areas of secondary or tertiary colour, in painting over-painting with opaque pigment encouraged a broader range of effects. Linear over-painting in sumi black allowed painters to construct linear contours not unlike those of the printmakers keyblock. These could be used to delineate shapes or objects, to indicate folds or creases in clothing, to represent the fine linear patterns of deeply oiled shimada coiffures, or to generate a sense of dynamic tension through the relations of interacting arabesques. Linear over-painting with white or coloured pigments over under-painted areas of flat colour allowed artists to indulge their enthusiasm for the representation of texture and pattern: painters could reproduce the textural effects of woven silk, the delicate traceries of brocades, or the subtle pink curve of the sakura petal. Beyond the application of linear patterns, painters could dab paint on in ‘pointillist’ layers, or spray, splash or sprinkle pigments on to the surface of the painting.

The second important difference in the technical condition of painting lay in the way painters actually applied their pigments. The master printer worked kneeling on the floor, on a low table placed in front of him, and sloping downwards away from his body. This peculiar downward slope facilitated the speedy exchange of blocks, and allowed the printer to register the greatest sensitivity of pressure on the baren. In Bowie’s record at least, painters also worked from a kneeling position, but with the support laid flat on the floor, rather than on a table. A layer of soft fabric (mosen) was laid on the floor, and the painting support, paper or silk, the latter mounted on a stretching frame, was laid down over it. The painter leaned over the support, and, holding the brush at the perpendicular, proceeded to paint.

A contemporary description of the application of paint to the face of a figure painting by Kawanabe Kyōsai lists the carefully ordered sequence in which the colours were laid down. Kyōsai began with the application of the principal outlines in a dilute wash of flesh colour. He then intensified the colour of the lips with taisha (iron red), then softened the lines and edges with a clean brush dipped in water. He then overlaid this, firstly with vermilion, then with shōenji crimson. Again the edges were softened with
water. The contours and details were then reinforced with a purple-brown, then the darkest lines were emphasized further with sumi. Highlights were then added using gofun, and again the edges were softened with water. Fine details, and then the linear layers of hair, were built up with further washes of sumi, repeated several times to describe the richness of texture and the three-dimensional volume of the hair. Then the finest of linear overlays, in the densest ink, was used to secure the textural complexity of the hair, and more dilute sumi was used to describe the delicate wisps of hair over the face.31

The object of working with the painting spread flat on the floor was to achieve the maximum freedom of movement for the painter, and to facilitate the free flow of fluid from the brush. This allowed him to describe, with the greatest of ease, the twisting arabesques that extend through the figures of courtesans or actors, or the flowing movement of waves, hills or trees. In addition, the typical structure of the Japanese paint brush, derived from those used for writing, and round in section, with bristles gradually tapering from a plump body to the sharpest and finest of tips, combined with its perpendicular disposition, allowed the painter to vary the thickness of line. Thus, with a simple change in pressure, the same brush could describe a plunging, energetic curve, the fine threads of silk brocades, or the delicacy of each individual hair of an eyelash. Vigorous strength of line, called fude no chikara, seems to have been particularly highly valued in Japanese painting, as a medium for the ‘sentiment of strength (that) must be invoked and felt throughout the artist’s system and imparted through his hand to the brush, and so transmitted into the object painted.’32

In practice, this mode of painting could also limit the actions of the painter. Firstly, it was one of the factors that limited the scale of ukiyo-e paintings – their height was limited by the extent of reach of the painter; their breadth was limited by that of the lateral stretch of his arms at full reach. Secondly, while this mode of working appeared to allow great freedom of gesture or movement of the brush, it could in fact be quite restrictive, favouring movements of the arm and hand away from, and especially back towards, the body. This tended to encourage a verticality of spatial disposition, especially evident in the near vertical axes of contours, the lines of clothing, or the vertical-line patterns of kimono.

III

Developments in the material conditions – registration system, papers, pigments – of woodblock printmaking facilitated the perfection of the nishiki-e ‘brocade picture’ during the 1760s. A polychrome printing system like this could have been accompanied by a concomitant problem. Ukiyo-e artists might have been led to indulge in essays in disorganized, riotous arrangements of colour. That this did not generally happen, that the luxurious ornamentation of lavish colour of nishiki-e prints was tempered by careful control of linear character and spatial disposition, was ensured by the rigorous control Harunobu and his successors were able to bring to bear. A second source of this tempering quality of cool, intelligent pictorial control lay in peculiarities of the procedural methodology that underlay the production of ukiyo-e prints. The procedural method comprised a complex sequence of events, each of which required the exercise of a different and highly refined skill. Each composition was transformed through a chain of shifts and changes in medium or appearance, in which the artist worked, not alone, but as a member of a team.33 The ukiyo-e print was generally the product of a curiously symbiotic relationship between four parties: the publisher, the artist, the block cutter and the printer.34
Each played a vital role in the conception, design or manufacture of the print. The relation between them was as much an economic or business partnership as it was a creative one. Their own activities were, in turn, dependent on, or conditioned by, those of papermakers, print-sellers, authors and poets. And the enterprise of all of these participants was tempered further by other forces – those of government agencies, audiences and inhabitants of the floating world (actors, wrestlers, courtesans and their various attendants) who functioned both as pictorial subjects and as an audience for ukiyo-e. The participation of each party was evident, in different ways, in the pictorial outcomes. The combination of their contributions was the key factor in the development of a character of cool detachment that tempered the potential for visual extravagance of nishiki-e.

The sequence of events underlying the production of a woodblock print generally began with, and was guided by, the publisher. The publisher negotiated the pictorial subject with the artist. The artist began by developing each image through a series of gakō, preparatory sketches. The fully resolved linear composition was then transferred to very thin, high quality mino-gami paper, in a drawing that often included written notes for the block cutter. This hanshita-e was first presented by the publisher to the gyōji or e-nanushi, the members of the Wholesale Publishers Guild who had been approved by the machi bugyō (city magistrates or governors) to act as censors. Between 1790 and 1842, approval of a composition was recorded on the hanshita-e by the addition of the censor’s kiwame seal.

The approved transfer drawing was then passed on to the block cutter. The drawing was pasted, face down, on to the smoothly planed surface of the block, using himenori (rice starch) paste or dosa (rice starch mixed with alum to prevent wrinkling of the transfer). When dried, the paper of the transfer was made transparent by rubbing with vegetable oil. The image could now be seen in reverse. The cutter then cut the first block – the keyblock, or ‘sumi-block’ which contained all of the main outlines and linear details of the composition. The cutter removed all areas that were not to be printed, leaving a fine network of raised lines and shapes that would transfer the ink to the paper. In addition to the drawn image the cutter also included the kentō marks, a raised right angle in the lower right hand corner of the block, and a corresponding edge mark upper right, by which the correct alignment or registration of blocks could be ensured. The printer then produced a number of proofs, or kyōgō, off the keyblock. In the process of printing the image, reversed in its transfer to the block, would appear again on its proper axis.

These kyōgō would then be returned to the artist who would, after approving the cutting of the keyblock, indicate in red ink on each of the proofs the parts that were to print a particular colour or patterned effect. Often the indication was in words only; sometimes the area to be printed in one colour was indicated by a thin wash or outline of the red pigment. The artist would never visualize his colour composition as a complete painted image.

The annotated kyōgō were then returned to the block cutters. Each was then glued, again face down (i.e. image reversed) to a separate block. Each block was then cut in the same way as the key block, leaving the raised, uncut area to print.

The full set of colour blocks, together with the keyblock, was then transferred into the hands of the printers. The image was then printed, lightest colour first, more intense or brighter colours later, and keyblock last of all. Prints were not usually published in finite
editions—a full run might extend to several thousand impressions, and blocks might then be sold on or recut for later republication—but they were, for convenience, printed in batches of two hundred (the standard paper pack size). Early in an edition the completed prints might be returned to the artist for final approval, but generally they would be forwarded to the publisher, and he would then arrange for their distribution and sale.

This procedure had important implications for ukiyo-e prints. Most obviously it enforced a tangible distance between the artist and both the technical processes by which his works were produced and the final art work itself. More subtly, the process of conception of each artistic enterprise, complex enough when it remained the province of a single mind, was here the product of a more complicated interaction between several. Thirdly, the image itself was required to be transformed through several states, from paper to carved wood, to printed image; through drawing and annotation, cutting and reprinting. Reduced from a single complex visualized composition in monochrome to a set of discrete colour components. Visualised, reversed, corrected, reversed, and corrected again. Every one of these carefully contrived steps served to remove, by however fine a degree, the final product from the hand of the artist himself.

In this way the complexity of the production process itself served to construct the condition of detached coolness or distance that tempered, in fact usually rigorously controlled, the profusion of colour and pattern that the technical conditions of nishiki-e had made possible. In fact, each of the ‘ukiyo-e quartet’ participants also had an independent conditioning effect on the pictorial outcome of the ukiyo-e print.

The publisher (hanmoto) was, first and foremost, an entrepreneur, a businessman who oversaw every part of the procedures of the manufacture of the print. He was generally the person who conceived projects, or at the very least negotiated their shape and scope with the individual artists he chose to represent. This meant that the publisher might determine the pictorial subject of a particular work or series, or negotiate between author and artist on an illustration project, or dictate the ways in which artists might represent their subjects. The publisher made decisions about the quality of works; his approval of the artist’s design was required for publication to proceed. Beyond this it was the publisher who established and supervised the meeting of deadlines by all participants, who secured official censorial approval for publication, who contracted cutters and printers, who funded publication, and who governed the size of editions and the distribution and sale of prints, through his own house, through other booksellers, by itinerant street seller, or even through lending libraries. Distribution was organised through kabu-nakama, unions organised and officially licensed for selling things. When, during the nineteenth century, editions of several thousand outran the life of the original keyblock, it was the publisher who authorized and supervised the manufacture of its replacement. More reprehensibly, when blocks were sold on from one publisher to another, and the works reissued, it was the publisher who might decide to omit several colour blocks from the printing to facilitate the most economical and speedy reissue of the print. The publishers also guaranteed the choice and reliable supply of materials—it was they who were responsible for the purchase, supply and storage of blocks, papers and pigments.

James A Michener early recognized the multi-faceted character of the publisher’s role. Michener saw, besides the exercise of managerial skills, two key creative functions for the publisher: as patrons of the arts, and as arbiters of taste. He argued, for example, that the commercial and artistic successes of Kitagawa Utamaro were entirely dependent
on the patronage of Tsutaya Jūzaburō (1750 – 1797). Jūzaburō inherited the Kitagawa family publishing business Tsutaya (Ivy House). The foundation of his own business success was built on the successful publication, from 1783, twice yearly of the *Yoshiwara saiken* brothel guides. Jūzaburō’s adoption of Utamaro, not just as a contracted artist, but as a member of his family (Utamaro moved into the family home and adopted Jūzaburō’s own adopted family name of Kitagawa) nurtured the development of the young artist. The majority of his early contracts were for the illustration of Yoshiwara-related themes, and published by Jūzaburō, not just in guidebooks but also as single-sheet printed portraits of the leading courtesans of the day. In governing what Utamaro would design for publication, in arranging for its official approval, in supervising the development from artist’s drawing to final print, in promoting its distribution and, coincidentally, Utamaro’s art world status, Jūzaburō was performing the role of patron to the artist. More subtly however, Jūzaburō’s sense of taste also determined the way Utamaro’s productions would look. His approval, before that of any other party, determined whether each of Utamaro’s designs would go to print; this required not just a hard-headed business decision based on market force relations, but a judgment of quality. This judgment could have quite tangible outcomes – Jūzaburō’s approval, for example, was required for the adoption of the innovative mica backgrounds that were introduced in Utamaro’s prints from 1792. One of the earliest examples of mica ground, in this instance bound with a translucent white pigment, was published in Utamaro’s *Fujin sōgaku juttai (Ten Types in the Physiognomic Study of Women).*

The scope of the publisher’s participation, and his engagement with every stage of the process, might appear to encroach significantly into the territory of the artist, casting him simply as the draughtsman-realiser of the publisher’s intentions. This was not so. The artist, as Michener put it, “...provided the intellectual, creative, and basic aesthetic elements’ that underpinned the *ukiyo-e* project. The publisher may well have determined the pictorial subject the artist was to represent in the illustrations for any given pictorial project, and the publication of the final designs was definitely dependent on his approval, but it was the artist who developed the sequence of sketches through which the composition was developed. The artist made the spatial decisions, thought through the linear character of the work, decided on relations of colour and pattern and surface quality. The artist adhered to existing pictorial conventions for the representation of spatial relations, movement or figural interaction, or developed new pictorial devices which extended the pictorial and conventional range of the genre. And the artists, as much as the publishers, oversaw the production of their prints, making judgments on the technical standards of cutting and printing, dictating, if only by shorthand indication, the relations of colours to be manipulated by block cutters and printers.

While Utamaro followed Jūzaburō’s lead in the early development of his career, focusing his attention closely on the representation of the women and activities of Yoshiwara, this was not simply due to contractual obligation. Utamaro’s focus on the hedonistic transactions of the *mizu shōbai* were generated as much by his own temperamental disposition – his preoccupation with these subjects was as much his choice as that of Jūzaburō. Indeed, the subject continued to dominate Utamaro’s oeuvre throughout his career, for some years after the death of his mentor.

The degree to which artists were able to control the quality of the printed image is evident in the works that constitute one of Katsushika Hokusai’s mature, but unfinished, projects, the *Hyakunin isshu uba ga etoki (Pictures of One Hundred Poems by One*
Hundred Poets, Explained by the Nurse), begun in 1836. Only twenty-seven of the one hundred prints planned for the series were ever completed. A key block survives for one other, and drawings or reproductions of drawings for a further sixty-one.\textsuperscript{45} The range of material that was produced for this project, but which appears never to have been realized in resolved colour print form, offers something of an insight into the nature of the ukiyo-e artist’s role. In the first instance, the precision and certainty of the drawings suggests they are Hokusai’s final designs, his hanshita-e, and that these are in Hokusai’s own hand, not that of a copyist as often was the case.\textsuperscript{46}

That Hokusai governed the process right through to the block cutting stage is evident also in differences between hanshita-e and earlier preparatory drawings which suggest that Hokusai was making pictorial decisions right up to that point. This is reinforced by the inclusion in some of these drawings, in red ink, of indications for colour or atmospheric effect – instructions to the block cutters that came direct from the artist, not from the publisher, and certainly not from a copyist. This is confirmed by the inclusion in some of the drawings of comprehensive written instructions to the printer in Hokusai’s own hand, again in red ink.\textsuperscript{47}

Hokusai’s close supervision of the cutting and printing of the blocks for his compositions is evident also in the consistency between the hanshita-e for the uncompleted images, and the keyblocks of those that were published. Hokusai, himself a skilled block cutter, was quite insistent on the absolute fidelity of the block cutter’s project to the artist’s vision, and quite indignant when cutters strayed from his direction:

I suggest that the engraver should add no lower eyelids where I did not draw them. As to noses: these are my noses (and he draws two examples) and the noses usually engraved are the noses of Toyokuni which I do not like at all and which are contrary to the art of drawing. It is also the fashion to draw eyes like this (he provides a sample with a black point in the center) but such eyes I like no more than such noses.\textsuperscript{48}

Where the artist’s contribution to the project was focused on pictorial invention and the control and maintenance of pictorial quality, that of the block cutter was essentially one of skill and technical knowledge. The success of cutters in faithfully reproducing every nuance of the artist’s drawing is evident in the consistency with which one can distinguish the works of various artists by a comparison of the linear qualities of their individual drawing styles, as sustained in the printed image. The attenuated, fine and elegant line of costumes and limbs in Torii Kiyonaga’s figures, for example, can be distinguished from the equally fine, but sensual and flowing character of those of his contemporary Utamaro.

The cutting of a set of blocks for a nishiki-e print was in fact usually a group effort. The finest work, that of the keyblock, and especially details of facial features, hair, limbs and the finest calligraphy or patterned areas, were cut by a ‘head carver’ or atamabori, a master carver who had trained for up to ten years.\textsuperscript{49} The supplementary colour blocks were carved by trainees of three or more years experience called dō-bori.

Cutters tended to follow the lead of the artist rather than contributing any significant pictorial decisions of their own. Some observers do suggest a more inventive role. Michener, for example, seems to overestimate the role of the cutter in determining the pictorial character of the works of the artist/novelist Kitao Masanobu:
He used a thin brush and jet black ink, so that his resulting line was rather heavy, from three to five times as broad as it is in the finished print. At places — as in the bottom billowing hem of the kimono worn by the woman with the umbrella — the line was uncertain and even wavering, but he knew the engraver would correct it. The meticulous ribs of the umbrella were merely suggested. Again that was the engraver’s job. A few dabs were placed on the kimonos, indicating patterns, and no more was necessary, for an assistant would fill them in. Great pains were taken with the flowers, the cuckoo, the faces, even though all the lines Kitao used were rather coarse. He didn’t bother with the hair, because his brushes couldn’t possibly do as good a job as the engraver’s knife, and besides, each engraver had a special way of doing hair and kept up to the yearly mode so that his finished prints would be in fashion. With the waves, too, Kitao merely indicated that he wanted some.30

Michener’s evaluation is problematic. In the first place, hanshita-e were inevitably destroyed in the cutting of the woodblock, so Michener could have no knowledge of the relation between Masanobu’s final drawing and the decisions of his block cutter. It seems more likely that Michener was familiar with preliminary drawings that might have been made at an earlier stage in the design of a print, and which might therefore be characterized by a variety of linear quality, error, or clumsiness, as well as grace of line, pentimenti, glued on corrections and written, rather than drawn, shorthand notes regarding colour, pattern or textural detail. Secondly, the finely nuanced linear character of one Masanobu print is repeated in others by his hand, regardless of who the block cutter was. Indeed, the linear quality in prints by different artists was distinctively individualized, as in the clear differences between early and late Torii school artists, or between the sensuality of Utamaro and the precision and daintiness of Harunobu. In each case the block cutter has been concerned with realizing, as closely as possibly, the drawn mark of the artist.

The role of the block cutter became increasingly important throughout the nineteenth century, as artists, audiences and publishers demanded increasingly finely cut detail, more complex decorative patterns, and an ever more inventive articulation of the pictorial surface. The greater importance of the role of the block cutter was recognized, with increasing frequency, by the formal acknowledgement of his participation in the final print. The signature of the cutter Horikō Gin, for example, is included in the small yellow cartouche directly to the left of Kunichika’s own signature in Tōkyō kaika meishō no uchi (Plate 17). The signature of the same cutter is included in the small cartouche to the left of Kunichika’s in his portrait The Actor Onoe Kikugorō V (Plate 33).

In fact, the relative importance of each participant was implicit in the scale and elaboration of their identifying logo. The signature of the artist was generally given the greatest prominence; it was usually larger, and often contained within a decorative or polychrome cartouche, and might be accompanied by the artist’s school seal. The publisher’s identity was generally indicated by a smaller cartouche, by character, or, for the more well known houses, by a pictorial logo like that of the bunch of ivy under the peak of Fuji adopted by Tsutaya. The cutter’s mark was always much smaller, more discrete, and often the workshop rather than the individual (or group) was acknowledged. The identities of the assistants who produced the colour blocks was rarely acknowledged.

In one important way however, the job of the block cutter was distinguished from the thinking of the artist. In any transfer printing process like that of woodblock printing, where the image is transferred from the printing surface to the paper, the image is reversed. In order that the final print might replicate the artist’s original drawing, the cutter carved
the keyblock, and subsequent colour blocks, in reverse – hence the laying of the *hanshita-e* face down onto the block. Working the image in reverse necessarily forced a degree of artistic distance in which the cutter’s interest was focused closely on the faithful reproduction of the artist’s drawing rather than in the introduction of any adaptations of his own.

This same shift from the reversed image of the carved block to the ‘positive’ composition of the final printed image also underpinned the printer’s project. As with the block cutter this peculiarity of the process lent some distance to the relation between printer and artist. Equally, the particular skills of the printer made themselves evident in the final printed image in a number of ways.

In many ways, the printer made the key decisions, not of choice of colour, but of qualities of colour. It was in his workshop that the paper was prepared by dampening and sizing with *dosa*; the consistency of colour quality between prints in the edition was directly related to consistency of absorbency and sensitivity of the paper. It was the printer who interpreted the artist’s colour directions, and his discrimination was important in matching the appropriate pigment to the artist’s indication, and in making decisions as to the relative transparency and intensity of each layer of pigment as it was being brushed on to the printing surface. The extent to which printers could vary the effects of colour in each individual impression is particularly evident in low-detail compositions such as Hokusai’s *Mount Fuji in Clear Weather* in which the *bokashi* change from green to red-brown on the mountain, and that across the top of the sky vary considerably from one impression to another, depending on the amount of pigment applied, the directions in which it has been brushed, and the subtle variations in pressure exerted on the *baren* in the burnishing of each print.\(^5^1\)

Original editions of Hokusai’s Fuji series represent the pinnacle of the printer’s art. Conversely, the printer could be responsible for poor registration, (often the result of forcing too many impressions during a single printing session, causing differential expansion of the blocks as they became waterlogged), printing off damaged blocks, or the application of inferior or poorly prepared pigments that could lead to colour bleeding, or even contribute to the breakdown of the printing surface of the blocks.

It was the skills of the printer also that allowed artists to design for special effects of colour and surface quality in prints. These included the *bokashi* graduated colour change from light to dark or intense to dilute colour. They also included a range of effects that included *karazuri*, or ‘blind printing’ (alt., gaufrage, embossing, goffering), in which soft damp paper was pressed against the surface of an uninked block, and burnished with a pebble of hard, smooth ivory, sometimes even hammered, to emboss an uncoloured image into the surface of the paper. Variations included *kimekomi*, a deep-line version, and *nunomezuri*, where net patterns were impressed onto the paper from the surface of highly starched muslin. Printers could also add extra lustre or shine to the surface of the print, polishing or burnishing it (*tsuya-zuri*) or painting it with a glue-like varnish (*nisu-biki*). They could overprint several blocks, of black over grey *sumi* to represent hair for example, or of variations of one colour to represent form or texture. They could spray pigment onto the block by flicking the brush, or using a simple atomizer (*kirifuki*, alt., *fukibokashi, fukibotan*) – using *gofun* to do this was a useful way of representing snow – or dust on powders of mica or metals over a surface prepared with egg-white (*nori-zuri*).\(^5^2\)
Within this complex partnership the contribution of each participant had a tangible effect on the final print. The contributions of each member tempered or conditioned or made possible the designs developed by the artists. Within this relationship it was the artist who guided the pictorial development of each project, who most determined outcomes in questions of quality, and whose professional reputation was most closely dependent on the commercial success of the project.

The *ukiyo-e* partnership model had one other, deeper, consequence however: it was the source of the resolution of the antithetical relation in *ukiyo-e* between its theatricality on the one hand, and its formal restraint on the other. In the nineteenth century in particular, *ukiyo-e* was much concerned with the theatre. The representation of *kabuki* themes, characters and actors was a key preoccupation of its artists. Equally the theatrical parades of *tayū*, *oiran* and *kamura*, of highly contrived cherry blossom viewing expeditions, boating parties or picnics, and the continued sympathy for theatrical effects of colour and movement occupied both artists and their audiences. Compositions had become increasingly melodramatic and violent in character by the end of the Tokugawa period.

The principal outcome of the complex relationship between the various parties of the *ukiyo-e* project was the tempering or conditioning of this theatricality with a quality of cool detachment or antitheatricality that prevented pictorial compositions from descending into the kitsch or melodramatic. The complex of participants and multiplicity of actions involved in the design and production of the print removed the final product by several degrees from the hand of the individual artist, towards a more leveled, balanced and restrained outcome. This was not entirely at the expense of the theatrical content of *ukiyo-e* images, but it was an antidote to extremes of theatricality. The tension between the inherent luxury or indulgence of the *nishiki-e* print on the one hand and the cool detachment of the procedural method that underpinned its production on the other resolved the paradox and introduced the qualities of objectivity, neutrality and impartiality that underpinned the sense of artistic detachment that became a hallmark of the genre.\(^5\)


\(^2\) James Michener claims that planks of more than two feet in width could be produced. This is unlikely. While it may have been possible to produce planks of such breadth from the oldest and largest of cherry trees, it would not have been possible to ensure a plentiful supply of them. The printing industry required a huge supply of blocks – tens of thousands in any year of the nineteenth century – to service the requirements of the proliferation of artists and publishers. In any case, one of the advantages of cherry was its resistance to warping and splitting; a block width across the grain of over two feet, with a thickness of only an inch, would have made both of these problems unavoidable. All the more so if, as Michener claims (presumably erroneously), these blocks were sun cured. Michener, 1954, p. 155.

\(^3\) Though *surimono* were printed in tiny editions – 75 to 100 perhaps – popular prints were sometimes published in editions of 20,000 or more, and often required the recutting or repair of key blocks. Some works remained in publication for up to thirty years. Richard Kruml, ‘Multiple Impressions’, *Impressions*, No. 14, Spring 1988, p. 6.


\(^5\) *Edo Kanjin Ōzumō Uki-e no Zu,* (Uki-e View of Edo Subscription Sumō), Sumō Museum, Tōkyō; Lawrence Bickford, ‘Three Aspects of Ukiyo-e Printmaking’, *Impressions*, No 18, Autumn 1994, pp. 1 – 8.)

\(^6\) Timothy Clark describes a similar instance in which a perspective interior of a *kabuki* theatre, complete with audience and stage hands, by Okamura Masanobu, is redeployed several times, each time with a different insert scene on the stage section of the composition, to represent different acts of the popular drama *Kanadehon Chūshingura*. What is peculiar about Masanobu’s representations is that the same setting was reused to represent differing, rival, productions of the play – the earlier set describes the performance at the
Ichimura Theatre, which opened at the fifth day of the fifth month of 1749; the later series represents, using the identical architectural setting and stagecraft, scenes from the performance that commenced at the Nakamura Theatre on the sixth day of the sixth month of 1749. Timothy Clark, in Timothy Clark, Anne Nishimura Morse, Louise E. Virgin, and Allen Hockley, *The Dawn of the Floating World 1650 – 1765; Early Ukiyo-e Treasures from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2001, p. 181.


12 See Clark, Morse and Virgin, 2001, for a range of early examples. Note in particular plates 27, 30, 31, 32.

13 Bickford, 1982 summarises this perspective, and challenges it. Bickford’s contention is that the development of the *nishiki-e* was dependent not so much on the invention of *kentō* as upon the availability of pigments with a fine enough particle size to be absorbed into the paper.

14 Hillier, 1987, pp. 75 – 78.


17 Binyon and Sexton, 1918, p. 60


19 Lane, 1978, p. 207.

The first aniline dye was manufactured in the United Kingdom by William Perkin in 1856. Within a decade a huge range of colours had been synthesized, and production, in Britain, France, and especially Germany, had become so prolific that the new colours had been quickly accepted as the international standard. They were enthusiastically received in Japan by both the print and the fashion industries – worlds that were closely linked in the enterprise of *ukiyo-e*. Simon Garfield, *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Colour that Changed the World*, London: Faber & Faber, 2000.


22 Bowie, 1952, pp. 44 - 45


26 Clark, 1992, p. 12.

27 Hokusai, *Ehon saishikitsū*, in Forrer, 1988, p. 339. Hokusai himself would have been unfamiliar with the term, or the product, ‘gouache’; de Goncourt uses it to describe water-based opaque pigments in Japanese painting.

28 See for example Sōga’s *Susano’o-no-Mikoto Making a Pact With the Spirits of Disease*, illustrated in Clark, 1992, p. 179. The consistency between painting and printmaking, in terms of flatness of surface and complexity of pattern is not surprising – the majority of *ukiyo-e* painters were, first and foremost, print designers.

29 This seems to be the way painters worked throughout the Edo period, though an illustration by Okamura Masanobu, *Osan Painting*, from the book *Ehon fūga nana Komachi* (*Picture Book of Seven Elegant Komachis*), published in the 1740s, represents the figure of Osan, grand-daughter of the artist Hishikawa Moronobu, at work on a painting on silk, mounted on stretchers and leaned up against a wall panel. Illustrated Clark, 1992, p. 12.


32 Bowie, 1952, p. 35.

33 To a lesser extent, or in different ways, this is true of other art enterprises as well. Pictorial briefs have long been subject to negotiation between artists and patrons; sculptors and painters have regularly, in one way or
another, subcontracted parts, or even all, of the construction of major works; architects operate as part of a wider and more complex team.

34 The first comprehensive description of this relationship was published by Tys Volker, Ukiyo-e Quartet, Leiden: Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 1949, pp. 1 – 49.

35 Many artists were easily able to do more than one step of the process; Hokusai, for example, had trained as a block cutter before practicing as a print designer. At his most successful, he could design more compositions if a larger group of cutters and printers were completing the actual printing process. It made economic sense to divide the tasks of ukiyo-e print production.

36 The principle focus of this section is on the activities of artists, publishers, cutters and printers – those who immediately articulated the medium of ukiyo-e. The effect of outside agencies was considerable however. Binyon, for example, relates a number of instances in which the external forces of government conditioned or compromised the activities of the ukiyo-e teams. These were most regularly exercised through the activities of municipal censors, but included also the impact of official edicts governing the conditions of the printing and related trades:

‘…in the 7th month of Kyōhō 6 (1721) the authorities forbade the publication of books and picture-books concerning current events, and also for the time being the printing and peddling of ichimai-ye (sic) (single-sheet pictures).’ Binyon, 1923, p. 35.

In 1842 a ‘sumptuary edict prohibiting the publication of prints of actors and courtesans and limiting the number of blocks.’ Binyon, p. 153.

‘As far back as the Tenshō period (1573 – 91) an edict had been issued forbidding the names and mon of high personages, warriors and others who had rendered conspicuous service to the country to appear in prints or books.’ Binyon, p. 173.

The injunction to gyōji (censors) of the 5th month of Kwansei 2 (1790):

‘Despite all previous warnings, books have assumed an improper tone. You, Gyōji, must censor all matter intended for publication, including picture books, readers, novels etc.; and any that are harmful to morals or in any way indecent must be forbidden. Those already published must be suppressed. As regards single-sheet pictures, those with pictures only may, as a rule, be passed; but if there is any inscription on them, you must inspect it most carefully; and no doubtful matter must in any case be allowed to be published. Persons who disregard this order must be accused by you in court. Moreover, if your censoring is imperfectly carried out, or if you neglect to censor at all, you shall be held personally responsible.

Those whom these instructions concern, must bear them well in mind, as well as those issued in the Kyōhō period, which will be embodied in this proclamation. Remember, therefore, this injunction as also all previous ones, and see to it that you carry out your examination in a proper and vigilant manner.

The above addressed to the Gyōji of the Wholesale Publishers Guild in 9th month of the 2nd year of Kwansei.’ Binyon, pp. 198 – 199. (The notice also carried the names of thirty gyōji of the Old division, twenty-three of the New division, and twenty-four of a supplementary division, as well as a notice warning the public against illegal print sales).

Such edicts may not have been rigorously enforced by censors, but any breach of them could be punished – witness the infamous case in which the mature Utamaro was imprisoned and chained, having included a picture of Hideyoshi in one of his works.

37 Publishers of illustrated and other books were known as jihon-tonya.

38 Takahashi Seijuro, 1972, p. 68.

39 Michener, 1954, p. 150.

40 Michener, 1954, p. 150.


46 Morse acknowledges Jack Hillier’s argument that the hanshita-e are the work of a copyist, but offers a comprehensive and convincing argument to the contrary. Morse, 1989, pp. 13 – 14.

47 Witness, for example, Plate 72, Yūshi Naishinnō-ke Kii, reproduced Morse, 1989, p. 150.


51 Indeed, as Richard Lane has demonstrated, the printing of variants of pictures like Mt Fuji in Clear Weather and its ‘partner-piece’, Mt Fuji in a Thunderstorm, could depart so far from the original as to constitute an alternate picture of the subject, rather than simply an alternate state. Richard Lane, Hokusai: Life and Work, London: Barrie and Jenkins, p. 1989, pp. 186 – 193.
52 Kruml, 1990, pp. 28–43.
7 UKIYO-E AND TEMPERAMENTAL DISPOSITION

I

The pictorial character of art works is conditioned by their circumstances – here those of aesthetic context, training, pictorial function, pictorial convention or medium – but it is determined by the artists themselves.¹ The individual preoccupations, habits, interests, experiences, pictorial preferences or temperamental dispositions of artists are evident in their works. Differing experiences contribute to differing art outcomes. Notwithstanding the complexity of the professional alliance underpinning the production of ukiyo-e prints, or the significant role of schools or conventional traditions in tempering artists’ practice, it was the artist who played the inventive role, and evidence of the artist’s complex, changing, finely nuanced trains of thought and experience is embodied in the pictorial character of the art works they produced. Since ukiyo-e pictures bore the registration of each artist’s individual inventiveness or particular artistic venture, one may expect to be able to infer something of each artist’s intention of their work or of their temperamental disposition from the evidence of the projects they engaged with and the images they designed.²

There are caveats here. It might be possible to read fanciful associations of disposition, temperament or intent by drawing over-inventive inferences from the works one encounters. This might particularly be the case where inferences are infected by anecdotal evidence of questionable provenance (and numerous fictitious anecdotes attach to better known ukiyo-e artists like Utamaro or Hokusai); where inference is founded in pictorial features which are atypical; or where inference is simply inconsistent with pictorial fact.³ Even more problematic is the construction of inference from oversimplified determinist assumptions – Utamaro was dissolute: the sensualism of his life imposes itself upon his pictures. However closely the pictures of Utamaro reflect aspects of his lifestyle, the relation is not a necessary one; Utamaro’s pictures could as easily avoid representing any aspect of his private life experiences, as his finely illustrated albums of natural world subjects testify. Though I may be reduced here to describing the relation between temperament and pictures in a clumsy and artificially isolated way, those I have in mind are complex, subtle, more pervasive than a straightforward cause and effect equation would allow. Any discussion of the way disposition conditions art works needs to be considered in close relation to those other forces that have formed the focus for each of the previous chapters.

To avoid drawing invalid conclusions about the individual dispositions of these artists I have employed three measures of legitimacy against which the conclusions I have drawn about particular pictures and the circumstances of their making may be tested. In the first instance, the conclusions I draw, or the inferences I make, need to be consistent with what is reliably known of the artist. In the second place, they must be consistent with other work within the artist’s oeuvre, or with works from a particular project within that oeuvre. Inappropriate conclusions about artists’ intentions might be founded on atypical pictorial content, or on devices that the artist might not have used consistently. Consistent patterns
may be established in choices of pictorial subject, of pictorial device or convention, of combinations of colour and pattern, and especially qualities of line. This is not to suggest that all works of a particular project should, or, might, look the same. Rather that within a particular project, or in developing pictorial solutions to a specific problem, an artist is likely to be making a sustained investigation into the various pictorial possibilities of a particular subject, or into the pictorial effectiveness of particular pictorial devices. Thirdly, they must be consistent with known facts of the intellectual, social, economic, religious world in which the artist and his audiences moved, to the extent to which ukiyo-e pictures were made and used, quite specifically, in the interests of that world. What one might take, from a distance, to be an idiosyncratic disposition of the artist’s individual temperament may in fact reflect, and be confirmed by broader patterns of behaviour, attitudes, knowledge or belief – the conditions of social life common to the contemporary environment.

Suzuki Harunobu’s composition *Aki no kaze* exemplifies, and together with the oeuvre to which it belongs could even be said to have crystallised the foundation for, the mainstream character of ukiyo-e. It does so in several ways. For example, Harunobu has placed his two figures within an exceptionally shallow pictorial space. The nearest feature is the grassy triangle lower left, pressed against the picture plane; the farthest point the two broad buff and yellow bands of flat colour directly behind the women, arranged parallel to, and relatively close to, the picture plane. In addition, he has made no attempt to describe the ground upon which the figures walk as a horizontal plane. The result – one found consistently also in the works of Harunobu’s Torii school contemporaries – was a curious floating effect. Harunobu has also established in this work particular features of linear character that were to become hallmarks of ukiyo-e style, particularly in nishiki-e prints. This is most clearly evident in the key-block contours of the figures – crisply defined, regular, and very fine delineations of edges, shapes and movements. It also generates the rhythmic repetitions that Harunobu has contrived through the curving stems of wind-blown grass and willow fronds, in the linear vertical-striped patterns of clothing, and in the complex longitudinal folds of kimono.

In the third instance Harunobu has developed in *Aki no kaze*, as in the other prints (more than six hundred) that he completed during the last five years of his life, a precedent for the treatment of pictorial fields of colour and pattern. He delighted in the project of arranging, variously, but consistently, contrasting, repeating, rhyming and rhythmic shapes and surfaces of colour and pattern against more representational pictorial devices or fields of flat, unrelieved colour. The complex colour arrangement he employed embodied fully the possibilities opened up by the development of reliable procedures for high precision multi-block printing. Harunobu may not have invented or personally perfected the technical procedure of the polychrome nishiki-e print, but he was the first to fully realise the possibilities it offered. This composition, together with the other works of the last five years of his career, establishes something of a paradigm for the representation of the figure in ukiyo-e woodblock prints for the remainder of the Edo period.

Several characteristics of *Aki no kaze*, while typical of Harunobu’s mature work, do not conform in this way to broader patterns of ukiyo-e style. The subtle, delicate, dance-like movement of the figures, for example, seems distinctively Harunobu in nature. It is generated partly through the arabesques that run through each figure, partly through the rhythmic repetitions of line and shape that are repeated throughout the whole composition, and partly through the spatial tension Harunobu has contrived in the relation between the
two figures. This sense of gentle movement is enhanced by the floating quality of the figures which seem to hover just above the surface of the pathway, with no visible connection between their feet or the hems of their garments and the ground below.

The second key characteristic that seems distinctively Harunobu is the subtle sense of sexual suggestion that suffuses the composition. This sense of sexuality is contrived quite explicitly, in two ways. It is suggested by the glimpses of naked flesh – most obviously in the revealed ankle and shin of the figure at left, but also in the more covert revelations of wrists and necks. It is present also in the labial folds of the lower kimono of both figures. The explicit vulval references in the lower skirts in this composition are repeated on a smaller scale in the soft pink folds of both the necklines and the cuffs of their garments and underclothes.

The dance-like movement of the figures, and of the composition as a whole, generate a sense of playfulness. This is contrived through the spatial tension established through the opposed curves of the two bodies, a tension that generates a frisson of sexual potentiality. This, in turn, is tempered by the coyness of the two figures, who modestly turn and look away from one another.

A similar tension is evident between the apparent youthful innocence of the two young women, and the explicitly sexual references of exposed limbs and vulval suggestions, and the front-tied obi that label them quite clearly as participants in Edo brothel culture. The sexual connotations are confirmed in the finely wrought conceit carried in the picture and its title. The wind-blown fronds of willow hanging above the figures, and the explicit reference to wind in the title – Aki no kaze – combine to form an overt reference to the ‘world of wind and willow’ – the world of the brothel.

The other singular characteristic of the two figures in this picture is their self-absorption. The interaction between them is close – they almost, but don’t quite, touch, and the hip of the woman at right thrusts provocatively towards her companion, while the lower kimono of the figure at left is blown towards the right. Just as he has constructed a spatial tension between these ‘coming together’ curves and those that drive the figures apart, however, Harunobu has also contrived a tension between the movements suggestive of pairing on the one hand, and the non-communicative nature of their relation on the other. Their bodies twist and curve away from one another, and their faces turn away from one another, eyes glancing downwards, barely open, and lips pursed shut.

The frozen moment of dance-like movement of Harunobu’s composition, the coy playfulness of his women, and the tension drawn between the innocent self absorption of each figure, and the electric frisson of sexual potentiality drawn between them, suggest a playful and erotically aware, but highly refined disposition of its artist. They also establish, fully realised for the first time in ukiyo-e, the air of confident, urbane manners, of sexual knowingness, and fashionable chic, the flavour of iki.

The features of Aki no kaze that generate this sense of coy playfulness, sexual potentiality and fashionable chic are consistent with patterns that run throughout the rest of Harunobu’s mature oeuvre. The self-absorption of the figures, for example, is typical of Harunobu’s compositions. In the single-figure compositions he achieves this by avoiding any direct connection between the viewer and the represented figure. Harunobu uses a range of devices to do this. With standing figures he typically twists their bodies away
from the picture plane, physically avoiding any sense of frontality. In seated compositions he positions the figures on diagonal axes, often emphasised by the diagonal isometric disposition of the plane upon which they are seated, or which stands behind them. In each instance the attitude of the head, tilted away from the viewer, facing pensively downwards, its reflective gaze directed, if anywhere, at some incident or object beyond the pictorial frame, confirms the attitude of self-absorption.

This sense of self-absorption is reinforced by the omission of any sign of facial expression, or even of individual identity, in Harunobu’s faces:

There is no individuality whatsoever in the faces of Harunobu’s figures. They are childlike and delicate, with a remote, withdrawn quality...There is little facial distinction between the sexes, even. A non-Japanese unfamiliar with the conventions of Japanese dress and hairstyles might be excused for not even noticing, in many cases, that one of the figures of a particular print is a man.5

In two-figure compositions like Aki no kaze – a model that dominates Harunobu’s mature oeuvre – this character of self-absorption is even more marked. It is implicit in the spatial tensions Harunobu contrived between the figures; the frisson of the close proximity of the figures is tempered by the clearly defined spatial gaps between them. Again this self-absorbed attitude is generally confirmed by the lines of sight of each figure. In Settsu Kinata-no Tamagawa for example, although the two figures appear to sit facing one another, they are clearly separated by the flat planes of unrelieved grey and the solid bulk of the rock that lies between them, and the eyes of each woman are directed toward the cloth they are beating rather than towards one another. Even in images of young lovers like Lovers Sharing an Umbrella, where one figure looks fondly towards his partner, she shyly averts her own gaze away, and downwards, in an attitude of coy propriety or feigned disinterest. And where beautiful young women fall under the glance of young boys, servants, or even potential suitors, they seem consistently unaware, continuing their self-directed activities independently and unconcerned by the attitudes of those around them. The quietly introspective mien of Harunobu’s figures provide the perfect foil to the luxurious exuberance of glamour, colour and pattern the new nishiki-e allowed him to exploit.

In a similar way, movement, and more specifically, the movement of dance is a consistent feature of Harunobu’s mature works. In several works dance itself is the pictorial subject – a trained monkey performs the Sambasō dance in one; a lone figure dressed in pure white dances the Sagimusume, the classical dance of the ‘Heron Maiden’ in another; one, entitled Sekidera Komachi, features a young woman leading a small boy in the dance during the Tanabata Festival at Sekidera;6 in another a group of children perform the ‘Spear Dance’.

In a more complex way, Harunobu contrives a formal reconstruction, in graphic terms, of the characteristic movement and gestures of dance. This is most evident in the structural composition of figures as series or groups in assemblages of stacked, alternating diagonals. Where figures are arranged as pairs these diagonals alternate from top to bottom and between the figures. The structural opposition of diagonally disposed limbs and torsos generates a high degree of dynamic tension. Reinforcing the dynamism generated by constructions of opposed diagonals, and tempering the severity of these arrangements, is the softer, more gracefully elegant movement of flowing, here intertwining, there parting company, arabesques, and the linear movements running longitudinally down through the
body of each figure. The flowing movement of these arabesques is emphasised even further by the rhythmic repetitions of shape and colour that run through the limbs, garments and gestures of Harunobu’s dainty figures.

All of this flowing, prancing, dance-like movement is enhanced even further by the consistent adoption of two further pictorial devices. The first is the habit of ‘floating’ his figures in space. Very rarely do the feet or the hems of the long, flowing *kimono* of Harunobu’s figures make contact with any concrete indication of the flat, stable surface of a floor or a pathway. On the contrary, Harunobu usually contrives to represent their feet as if floating just above the ground. He does this by avoiding any reference to any solid substance below their feet, or by arranging the figures as walking on light, airy substances – on the frothy buoyancy of clouds of snow, for example, or even on water. This floating quality is even adopted for seated figures, in which, rather than flattening the lower edges of their garments as if they were pressed by the weight of the seated bodies against the hard, flat, horizontal surface of wooden floor or veranda boards, he represents the lower edges of their garments as impossibly plump, pillowy, even billowing puffs of cloth. In a similar way, with standing figures, the hemlines bulge out and downwards below their feet, in rhythmic flowing folds and spills.

The second device is that of ensuring that, where feet are visible, they are never represented pressed flat to the ground. Harunobu’s figures never stand still; their feet, whether bare or sandaled, or poised on wooden *geta*, are always described, one higher than the other, placed at angles to the horizontal, tripping, hopping, dance-like, toes pointed or arched, as though their owners are dancing across the pictorial surface in gracefully dignified tip-toe, or *en pointe*.

Even more important in Harunobu’s mature work is the notion of play. Just as he represented specific dances in his images, he repeatedly, almost obsessively, described various aspects of play: games, pastimes, frivolous interactions. Many are images of children at play. In several images he portrays young boys wrestling; in others they play football; battledore and shuttlecock occupy some; in others they are catching insects; throwing stones; sailing paper boats; dancing; fishing; riding hobby horses; playing with pet animals; blowing home-made whistles; collecting sea shells; playing cat’s cradle; or building figures out of snow.

In others Harunobu explores themes of adults at leisure or at play. Single figures, pairs, or larger groups, often of women, are shown promenading in gardens or parks, in moon viewing parties, or blossom viewing expeditions. In other images they are shown enjoying the pleasures of the tea-houses, nibbling food, sipping rice-wine, engaging in conversation, or smoking tobacco. In some they play music, on *koto* or *samisen* or flutes. In others they read books, pass notes to one another, exchange secrets and letters – activities which, incidentally, bore evidence of their status as ‘modern’ women of Edo, urbane, well-educated and literate. In still others they are represented reciting poetry, in blow pipe parlours or archery ranges, or simply playing card games or reincarnations of the various classical picture matching activities like the shell game.

In many instances there is a decidedly romantic flavour to Harunobu’s representations of adults at play. In several compositions he has represented lovers meeting, in secret trysts, or walking out in public, in gardens, in snow, or along riverbanks, as in *Lovers Sharing an Umbrella*. In some the young lovers are openly flirtatious, in
others they bid tearful farewells at dawn, and in others their relations are pointedly chaste. In some, especially scenes of courtesans, or in the *shunga-e* the notion of love, at least as we might understand it today, is notably absent. During the Tokugawa period marriage was a monogamous arrangement and the conjugal family was the foundation of the household institution, or *ie*.

Marriages were often the product of contrivance rather than romance during the Edo period however. Unions were arranged to secure economic, political or social alliance as much as for the generation of domestic harmony. In addition, many married couples lived apart. The practice of *sankin kōtai*, or ‘alternate attendance’ required *daimyō* from other centres to spend alternate years in the capital, and every other year at their homes. During the extended periods of absence from Edo that this required, their wives and children were kept in the capital virtually as hostages. This practice effectively kept *daimyō* under control, but it also encouraged the development of alternative arrangements either for sexual engagements, or for the development of extramarital domestic relationships, maintained in parallel with the formally sanctioned marriage.

A *daimyō* might express as much depth of affection for his extramarital partner, (who might be of either sex) as for his wife:

> ‘The *daimyō*’, complained the hero of Saikaku’s *Kōshoku ichidai onna* (1685), ‘are busy with their formal duties, and with boy attendants nearby day and night, they fall in love with them. They also feel a deep affection for their women (such as secondary wives and mistresses) but neglect their main wives’.

In an additional category, Harunobu explores the pictorial possibilities of a range of adult/child combinations, in which a young woman is typically accompanied by a young boy. These subjects gave Harunobu an opportunity to make subtle allusions to sexual encounters through an otherwise innocent subject. In one, for example, a woman casually operates a weaving loom, while a small boy seated at her feet lifts up the hem of her *kimono* to stare at her exposed shin. In another a young boy ties decorations to the hair of a somnolent young woman, an activity that gives him the opportunity to glimpse the exposed nape of her neck, an area generally considered to be sexually provocative.

As well as representing play as a subject or theme in his pictures, Harunobu engaged in differing forms of pictorial and poetic play. Examples of his pictorial play, the subtle thematic allusions of *Settsu Kinata-ko Tamagawa* for example, or the complex sequence of pictorial references contemporary audiences would recognize in the series of ‘White Heron, Black Crow’ compositions, have been discussed earlier. The *mitate-e* form gave Harunobu the opportunity to explore the possibilities of art as pictorial play. Timothy Clark describes *mitate-e* as ‘bizarre, brain-teasing collisions’, citing Nakamura Mitsutoshi’s explanation of their generation from analogy (*ruisui*) or association of ideas (*rensō*). He also cites Tanabe MasAkō’s observation of Harunobu’s repeated, almost obsessive, pictorial borrowing from earlier works by Nishikawa Sukenobu, and explains this habit as a sort of sophisticated picture game to which Harunobu’s audience would have responded knowledgeably and enthusiastically:

> …it is inconceivable that they would not have noticed the pictorial quotes from Sukenobu’s *ehon* that litter Harunobu’s compositions. Tanabe argues persuasively that the pictorial quotes were in fact hidden there deliberately to be discovered by the cultivated patrons, constituting a playful ‘device’ (*shukō*) in their own right. They were yet another manifestation of the over-riding taste for *mitate*…just like the witty combinations which these men made the basis of their *haikai* poetry in the Edo-za style.
And as Clark also acknowledges, other observers (he cites Hayakawa Monta) confirm the dependence of mitate on ‘wit and playfulness’.  

Harunobu regularly augmented the picture-play in his mitate-e and other compositions by engaging in different types of word-play. In his translations of the poems and poetic allusions included regularly by Harunobu, David Waterhouse describes three different kinds of word-play. In the first type, Harunobu engages in simple verbal/pictorial metaphors. In one example, the poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mayu fukaki</th>
<th>With deep-brimmed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kasa ni yūhi no</td>
<td>basket-hats, fragrant trees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaoyobana</td>
<td>in the evening sun!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

accompanies the image of a promenading courtesan and her kamuro. As Waterhouse explains, kaoyobana refers both to ‘fragrant tree’ and to ‘courtesan’.  

The second type of word game Harunobu liked to engage in was the verbal pun. In the print Amagoi (Praying For Rain) from the series Furyū Yatsushi Nana Komachi (Dandified Seven Komachi), he has included the poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kotowari ya</th>
<th>This may be the land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hi no moto narebana</td>
<td>that lies beneath the sun, but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teri mo sen</td>
<td>its light torments us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sari tote wa mata</td>
<td>Surely what we call this earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ame ga shita to wa</td>
<td>lies also under the rain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Waterhouse explains:

The poem depends on two puns, which can only be hinted at in translation. Hi no moto means ‘under the sun’, but is also a stock phrase for ‘Japan’; ame ga shita means ‘that which is beneath the sky’, i.e. the earth, as well as ‘in the rain’.  

The third type of poetic play that Harunobu liked to engage in was that of the creative and witty re-fabrications of classic verse. In the print Kayoi (On The Way) from the same series as the last example, he has included an inset cartouche with a poem that is a witty reconstruction of an older stanza:

The legend of Fukasaka, on which the nō play Kayoi Komachi draws, goes back partly to a story cited in the Shūchūshō of Fujiwara no Kenshō (1129 - ?) from a lost work, the Uta rongi. In this version of the ‘Hundred Nights’, the man, who is not named, sleeps 99 nights on the mounting platform of his loved one’s ox-cart. On the 100th night his father suddenly dies, and he has to remain at home. The heartless girl sends him the following poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>akatsuki no</th>
<th>In the early dawn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shiji no hashigaki</td>
<td>you marked up a hundred nights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>momo yo kaki</td>
<td>on the mounting block –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kimi ga konu yo wa</td>
<td>but the night you failed to come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ware zo kazu kaku</td>
<td>it was I who counted that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a parody of Kokinshū XV, 761 (KI, p. 15)

| akatsuki no | In the early dawn |
A different notion of play underpins Harunobu’s representations of subjects on sexual themes. A sense of sexuality, a frisson of mutual attraction tempered by the spatial opposition of figures, something of the potential for the establishment of sexual relations, runs, either implicitly or explicitly, throughout his oeuvre. As with images of children at play or adults at leisure, these themes are established through Harunobu’s choices of pictorial subject. In some it is suggested in images of women after the bath, damp, clad in thinly draped yukata, breast, shoulder, throat, wrist or ankle exposed. Typically the hair is still wet, in subtle disarray, and clothing is dishevelled, sometimes even rolled right down to the waist to expose the whole upper torso. In others the figures are swathed in folds of cloth, drying off, or being dried off by an assistant. In some women are shown dressing, or being dressed by their kamuro, a subject which again gave Harunobu the opportunity to show exposed glimpses of naked flesh.

Sexual themes are even more clearly evident in images of figures in pairs, or sometimes in groups of three. Thus Harunobu contrives pairs of women, or women and men, dallying languorously on beds or on verandas, promenading or trysting; flirting openly, or hidden from the rest of the world; taking tea – or sake – in convivial preliminaries to sexual union; lovers parting company; lovers meeting; lovers whispering exchanged intimacies (an exception to the usual self-absorption of his figures); or lovers adjusting one another’s clothing. In some the combinations are highly suggestive: two figures playing the same flute; exchanging love letters; stroking one another; making love, sometimes under the secret gaze of a hidden voyeur.

Inevitably the sexual play in Harunobu’s pictures eventually reaches a point of consummation. Harunobu, like most of his contemporaries, designed shunga-e – the so-called ‘spring pictures’, or explicitly erotic compositions of ukiyo-e. Where the shunga-e of other artists contain representations of aggressive, athletic or highly imaginative couplings, those of Harunobu are far more delicately disposed – even refined. The participants appear to be gentle, mutually considerate, and dainty in their actions and gestures. Though the carnal detail of their union is generally revealed in quite an explicit manner, the figures themselves are often disengaged, in some instances playing samisen, or toying with fans, or adjusting hair-pieces, or gazing, characteristically in a state of complete self-absorption, away from their partner, down to the floor, or away, beyond the pictorial space. In Harunobu’s shunga-e the most suggestive element is usually (and regularly, and playfully) provided by the presence of a third figure, as semi-hidden voyeur, or as an actively helpful participant in the sexual exchange.18

Despite the explicit nature of his repeated references to female sexuality however, and excepting the shunga-e, Harunobu’s figures rarely actually engage in sexual congress. Their sexuality is one of potential, of an electric sexual tension between figures who tease, provoke, inflame, but hardly ever consummate their passions. In Harunobu’s works one encounters the first complete manifestation of the sense of chic sexual provocation and potential of iki.

The understanding of Aki no kaze as an exposition of coy and sexually provocative play is, then, quite consistent with the patterns one can trace through the rest of
Harunobu’s mature oeuvre. It is much more difficult to establish any correspondence between these patterns and the facts of his life. Almost nothing is known of Harunobu’s life. He appears to have died on or about the fifteenth day of the sixth month of 1770, possibly in his mid-forties. His family and art names are all known, together with the fact that he lived in Edo, at Yonezawa-cho and at Shirakabe-chō. He appears to have made about forty prints in the period prior to 1765, and the remainder of his oeuvre was completed in the five fecund years that followed. Most other assumptions about the facts of his life are made by inference or association. David Waterhouse, for example, has suggested personal relationships with contemporary artists, craftsmen, scholars and literati which may easily have been real — many would have been Harunobu’s neighbours in Shirakabe-chō — but for which there is little documentary evidence. Waterhouse also describes the origins of assumptions that Harunobu was overly fond of drink:

At the beginning of 1770 he illustrated a shunga book, Tawamure-gusa, in which he is alluded to (with a pun on his name) as Shusuki nanigashi, ‘somebody fond of rice wine’.

In weaving a web of associations, friendships and professional relationships for Harunobu, Waterhouse describes one relationship in particular between Harunobu and one of his neighbours in Shirakabe-cho, Hiraga Gennai. Hiraga, a scholar descended from a samurai family, had written several books on homosexuality and engaged in homosexual relationships. Waterhouse argues that Harunobu knew Hiraga, and completed at least one portrait of the kabuki actor Yoshizawa Sakinosuke II, who appears to have lived in the same house as Hiraga’s lover Yoshizawa Kunishi. On this evidence, as well as that of the effeminate character of Harunobu’s representations of men, Waterhouse asserts Harunobu’s own homosexuality:

The inference I have drawn is that Harunobu, like Gennai, was homosexual in his preferences, or at least bisexual. The delicate colours of his prints, the limp-wristed androgynous young men, and his idealised young women, are general features of his art which also point in this direction. There is no evidence that he ever married or had children; and in Edo Japan homosexuality was common among the samurai class and the Buddhist clergy.

If Waterhouse’s observation is correct, it would not refer to practices that were at all unusual. Homosexuality, albeit known by different terms – shudō, or the ‘way of youths’, for example, or nanshoku, which ‘...signified an erotic interaction between two (or more) males’ — was commonplace in Tokugawa Japan. Though they may have provoked some concern amongst the political authorities, and were, indeed, the object of official regulation homosexuals were represented repeatedly in the popular literary and graphic arts of the period.

As Richard Lane has observed, observations like that of Waterhouse can be unhelpful, and tend to be flavoured with something of a sensational, ‘value-judging’, or moralising attitude towards the sexual mores of Edo, and especially those of the participants of the floating world. Certainly homosexuality was tolerated in Edo, and catered for in the brothel districts. The art of female impersonation by onnagata was one of the mainstays of the kabuki theatre. The explanation for the androgynous character of Harunobu’s figures is not to be found in arguments of his sexual preference. Harunobu represented men as willowy, lithe, delicately effeminate creatures because this was an accepted attitude of male heterosexual attractiveness during his own lifetime, and one
whose roots reached right back to Heian times. A sensitivity to qualities of colour and pattern and fashion had long been observed in mens’ habits of dress and manners:

Towards noon the Middle Captain of the Third Rank (as the Chancellor, Michitaka, was then styled) arrived at Smaller Shirakawa. Over a thin silk robe of dark orange he wore a dazzling white one of glossy silk; his court cloak was lined with violet, and his laced trousers were the same colour, while his trouser skirt was of deep red material. One might imagine that his costume would have seemed too warm next to the light, cool attire of the other gentlemen; in fact he seemed perfectly clad. His fan, with its slender, lacquered frame, was slightly different from the others, but it was covered with red paper of the same tint. As I looked at all the men gathered there with their fans, I had the impression that I was seeing a field of pinks in full bloom.  

Sei Shōnagon’s private observations were echoed on a grander scale in Murasaki Shikibu’s descriptions of the ideal of male beauty in *The Tale of Genji*:

The picture of the average Heian aristocrat that appears in literature and painting is likely to strike many Western readers as effeminate. The contemporary ideal of male beauty was a plump white face with a minute mouth, the narrowest of slits for eyes and a little tuft of beard on the point of the chin. This – apart from the beard – was the same as the ideal of feminine beauty, and often in Murasaki’s novel we are told that a handsome man like Kaoru is as beautiful as a woman. We know that Fujiwara no Korechika, the great Adonis of the day, had a perfectly round white face; here, as in many other respects, he was probably the model for the hero of *The Tale of Genji*. Having read the scenes in which ladies almost swoon at the thought of Prince Genji’s physical charms, most Westerners (and many modern Japanese) are bound to be surprised by his rather epicene appearance in the scrolls, where he is depicted with a pasty complexion, almost imperceptible eyes, and an exiguous tuft of beard, yet there is every reason to believe that the scrolls are faithful to Murasaki’s ideal of male beauty.  

Ivan Morris describes the ‘effeminate’ habits of the Heian male, including powdering the face and wearing, and even preparing their own, scents – two of the most respected male characters of *Genji* were named ‘Lord Fragrance’ and ‘Lord Scent’. And if Murasaki’s heroes appear overly timorous, or too easily moved to tears, these things were really evidence ‘…that a man was sensitive to the beauty and pathos of life’.  

Allowing for the fictional and idealised nature of Murasaki’s construction of Heian life, and acknowledging the existence of other, more ‘manly’ ideals in other contemporary literature, Morris argues that

…it was a man like Prince Genji, with his gentle nature, his sensitivity and his wide range of artistic skills, who represented the ideal of the age and who set the tone for the social and cultural life of the good people.

By the fashions of Harunobu’s day, both male and female wore their hair long, and often decoratively arranged, and dressed in similar, and equally decorative, garments. Gestures, mannerisms and sensibilities of the floating world tended towards the effeminate for both sexes, and this sense of gender-playfulness was entirely consistent with the contemporary tastes and habits of the Edo population. The fastidious attention to clothing, appearance and manners described by Sei Shōnagon survived, amongst the *tsū* and the dandies of the floating world, well into the Tokugawa era:

The appearance that an up-to-date courtesan favours in a man is as follows: his kimono, of which both the outside and the lining are of the same yellow silk, is dyed with fine stripes;
over this he wears a short black crested jacket of Habutaē silk. His sash is wrought of light yellowish-brown Ryumon, and his short coat is of reddish-brown Hachijo pongee, lined at the bottom with the same material. His bare feet are shod in a pair of straw sandals, and he dons a new pair each time that he goes out. In the parlour he bears himself with dignity. The short sword by his side protrudes slightly from its scabbard; he wields his fan so that the air is blown inside his hanging sleeves.

Though the stone basin may already be full of water, he has it filled afresh; then he washes his hands in a leisurely fashion, gargles softly and performs his other ablutions with like elegance. Having completed his toilet, he bids one of the girl assistants to fetch his tobacco, which his attendant has brought along wrapped in white Hoshō paper. After a few puffs he lays a handkerchief of Nobé paper by his knees, uses it with artless elegance and throws it away.32

This description was made by Ihara Saikaku in a novel – *The Life of an Amorous Woman* – published in 1686, and still popular in Harunobu’s time, but in any case Harunobu’s own audiences could have been expected to have recognised the Heian ideals as reflected in his own compositions. As Timothy Clark observes, mitate-e and other images build on and refer to themes, ideas or literary sources that were a part of the broader cognitive stock of the Edo audiences for which they were made. Thus veiled pictorial references to *The Tale of Genji* could readily be understood, because *Genji* was...a fairly static cultural ‘given’, one of the sekai (‘worlds’, themes) well established as common fodder for all the new, culturally evoking cultural forms in the Edo period.33

In a similar way contemporary attitudes towards prostitution and the broader world of teahouse entertainments, literary game-play, and witty repartee were all absolutely consistent with the mildly provocative sexiness, the literary allusions, and the up-to-date (fūryū) fashionable elegance of Harunobu’s women. The sexual world to which he alluded may not have been accessible to all Edokko, but it was real enough, and accessible for enough of Harunobu’s patrons to form a coherent context for the contemporary appreciation of his works.

What, precisely, was Harunobu’s intention for these works? Curiously, though perhaps not illogically, an appropriate parallel explanation can be found in Clement Greenberg’s description of the enterprise of the School of Paris painters:

The School of Paris no longer sought to discover pleasure but to provide it...principally in luscious colour, rich surfaces, decoratively inflected design.34

Harunobu was a man with an acutely refined disposition to sexual playfulness. He imbued his pictures with a flavour of the teasing potentiality of *iki*, a sensibility finely attuned to every nuance of sexual play. He realised this in the subject choices he made and in the stylistic character of his work, in precisely those qualities which Greenberg finds so attractive in the works of Matisse: ‘controlled sensuality’ (Harunobu rarely abandons himself; always maintains a measure of cool detachment), ‘careful sumptuousness’ and ‘cool hedonism’ – precisely the conditions for the development of an experience of *iki*-chic.35
The sense of play that recurs throughout Harunobu’s pictures is not unique to him. It preoccupied many *ukiyo-e* artists. What does distinguish Harunobu’s treatment of play, and of sexual play in particular, is the sense of detachment evident both in the attitudes of his characters, and in his own sense of distance from their world. The preoccupation of *ukiyo-e* artists with play reflected its importance for the lives of Edo people, particularly within the context of the floating world. Play performed important social and cultural functions:

The great Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga wrote that ‘play is not “ordinary” or “real” life. It is rather a stepping out of “real” life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own…The consciousness of play being “only a pretend” does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness.’ Play as an activity and play as an idea are not uniquely Japanese. In Japanese, however, the meanings of *play* (*asobi*) are so numerous that, as the cultural anthropologist Liza Crihfield Dalby has written, *asobi* covers almost everything people do for enjoyment in Japan. ‘A heart that knows how to play,’ she writes, ‘can mean a sense of humour, a relaxed outlook on life, a tendency to neglect one’s work, or debauchery, depending on the degree.’ The Japanese love of spectacle, ritual, performance, and games also is *asobi*. For adults *play* has included traditionally refined activities such as writing poetry, as well as public festivals, eating and drinking with friends, and sex. It is also germane to Japanese artistic form and production.36

For those who sought their play in the floating world, the *kabuki* theatre and the teahouses, restaurants, the social and sexual entertainments of the brothel quarters required, in a very tangible sense, the ‘stepping out of “real” life’ that Huizinga described, and a knowledge of the playful arts of poetry, conversation, music and fashion was precisely the condition of *sui* by which its most confident participants could be recognised.

This is not to say that the lives of the Edo population were given completely to the pursuit of pleasure. On the contrary, life in the new capital could be particularly arduous. The privileged *samurai* class were usually forced to live separately from their families, in many instances in reduced circumstances. The indenture of workers in the rapidly growing mercantile and trade sectors was oppressive – long hours of repetitive, hard work, extending over many years, and with an extraordinary degree of company regulation of one’s private affairs. Company regulation was extended by a high degree of governmental control, sustained through an endless series of sumptuary edicts restricting the behaviour of Edo’s citizens.37 The advantages of living in the city were evident, however, in the affluence of the prospering merchant class, in the high level of literacy of the population at large38 and in the tempering of the severity of urban life by engagement in a range of leisure pursuits. These included participating in public festivals, reading and composing verse, flower arrangement, music, taking of tea and food in public restaurants, and patronising the worlds of the theatre and the visual arts. For many, particularly male, Edo citizens, the parallel worlds of *kabuki* theatre and the Yoshiwara brothel district formed both a geographic and a congenial focus for these activities.

Implicitly it was the world of prostitution that occupied Harunobu, but, with the exception of the *shunga*-e, he rarely represents its activities overtly. Only occasionally does he place his figures inside Yoshiwara itself, behind its closed doors or barred windows. More frequently however, the references to the occupation of his women are made by allusion only, and are heavily tempered by their daintily coy demeanour. Similarly, most are anonymous. The identities of two of his models are known – Osen of
Kasamori, a teahouse attendant and well-known beauty, and Ofuji, the famed daughter of a toothpick seller. Few others can be identified however, and this anonymity, together with the highly schematic, almost identical, faces of Harunobu’s women, contributes further to the sense of detachment in his works.

Where Harunobu appears to remain distanced, or aloof from, the pleasures of the floating world, Kitagawa Utamaro seemed completely resigned to them. For Utamaro the notion of play was far more narrowly prescribed than that of Harunobu; it was centred almost exclusively on the activities of the brothel district. He appears not only to have represented the activities of the inhabitants of Yoshiwara, but to have engaged in them freely himself.

Utamaro’s personal dispensation towards the literary, epicurean and sexual indulgences of the floating world is clearly evident in his pictures. His illustration for the first print in the series Kömei bijin mitate Chūshingura junimai tsuzuki (Plate 1) is, as mentioned earlier, on one level a straightforward representation of a tea-house entertainment. The background scene is of a well-dressed samurai, drunkenly spilling his sake cup, attended by two young women. The painted screen hints at the educated and refined art and literary conversations that took place in such environments. The bonsai, the samisen and the sake warmer indicate the playful amusements one might engage in. The ornately clad courtesans in the foreground provide something of an indication of the sophistication of the highest level of courtesan, the tayū, and of the extravagant wealth that was associated with their engagement. Even more importantly, the fact that both of these figures can be specifically identified, the seated one as Tomimoto Toyohina, the standing woman as one of the famous Takao, clearly distinguishes them, and the remainder of the principals in this series of prints, from those of Harunobu. As with Harunobu, Utamaro has included subtle vulval references in the clothing of the two foreground figures, in the cuffs of Toyohina, in the necklines, in the lower kimono of the Takao figure. Also, he has contrived to expose the nape of the neck of each woman, its tuft of black hair protruding out beyond the contour of the neck. The depth of Utamaro’s knowledge of the activities of the Yoshiwara teahouses, as exemplified in this print, clearly demonstrates the broadly accepted understanding of play for the well-heeled Edo chōnin:

The concept of asobi comes from the Japanese reading of the Chinese character yū as it appears in the word yūkaku (literally, a place to play) and in the word yūjo. In modern Japanese, asobi refers to children’s play, a game or sport, an outing, a diversion, gambling, or study pursued away from one’s main academic institution. But also, when used to describe adult activity, the term indicates devotion to the pleasures of such things as nightclubs and geisha parties. In the Dictionary of the Language of Edo, asobi is simply defined as addiction to sensual pleasures, leading a fast life, or more specifically, visiting the pleasure quarter. Before the Tokugawa period, the meaning of asobi was quite broad – though even then the word was linked to the realm of eroticism. However, it also had meaning in the context of the sacred and in the world of art, where it was connected to singing, dancing and the creation of music and poetry.

Utamaro’s intimate knowledge of this world of adult play is evident throughout the Chūshingura mitate series to which this picture belongs, in both his recognition of the various games and indulgences to be found there, and in his portrayal of its inhabitants as individual, named persons. It is demonstrated even more plainly in the final print of the series, a larger work than the rest, in diptych double ōban format, representing an even more comprehensive array of brothel activities than the first ten sheets. Again, the subject
of the picture revolves around play, and in particular of games and entertainments – music, fan dancing, taking sake, jan-ken-pon (‘paper, rock, scissors’) – and, implicitly, that of sexual engagement. In this final work, echoing, in reverse, the composition of the first image, Utamaro has represented in the foreground a well-dressed dandy, a man knowledgeable in the ways and manners of the brothel quarters, a connoisseur of its pleasures, a man completely at ease with its complex customs and the women who lived and worked there. The man who demonstrated these qualities, and who also had the financial resources to indulge here casually and freely, was known as tsū. The man in the final print of this series is Utamaro himself.

This image of Utamaro seems to be confirmed by what we know of the facts of his life. Most sources describe Utamaro both as an observer and as a participant in the sensual and intellectual activities of the floating world:

Utamaro lived in the gay quarters of old Edo and associated continually with entertainers, waitresses, prostitutes and their patrons. His surroundings were hardly what one would describe as edifying.

In reality, very little factual information about Utamaro’s life has survived. His date of birth is uncertain, as are matters of parentage, marriage or issue. Utamaro’s first significant professional relationship was as a pupil of the artist Toriyama Sekien. His second was to engage him directly with the activities of the Yoshiwara. Utamaro became indentured to, and was to enjoy a most fruitful relationship with, the publisher Tsutajū, or Tsutaya Jūzaburō. Just how close and how long their relationship was has been unclear. Jack Hillier claimed that Utamaro produced print designs for Tsutaya from as early as 1775, and that he lived with the publisher from about this time, through his shift in premises in 1783 to Tsutajū’s death in 1797. More recent estimates, founded in contemporary records, suggest the relationship was neither as long or as closely symbiotic as that suggested by Hillier:

We are told in early biographical notes on Ukiyo-e artists compiled by the writer Ōta Nampo (1749 – 1823) that Utamaro lodged for a while with Tsutaya, possibly from the spring of 1783, in the shop located on the approach road to Yoshiwara.

Asano Shūgō agrees, arguing that during the early 1780s Utamaro lived in the Shinobu-ga-oka district of Ueno. Asano sees Utamaro’s ‘client-artist’ association with Tsutaya Jūzaburō as extending from about 1783 to around 1790:

It (then) seems that in the middle of the 1780s he may have lodged with the publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō; the anthology Bakuseishi (preface dated ninth month, 1787) includes the inscription ‘Utamaro at the foot of the ivy’ (Tsuta no moto no Utamaro).

The ‘Tsuta’ of Tsutaya’s name signified ‘ivy’, ‘Tsutaya’ was ‘Ivy House’ and Tsutaya’s publisher’s mon was composed of a bunch of ivy leaves set beneath a triple-peaked mountain. Utamaro’s association with Tsutaya brought him into close contact with the Yoshiwara in a number of ways. In the first instance it did so through contractual obligation. Tsutaya published a range of material connected with the brothel quarter, including single-sheet prints, kibyōshi, and in particular, the twice-yearly brothel guidebooks Yoshiwara saiken. Tsutaya guided Utamaro in most of his early projects, and many of these were closely connected with the Yoshiwara – developing illustrations of courtesans and their associates for the guidebooks and novels, or ‘publicity’ portraits of the
better-known courtesans. Some of the earliest picture books – *Edo suzume*, or ‘*The Edo Sparrows*’ of 1786, for example – provide a detailed pictorial catalogue of the activities of an Edo era brothel.

Participation in literary events brought one right into the bosom of the Yoshiwara society. Association with Tsutaya provided avenues through which Utamaro could develop his relationships with floating world literary figures. Tsutaya, as a publisher, was at the centre of a literary circle that included such well-known figures as Santō Kyōden (known as an artist as Kitao Masanobu) and Ōta Nampo. Utamaro is himself known to have participated in a range of literary events held in, or in association with, the Yoshiwara. In 1782, for example, he is recorded as participating in a literature club ceremony as a member of the ‘Yomo Group’, a *kyōka* group. On that occasion he introduced himself as ‘Utamaro Daimyōjin’ – ‘The Great God Utamaro’. He is listed in *Kyoša shitta-furi*, 1783, as a *kyōka* poet under the nom-de-plume of ‘Fude no Ayamara’ – ‘A slip of the brush’. Utamaro obviously took some pride in the status he enjoyed within the framework of these associations –

…the *kibyōshi* entitled *Minari daitsūjin ryaku engi*, published in spring, 1781, for instance, bears the signature ‘Written by Utamaro, the playboy of Shinobu-oka Su-chō’ (*Shinobu-oka-su-chō yūgin Utamaro jo*).

One source of evidence of Utamaro’s predilection for the sensual and intellectual pleasures of the Yoshiwara is the number of self-portrait representations set in brothel surroundings and engaging in brothel quarter activities. His self-portrait as Ōboshi Yuranosuke in the final scene of his *Chūshingura mitate* series is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

Timothy Clark cites two other self-portraits in print form that link Utamaro closely to the life of the literary circles that met and contested in the Yoshiwara precincts. One, apparently from 1782, appears in *Shokusanjin hantori-chō*, a scrapbook compiled by Ōta Nampo, in an entry describing that years gathering of the ‘Yomo Group’ mentioned earlier. In a second, done in 1784 for the *kibyōshi Yoshiwara daitsū-e* (*Meeting of the Great Sophisticates at Yoshiwara*) Utamaro has included an image of himself (named on his costume) peering over the shoulder of one of the ‘Sophisticates’ of floating world society amongst a group assembled at the Daimonjiya House in Yoshiwara.

Jack Hillier notes a much later (1804) self-portrait which shows Utamaro painting a mural of a Hō-ō bird on the screen wall of a brothel, watched by a cluster of courtesans. Hillier also notes an earlier single-sheet print, *Kin ki sho ga – The Four Accomplishments: koto, go, calligraphy, painting – ga: ‘Painting’*, 1792 – 1793 – as a self-portrait. Again Utamaro has drawn himself in the brothel district, as a well-dressed and accomplished *tsū*, a highly refined painter in the Chinese style, surrounded by Yoshiwara beauties. As Kondo Ichitaro points out, a certain irony underlies these self-portraits. In all of them Utamaro has represented himself as youthful, fashionable, and, most importantly, as an active participant in Edo brothel quarter activities. In a posthumous portrait of Utamaro by Chōbunsai Eishi, he is represented as, in Kondo Ichitaro’s words, ‘…a very ugly man…fat, flabby and rather dissipated in appearance’.

Utamaro’s sensualist preoccupations with women and brothel-quarter activities are confirmed elsewhere in his oeuvre. It is evident, for example, in the explicit references to
sexual exchange in *Kaya*. The setting for this scene is, quite specifically, the interior of a brothel. The picture takes its name from the distinctive green mosquito netting from which the ‘Green Houses’ took their name, and refers in particular to the bed chamber. Other indications are more subtle. The sashes hanging from the upper edge of the composition are an indication of undress, but also allude to the popular Edo painting theme of *tagasode*, or ‘whose sleeves?’ The figure at right is clearly prepared for a sexual engagement – her coiffure is immaculate, the décolletage at her breast carefully contrived, and her bundle of tissues at hand. The figure at the left and rear of the composition is represented in a post-coital state, with her *kimono* front open, modestly half-hidden behind her fan, with wisps of hair hanging loosely. The references are equally clear, albeit less overtly in Utamaro’s representation of Yamauba. Her elongated figure, her casual dishabille, her coiffure and her front-tied *obi* all identify her as a fashionable courtesan.

In both of the figures in *Kaya* the *kimono* are open, most obviously, at the front. More subtly they are pulled back at the neck to reveal the neck and throat of both women, and in particular the nape, with its gently protruding tuft of hair. This phenomenon is not confined to this picture; it is virtually the rule in Utamaro’s images of courtesans. It is equally evident, for example, in his representations of Yamauba and, as mentioned earlier, Tomimoto Toyohina. The exposure of the neck not only provides Utamaro with an avenue for the suggestion of the sexual provocation of *iki*, but also contributes to the attenuation of form that stretches the length of Utamaro’s figures out, apparently beyond the realms of physical possibility. The elongation of the figures, together with the vertical striped patterns and geometric repetitions favoured by Utamaro, contribute to the sense of willowy elegance that characterises the figures of his mature works.

Like Harunobu, but more than any other *ukiyo-e* artist, Utamaro focused the attention of his enterprise obsessively on the representation of women, especially on the environs, roles and activities of the women of the floating world:

Of the approximately nineteen hundred designs for sheet prints by Utamaro currently known, about five hundred and fifty – almost thirty percent – are directly related to Yoshiwara by their subject matter. These take various forms: portraits, often half-length or head-and-shoulders, of leading courtesans; scenes from their lives (customarily without depicting the client); tableau from costume parades performed each year in the Niwaka festivities during the eighth lunar month (mid-autumn). This makes Yoshiwara Utamaro’s most important subject, confirming de Goncourt’s sobriquet ‘painter of the Green Houses’ that was subsequently re-imported into Japan as *seirō no gaka*.55

Numerically, Clark’s analysis seems correct, but if one adds to the catalogue of single-sheet images that specifically represent Yoshiwara scenes those also of the *shunga*, the *Yoshiwara saiken*, pictures of women in general, or those that represent the manners of men and women in floating world interactions, illustrations of women for *kyōka* gathering albums, the broader themes of women, sensuality and the floating world flow through almost every facet of Utamaro’s project. A brief sampling of the titles of some of Utamaro’s better-known print series illustrates how closely his pictures reflect the scenes that Yoshiwara habituées would have found familiar. An early series was entitled *Keisei fumi no sugata, ichi, ni* (Forms of Courtesan’s Letters, One, Two, 1781–2); shortly after Utamaro published *Fūryū hana no ka asobi, jō, ge*, (Elegant Pleasures: The Scent of Flowers, Right, Left, 1783); and in the same year *Seirō niwaka onna geisha no bu* (Female Geisha Section of the Yoshiwara Niwaka Festival) and *Seirō niwaka Kashima-odori, tsuzuki* (Kashima Dance of the Yoshiwara Niwaka Festival). Around 1792 – 3 Utamaro
published the series *Fujin sōgaku juttai* (Ten Types of the Physiognomic Study of Women) which included such individual print titles as *Omoshiroki sō* (The Interesting Type) and *Uwaki no sō* (The Fancy-free Type). During the same period he also published *Fujo ninsō jupon* (Ten Classes of Women’s Physiognomy); *Sugatami shichinin keshō* (Seven Women Applying Make-up Using a Full-length Mirror); *Edo kōmei bijin* (Famous Beauties of Edo); *Seirō niwaka onna geisha no bu* (Female Geisha Section of the Yoshiwara Niwaka Festival); *Tōji san bijin* (Three Beauties of the Present Day); and *Seirō settsu gekka* (Snow, Moon and Flowers in Yoshiwara). Between 1793 and 1794 he completed *Enchū hassen* (Eight Immortals in the Art of Love), and *Kasen koi no bu* (Anthology of Poems: The Love Section).56

In some instances these series are remarkably frank in their descriptions of Yoshiwara women and their activities. The 1794–5 series *Hokkoku goshiki-zumi* (Five Shades of Ink in the Northern Quarter) includes images of women from the whole spectrum of the sex industry (*mizu shobai* – water trade), including *oiran* (high-ranked courtesan); *kashi* (moatside prostitute); *teppō* (literally: ‘gun’ – a prostitute from whom one might be highly likely to receive an infection); and *kiri no musume* (woman from a low-class brothel).57

A similar focus is evident in a spectrum of titles of Utamaro’s illustrated books. Besides the illustrated *kyōka* anthologies and the *Yoshiwara saiken* published by Tsutaya Jūzaburō, Utamaro illuminated books with sensually evocative titles like *Oki-miyage* (*Gift of the She Devils*, 1779); *Ehon Azuma asobi* (Picture Book: Amusements of Edo, 1790); *(Seikō gidan) Tatsumi Fugen* (Prostitutes Sermon at a Stony Place: Words of a Woman From the South-East, 1798); *Ehon shiki no hana* (Picture Book: Flowers of The Four Seasons, 1801); *Keisei jitsu no maki* (Volume of Courtesan’s True Feelings, 1801–4); and *(Seirō ehon) Nenjū gyōji* (Yoshiwara Picture-book: Annual Events [Annals of the Green Houses], of 1804).58

The titles of albums of *shunga*-e were even more colourfully allusive. They included *Ehon kiku no tsuyu* (Picture Book: Dew on the Chrysanthemum, 1786); the best known title, *Utamakura* (Dream of the Pillow, 1788); *Negai no ito-uchi* (Unravelling the Threads of Desire, 1799); *(Ehon) Toko no ume* (Picture Book: Plum of the Bedchamber, 1800); *Ehon Komachi-biki* (Picture Book: Pulling Komachi, 1802); and *(Ehon) Hana fubuki* (Picture Book: Flowers in Violent Bloom, 1802).

In some ways Utamaro’s view of brothel life was quite idealised. He focused very much on the pleasures this world offered to male clients of a certain social standing and financial substance. The actions of his figures are generally those of a willing engagement in the broad range of indulgences one could find there. The impassivity of the faces of his courtesans suggest a different aspect of the Yoshiwara however. Life there, even for the most sophisticated and highly regarded *tayū*, was hard, and the glamorous public face of prostitution was countered by a less visible, but all-pervasive, experience of debasement and exploitation. In other ways though, Utamaro’s representation of the Yoshiwara, of its habits and manners and its best known citizens, seems to be entirely consistent with what is known of life there at the time, not the least in his own congenial and non-judgmental attitudes towards the activities upon which its prosperity was founded. Perhaps the thing that distinguishes Utamaro’s own descriptions of, and participation in, the pleasures of the brothel quarters from the attitudes of the earliest European evaluations of his work was this quality of non-judgmentality. Where Utamaro’s representations are frank and
straightforward, the evaluation of his work by commentators like Fenollosa and Ficke were infected by disapproval, by the suspicion that artistic decadence amounted to evidence of moral decay. Such approbation is entirely inconsistent with the values of Utamaro’s time and world.

In the first place, prostitution in late eighteenth century Japan, and especially in its major cities, did not attract the sorts of disapproval it might today. A liberal attitude to sexual exchange seems to have existed from before the Nara period. Prostitution itself appears to have become common during the Heian period. At different times the profession even attracted women from dispossessed aristocratic families, or the nuns and female attendants of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. The first officially tolerated quarters built as a self-contained walled-in precinct was that established by Hara Saburōzaemon in Kyōto after 1589. The officially sanctioned brothels at Yoshiwara opened in 1618 and rapidly eclipsed the standards of the brothel quarters of all other cities:

Beginning its operation in the eleventh month of 1618, the Yoshiwara at first looked to Kyōto’s quarter for its manners and customs, for its tradition of shirabyōshi dancers and their cultured ways. In time, it created its own identity and its own lineage of celebrated courtesans. From 1618 to 1868, even with frequent natural disasters and periods of decline, its prosperity and fame were unparalleled among the pleasure quarters of Japan, making it the pride of Edo and the glory of Japan in the opinion of Edo period Japanese.

Isolated in a small walled-in world, assured of government protection and special privileges, the Yoshiwara developed a strong sense of pride in its identity. It nurtured its own unique customs, traditions, language, fashion – exotic even in Edo, which was itself quite different to the rest of Japan. Edoites were aware of the insular character of the Yoshiwara quarter, calling it ‘arinsu-koku’ (country of the arinsu language). Arinsu was a corruption of arimasu (‘there is’), a distinctive sentence-ending in the special dialect of Yoshiwara courtesans.

The activities of Yoshiwara were not just tolerated during Utamaro’s day, they were highly regarded. The highest ranking courtesans, despite public disapproval of their vocation, were extremely well-known, leading changes in fashions and manners, that affected people who had never seen the brothel world at first hand. The Yoshiwara became the central focus of the floating world. Its complex of protocols and customs demanded a comprehensive body of knowledge of all of its participants. They also provided the framework against which male visitors status as tsū or yabo might be judged. By coincidence it also provided the focus, by providing both subject matter for writers and premises for meetings, competitions or festivals, of the floating world literary circles. It generated the illustrated storybook genre of kibyōshi and a craze for the composition of kyōka, the so-called ‘crazy poems’ of thirty-one syllables. The composers of both forms were regular visitors – often well-known ‘stars’ – in the Yoshiwara.

While Utamaro’s representations of the women of the Yoshiwara seem idealised, and perhaps rather sanitised, they are consistent with what he would have encountered there. The ‘tea-parties’ he represented in the first and final prints of the Chūshingura mitate series are perfectly straightforward representations of the sorts of gathering Utamaro engaged in himself. The fashions he represented, even at their most extravagant, were those with which he was familiar – highly refined brocades whose richness played an important role in indicating the social and professional status of the wearer, and whose immense cost often contributed to the penurious position in which many courtesans found
themselves. The notion of display, in dress and behaviour, was most important in the
courtesan’s profession, and in this Utamaro’s depictions of courtesans on show in brothels,
or promenading in the streets of the Yoshiwara, reflect very public, if highly contrived,
protocols:

When a courtesan has a client, she dresses in a fine apparel of original design, for instance,
in the very popular dark purple silk covered with minute white tie-dye points, and she
parades to an ageya, kicking a foot outward at each step as in a figure-eight, holding her
shoulders straight and twisting her hips. A crowd of spectators watch her. From the
bordello to the ageya, it is scarcely a hundred and twenty yards, but the courtesan walks so
slowly and solemnly, it can take two hours on a long autumn day; the ageya proprietor has
a hard time appeasing a short-tempered patron.

But a procession can be the beginning of an important love affair, an opportunity
to impress and entice men. The courtesan arranges her clothing so that her red crepe de
chine undergarment will flip open to reveal a flash of white ankle, sometimes as high as
her calf or thigh. When men witness such a sight, they go insane and spend the money they
are associated with, even if it means literally losing their heads the next day. But most men
who stand on the street to watch the processions are lightweights who cannot afford to buy
these women; they only gape, envious of the men who can pay the courtesan’s price.

Similarly Utamaro’s representations of ornately constructed coiffures and carefully
selected combinations of richly coloured and patterned garments seem to be quite
consistent with the way these things were represented also in the literature of the floating
world. For the women of Yoshiwara, appearance was everything. The finest of
presentations could be marred irretrievably by the tiniest of flaws. When a group of Ihara
Saikaku’s male characters set out to conduct an informal beauty contest of passing women
they focus very much on qualities of appearance:

Next they spied a lady of thirty-four or thirty-five with a graceful long neck and intelligent-
looking eyes, above which could be seen a natural hairline of rare beauty. Her nose, it was
true, stood a little high, but that could easily be tolerated. Underneath she wore white satin,
over that light blue satin, and outside – reddish-yellow satin. Each of these garments was
luxuriously lined with the same material. On her left sleeve was a hand-painted likeness of
the Yoshida monk, along with his passage: ‘To sit alone under a lamp, and read old
books…’ Assuredly, this was a woman of exquisite taste.

Her sash was folded taffeta bearing a tile design. Around her head she had draped a
veil like that worn by court ladies; she wore stockings of pale silk and sandals with triple-
braided straps. She walked noiselessly and gracefully, moving her hips with a natural
rhythm. ‘What a prize for some lucky fellow!’ a young buck exclaimed. But these words
were hardly uttered when the lady, speaking to an attendant, opened her mouth and
disclosed that one of her lower teeth was missing, to the complete disillusionment of her
admirers.

Saikaku’s literary description of the well-presented woman verifies those of Utamaro,
though with the exception of one detail. By and large Utamaro’s representations of
Yoshiwara women are a celebration of their charms; indeed, ukiyo-e prints of identifiable
courtesans played a key role in their promotion. This being the case, few of his women
display even the slightest of flaws of the kind described in Saikaku’s portrait. Moles, scars,
wrinkles or squints are rarely found. With the exception of subtle suggestions of stray
strands of hair, Utamaro’s women, and especially their faces, necks and shoulders, are
perfect – highly stylised, carefully contrived, smooth-surfaced, gracefully contoured, blemish-free manifestations of ideal types.

The manifestation of Utamaro’s own sensuality in his representations of women is so intense as to provoke corresponding responses in his viewers:

I feel I scent, in facing Utamaro’s ladies, whether with no soul or with myriad souls…the rich-soft passionate odour of rare old roses; when I say I hear the silken-delicate summer breezes whining in the picture, I mean that the Japanese sensuousness (is it the scent or pang of a lilac or thorn?) makes my senses shiver at the last moment when it finally turns to spirituality.67

Noguchi Yone’s response to Utamaro’s pictures is unabashedly sensual in character, and as such, entirely consistent with the character of the pictures themselves. To view this as some kind of sensual decadence, or to simply assume Utamaro’s attitude as one of an undisciplined self-indulgence in sensual pleasures is, however, a simplification. His experience was more complex than this. His participation in the Yoshiwara was guided by the urbaneity, the coolness of detachment of the knowledgeable tsū. Consequently, Utamaro was able to manifest something of the flavour of iki in his representations of brothel life.

Most of the qualities that Kuki Shūzō described as the ‘natural’ and ‘artistic’ expressions of iki are evident in Utamaro’s works – indeed, of the handful of artists Kuki refers to in his explanation, Utamaro is the one who seems to exemplify this experience most successfully. A sense of iki is evident, for example, in the passivity, moderation, restraint or asymmetry of Utamaro’s figures – ‘…for the whole body the iki expression is that which lightly disorders posture.’68 It is equally present in the subtly contrived exposure of undergarments, in particular ‘…the scarlet underskirts of a woman wearing Akashi crepe…’69 and in poses and states of undress associated with the toilet or the bath. Kuki mentions here the series Fujōsōgaku juttai (Ten Figures for Studying the Form of Women).70 It appears also to be the reason for the elongation of the figure in Utamaro’s compositions:

The slender willow-waisted pose…Utamaro declared an almost fanatic conviction about this feature.71

Equally consistent with Kuki’s notion of iki are Utamaro’s slim, rather than round, faces, the sidelong and the downcast glance (iki favours disinteredness),72 light make-up, a subtle disarray of the coiffure, and the revelation of the nape of the neck.73 Gestures like ‘lifting a kimon skirt by the left hand’, little exposures of bare flesh, especially at the foot, ankle or shin, and the delicate ‘…nuances of lightly bending and curving hands’, are all clear evidence of the iki status of the women in Utamaro’s compositions.

Among Utamaro’s pictures there were some where the centre of gravity of the whole figure is located in a single hand. To go a step further, it is the hands, after the face, which express the character of an individual and speak of past physical experience.74

In a similar way Utamaro’s figures, or at least the fashions they wear, exemplify Kuki’s notion of the ‘artistic expression’ of iki. In clothing his courtesans in the most fashionable fabrics of the day, Utamaro inevitably settled on those designs that appealed strongly to Kuki, most particularly the:
parallel lines which run forever without meeting are the purest visual objectification of the relational. It is certainly no accident that the stripe, as design, is regarded as iki. Utamaro favours the vertical stripe and related patterns like the checkerboard arrangement for both male and female figures. The effect of the stripes is enhanced by choices of colour:

The relationship of pattern to colouring is formed either when the dyadic quality of pattern is expressed by colouring as well, through the contrast of two or three colours in different tones – or when different tones of a single colour, or a single colour in definite saturation, perform the role of providing a specific mood in relational opposition on the basis of pattern.

The subtlety of Kuki’s requirements of colour and pattern would seem to be inconsistent with the polychrome character of the nishiki-e, but Utamaro tempers the potential for over-elaborate colour design by achieving a fine integration of colour and pattern, and by selecting a single key colour, or ‘tonality’, which all other colours must relate to, for each composition. In the Chūshingura picture this colour is a light tea-brown; in Kaya it is olive green; in Yamauba the background is the plain unprinted buff of the paper. These choices are quite consistent with the quiet colours recommended by Kuki – lemon-brown, mouse grey, tea-brown, and variations of blackish-blue – coolish hues, quiet, and weakly saturated.

There does seem, however, to be one apparent inconsistency between the experience of iki and Utamaro’s representation of the women and habits of the Yoshiwara. In Kuki’s explanation, the experience of iki is generated by a sense of coquetry rising from the potential for relations between the sexes. Iki is lost in the consummation of sexual experience. With Harunobu this feeling of expectation or potential is precisely what is described. With Utamaro, on the other hand, the engagement between the sexes appears to be achieved quite frequently. The figure behind the screen in Kaya, for example, has very clearly only just left a sexual encounter.

Yet Utamaro’s compositions still convey much of the sense of iki that characterised his own experience of the brothel quarters. It is generated through the quiet impassivity and impersonality of his women in whom is registered a quality as essential to the experience of iki as bitai: the quality of akirame, or ‘brave resignation’: 

The third attribute of iki is resignation (akirame), an indifference which as renounced attachment and is based on knowledge of fate. Iki must be urbane. It must be a well-formed and elegant disposition with a good grace.

Utamaro’s women often appear somnolent, weary – world-weary. The long experience of brothel life of his courtesans and brothel habituées has carried them far beyond the immediacy of a single sexual encounter. They are distanced, unmoved, or at best quietly and rather sadly resigned to the conditions of their lives and their world. This sense of detached resignation is equally characteristic of Utamaro himself, evident both in his own urbane engagement in the sensual pleasures of Yoshiwara, and in the quiet detachment with which he observes and describes the activities of its participants.
A cursory glance through Hokusai’s oeuvre might suggest a preoccupation with play similar to Harunobu or Utamaro. His compositions often seem filled with activity, figures scurrying through landscapes, interacting in animated groups, engaging in all manner of recreations. In some instances play is what is represented in Hokusai’s pictures, but more frequently his figures are at work, as peasant farmers, peddlers, itinerants, shopkeepers, priests or pilgrims. The nearest he comes to recreation is when he represents groups of aristocrats in moon-viewing parties or rural expeditions.

Hokusai’s project was radically different from those of either of his predecessors, and more difficult to explain precisely. His oeuvre seems to reflect a temperament comprising two contradictory extremes: one of uncontained restlessness on the one hand, and one of a single-minded obsession with order and stability on the other. The restlessness seems to have manifested itself in both his life and his work from a very early stage. His own life was spent in a constant state of flux – he is known to have changed names more than fifty times, and to have resided in at least ninety-three different homes. Within his graphic enterprise it was evident in a dynamic and constantly readjusting focus that seems to reflect a spry, eclectic, endlessly inventive mind, thirsty for new challenges, new problems, new projects. This led Hokusai to explore the pictorial possibilities of a broader range of subjects than any earlier artist, and to experiment with a broader range of pictorial conventions or stylistic devices. His single-mindedness, on the other hand, is equally evident in his work. While investigating the potentials of a range of subjects, and developing one, landscape, to a level of popularity it had never previously enjoyed, Hokusai also refocused ukiyo-e attention on its original genre subject matter to a degree unmatched since Matabei. Throughout his constant changes of direction there are a handful of constants in Hokusai’s works, threads of thematic enquiry or conceptual preoccupations which manifested themselves at every stage of his career. Of these the most notable are his obsessions with the problem of pictorial spatial relations explored here earlier in Chapter 5, and the problem of time as it relates to pictures. Right at the heart of his concerns for pictorial space and time lay a lonely and deeply contemplative character that belied the superficial impression of nervous energy and restlessness his works sometimes suggest.

The regularity with which Hokusai changed his name provides tangible evidence of his restlessness. There was nothing unusual in Edo in the practice of changing names in itself – most artists did so several times throughout their careers. What is notable about Hokusai’s name-changes is their frequency, the confusions they generate, and the changes in his life and work as an artist that they represent. Hokusai’s name as a child was Kawamura Tokitarō; that as an apprentice block-cutter from 1774 – 1777, Nakajima Tetsuzō. By 1779 he had served long and well enough in the studio of Katsukawa Shunsō to be given the Katsukawa school name Shunrō, which he continued to use through 1794. During the same period, however, he is known also to have used the names Tokitarō (from 1780), Banri (1780 – 1782), Mari, or Mari-ko (1780 – 1782 – a hypothetical pseudonym), Korewasai (1781 – 1782), Zewasai (1781 – 1782), Gyobutsu (1782), Gumbatei (1785 – 94), Shishoku Gankō (c. 1788 – mid-1810s), possibly Kasamura Shinnō (1793 – 1794) and Magura Shunnō (1793). Between 1795 and 1798 he signed his works with variants of the nom-d’artiste Sōri – possibly Hyakurin Sōri and Tawaraya Sōri II or IV, and certainly Hokusai Sōri and Zen (previously) Sōri Hokusai between 1797 and 1798. He seems to have used Hokusai fairly consistently between 1797 and 1819, Kakō from 1798 – 1811, Gakyōjin between 1800 and 1808, and Tatsamusa Shinsei from 1799 to 1810. He used Gakyō-rōjin between 1805 and 1806 and from 1834 to 1849; he adopted...
Katsushika, the name of his home province, from 1807 to 1824; used Taitō from 1811 to 1820; Iitsu between 1820 and 1834; and Manji from 1831 to 1849. What is significant about these name changes is the way in which each change of art-identity represents a shift in pictorial preoccupation. Hokusai’s restlessness was reflected, particularly during the earlier years of his career, by a constantly shifting professional focus which was manifest in his membership of, or study of, a range of schools and masters. His name Shunrō, for example, besides denoting his membership of the Katsukawa school, defines a period when he worked mainly on actor prints and illustrations for kibyōshi; just as clearly, his loss of this name reflects his expulsion from the school around 1794. His use of other names during and directly after this period reflects different allegiances. Between 1793 and 1794, for example, Hokusai is believed to have studied under Kanō Yūsen and to have established short-lived relations with the Tosa, Tsutsumi and Sumiyoshi schools. From about 1793 Hokusai seems also to have studied under the Sōtatsu painter Tawaraya Sōri, and this interest is indicated in his adoption of the name Sōri, and its application in several variants, from 1795. During his ‘Sōri period’ his work is distinguished by more brush paintings, surimono and pictures for kyōka ehon.

Throughout the rest of his career Hokusai’s name changes continued to relate to major shifts of focus in his work. He used both Sōri and Kakō for early Chūshingura and courtesan series. The adoption of ‘Hokusai’, however, coincides with a shift in attention away from these subjects to the pictorial representation of landscape in early series such as Dōban Ōmi hakkei (Eight Copperplate Views of Lake Biwa, 1798 – 1800), Edo hakkei (Eight Views of Edo) and two untitled sets of prints in the western style published during 1799 and 1800. What is remarkable about these works is not just the novelty of their landscape subject but the employment of Chinese stylistic devices together with European-style perspectival conventions for the description of deep pictorial space. Hokusai continued to use this signature in subsequent years, both in landscape as subjects and in series in which the historical, poetic or genre subjects were represented in expansive landscape settings.

From the early 1820s Hokusai applied the signature Iitsu, initially, in several variants, in a number of historical, genre and floating world themes. The Hokusai Iitsu signature is, however, most notably associated with the major landscape and kacho-e print series of the late 1820s through the mid 1830s. The landscape series include some of Hokusai’s most ambitious projects – Fugaku sanjū-rokkei (Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, 1829 – 1833); Shokoku meikyō kiran (Wondrous Views of Bridges in All the Provinces, 1831 – 1832); Setsugekka (Snow, Moon, Flowers, c. 1832); Chie-no-umi (Oceans of Wisdom, c. 1832 – 1833); Shika shashin-kyō (A True Mirror of Chinese and Japanese Poems, c. 1932 – 1833). The kacho-e include an untitled series of ōban flower, bird and insect compositions published c. 1832 and a chūhan bird and flower series of 1832 to 1834, both published by Nishimura Yohachi (Eijūdō). Where the earlier ‘Hokusai’ landscapes were remarkable for their adaptation of western pictorial conventions, the ‘Iitsu’ pictures are notable for their drawing together characteristics of Western and yamato (Japanese) traditions, with an even stronger flavour of the kanga, or Chinese-style painting. Hokusai employed a different signature again, ‘Gakyō-rōjin manji’ – ‘Manji, old man mad about drawing’ – for his later publications in book format, including the Fugaku hyakkei (One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji, 1834 – 1835).
The restless, sometimes apparently fickle changes in Hokusai’s life manifest themselves also in rapid shifts in the stylistic character of his works.91 A diversity of interest characterises the early years, but throughout his mature career Hokusai’s attention became more closely focused on the exploration of three principal stylistic themes. The first of these was the application of western-style pictorial conventions for the representation of three-dimensional form and space. The second was the melding of earlier yamato-e conventions with those of ukiyo-e. The third was the re-development or re-application of the conventions and techniques of Chinese school painting.

The first of these interests led Hokusai to explore a range of conventions, including empirical perspective, shading to describe three-dimensional form, and cast shadows, and to try western ways of describing things like clouds or foliage that had previously been indicated using highly schematised devices. Where Nagasaki artists tended simply to imitate or copy European pictures, or where Hiroshige applied perspectival devices in a highly exaggerated fashion, Hokusai’s deployment of these strategies was achieved with great subtlety, in the mature works at least.92

While experimenting with western modes of representation, Hokusai continued to apply conventions adopted from earlier Japanese schools. The isometric architectural schematic of the Gishi yo-uchi scene of the 1806 Chūshingura series and the Tosa-derived cloud schema of Bushū Tamagawa were both still being employed in the final great, though incomplete, series Hyakunin isshu uba-ga-etoki (The Hundred Poems of the Hundred Poets, Explained by the Nurse).

The exploration of older Chinese modes led Hokusai to adopt a number of pictorial devices – the stacked compositional principal employed in the Mountain Landscape in the Chinese Style, for example, together with its exaggerated variations in linear quality – but it is most clearly evident in Hokusai’s understanding of Chinese modes of modulating the relations of tonal value, or nōtan. Fenollosa acknowledged in Hokusai the

…raising of nōtan, or light and dark mass, to the leading element of the composition and the blending of this in extraordinary broad tones by his adopted scheme of colours…This solemn breadth of colour-nōtan is the triumph of the close of Hokusai’s career.93

Diversity of stylistic investigation in Hokusai’s work is accompanied by an engagement with a corresponding variety of pictorial subject. Like Hiroshige, Hokusai’s popular reputation seems to be founded largely on his essays in landscape, and indeed, this constitutes an important and innovative field in his work. Throughout his career Hokusai developed compositions for almost every subject category in (and sometimes outside) the ukiyo-e repertoire. His early projects found him representing both actors and courtesans, for example, together with courtesans and local views. He illustrated literary and historical series – most notably, given his own claims, for Chūshingura.94 These sets of prints portrayed the heroes of both Chinese and Japanese histories. He drew birds and animals, an array of flora, urban, and especially rural, landscapes, poetic themes, and set piece subject groups like ‘snow, moon, flowers’. In the manga he illustrates all of these subjects and adds more: countless studies of single figures and figure groups, at work, at play, active or at rest; architectural studies, including detailed diagrams of structural systems; technical diagrams including explanations of machines and of drawing conventions for perspective; and grotesquers, including superstitious and fantastic scenes. Some subjects, notably landscape and historical themes, were to dominate Hokusai’s oeuvre, but the central
importance of even these subjects was tempered by Hokusai’s habit of combining them with others. The landscapes, for example, are regularly used as settings for genre scenes, and his historical and literary figures are frequently less important than the picturesque landscapes in which they are placed.

Hokusai’s magpie-like mind embraced this immense range of subjects more enthusiastically, and integrated them in multi-subject compositions more coherently, than any other ukiyo-e artist. In a similar way, where other artists specialised in one or two pictorial formats, Hokusai seems to have explored the whole field. Though for obvious reasons he tended to favour the horizontal ōban format for his landscape and landscape/genre combinations, he also worked in the smaller chūban, in koban, aiban, hosoban, tate-banko ōban, nagaban and double-aiban formats and the full range of surimono sizes. Hokusai chose to rationalise his huge output by working in serial form, again stretching the conventions for size and subject further than any of his contemporaries. He also illustrated a staggering number of written volumes, some of which he is known to have penned himself, providing designs for the popular kibyōshi, yomihon and etehon forms and for albums of shunga-e.

The orthodox view of Hokusai is founded in this variety and diversity of his projects – it is the self-styled concept of an ‘old man crazy about drawing’; but this view explains only one, admittedly complex, aspect of Hokusai and his art interests. Disparate though his oeuvre may have been, however erratic or capricious the shifts in his attention might appear, some antidote to Hokusai’s fitful vacillations can be located in the continuities that ran throughout his life. The first, and most obvious, of these was simply his commitment to art. This may seem self-evident, as to an extent it is, but in Hokusai’s case the commitment was exceptional. His productive career lasted from his late teens to the end of his life – seventy years. His output was prodigious – Matthis Forrer claims more than thirty-thousand works. Hokusai pursued his vocation despite facing increasing privation. He appears, by all accounts, to have been insensible to his surroundings, living in squalor in the most humble of accommodations, and, despite the income he must have received for his commissioned designs, in relative penury:

...in the winter of 1830 he wrote to his publisher Hanabusaya Heikichi claiming that, ‘This month, I have no money, no clothing, no food. If this continues for another month, I will not live to see the spring…’

Hokusai’s commitment to art seems to have been made at the expense of every other consideration, including the stability of his personal relationships.

One mainstream thread of continuity in Hokusai’s work is his sustained investigation into the qualities and conditions of his medium. In the woodblock prints this is especially evident in the surimono, in which Hokusai embraces, and applies with great subtlety, the whole repertoire of technical invention upon which the finest printers were able to draw. It is apparent also in the Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, in which Hokusai adopted the then novel Prussian Blue pigment, overprinting transparent layers of the same colour to achieve the subtlest of colour variations. It is most evident of all in the sustained investigation into complex spatial problems described in Chapter 5.

There is one further, though more elusive thread of investigation in Hokusai’s project: an obsessive preoccupation with time. This problem is manifest in Hokusai’s
works in different, and sometimes contradictory, ways. In one instance a consciousness of time is evident in his representations of pictures as ‘frozen moments of time’. In one picture the movement of a bird’s wing is caught, crystal clear, as a single moment; in another the gesture of a figure is glimpsed, mid-step, or turning and twisting toward or away from the viewer in a single instant; in another the complex dynamism of galloping horses is caught precisely; in still another a cresting wave is poised, momentarily, right on the point of bursting over its fragile human travellers. In the manga he has included a host of figure studies, momentary and intimate glimpses of figures in every position, seen from every angle, performing a broad variety of actions and activities, each one caught as if by the shutter of a camera or the blink of an eye. At precisely the same time, however, and often in exactly the same composition, Hokusai occupies himself with subjects that would have been considered by his contemporaries to be timeless. This is especially the case with themes of the land, and particularly those of the countryside rather than the city. He represented the slow-paced time of rural occupations – farming, village crafts, Tokaidō travellers, sages and poets, pilgrims and roadside prostitutes, as a world in which time has come to rest. To all intents and purposes for Hokusai’s Edo audiences at least, this was a bygone world. The distant, and usually raised, viewpoint he employs in landscapes like Bushū Tamagawa serves to emphasise the sense of detachment experienced by the viewer.

Hokusai’s preoccupation with stillness, with even the suspension of time, is suggested in his work in several ways. Most notably his investigations into themes from the past, and particularly into artistic traditions and conventions of Chinese origin, and the ways these could be melded with those of Japanese device, and his interest – what amounted in his later years to an obsession – with longevity or even immortality, reveal an ongoing preoccupation with time.

Hokusai’s representation of subjects concerned with the past included those rural views with genre scenes of peasants at work which, though they still existed throughout other parts of Japan, were considered by many Edoites to be part of their own past, viewed, at best, with nostalgia, more likely with some distain. They also included many of the subjects designed to accompany the kyōka that were themselves re-workings of earlier verses, and for surimono designed to mark the passing of time (as calendars for example), or to commemorate an important occasion. They included the illustration of verses from the past, themes symbolic of change – the passage of the four seasons was a recurrent theme – age old themes like ‘The Fashionable Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove’ (Shōfūdai shichi ken) or variations on themes like ‘Six Famous Poets’ (Rokkasen no uchi) or ‘The Seven Komachi’ (Nana Komachi). Indeed, historical, and in particular historical/poetic themes of both Chinese and Japanese traditions, occupied Hokusai from early in his career, through his maturity (witness Shika shashin-kyō – A True Mirror of Chinese and Japanese Poems, c. 1832 – 1833, which included representations of the Chinese poets Tōru and Li Po and the calligrapher Toba) to his very last major project, The One Hundred Poems by the One Hundred Poets, Explained by the Nurse.

His preoccupation with the past is even more conspicuous in his transposition of a range of subjects and pictorial devices from a range of earlier Chinese contexts into that of nineteenth-century Edo. In one sense Hokusai’s interest in Chinese traditions manifested itself simply in the adoption of Chinese stylistic conventions – Nagata Seiji cites the ink-brushed foreground and the distant mountain zone in the painting Shiohi-gari (Gathering Shellfish at Ebb-tide) as an example. In others whole compositions are modelled on Chinese precedents – his kacho-e and other studies from nature being founded on
precedents set out in Li Yu’s *Mustard Seed Garden* and Hu Cheng-yen’s *Ten Bamboo Studio*, both texts widely available in Japan and of seminal importance in the development of formal conventions for the representation of scenes from the natural world. The compositional conventions he learned from Chinese sourced texts was enhanced by the assimilation of late Ming trends to representational realism, shallow pictorial depth, and ‘boneless’ (without outline) painting style which had been introduced into Tokugawa Japan by visiting scholar-painters like Shen Ch’uan. Not only were his nature pictures modelled on the pictorial formats of Chinese precursors but they frequently contained allusions to Chinese themes. One of the ‘Large Flower Prints’, for example, *Botan ni kochō (Peonies With Butterfly)* carries ‘…an allusion to the ancient Chinese story “The Butterfly Dream” associated with the philosopher Zhuang-zi.’

Throughout his long career Hokusai was contracted to illustrate a huge number of books, and these included many on Chinese themes, including, in 1833, five volumes of a translation of Chinese T’ang poetry (*Ehon tōshisen*) and the *Illustrated Senji-mon (Chinese Poem of 1,000 Characters – Ehon Senji mon)*. Earlier, in 1805, he had begun the illustration of a ninety-one volume translation of the Chinese novel *Shimpen suiko-gaden (The New Illustrated Shuihuchuan)*, an enormous project that occupied him until 1838. In addition, Hokusai was repeatedly involved in projects that obliged him to illustrate Chinese themes, persona, or poetic preoccupations.

This sustained investigation of Chinese modes, and their absorption into his own oeuvre, was not only a matter of, and not confined to, representation of Chinese themes and subjects. Hokusai easily embraced Chinese pictorial devices, particularly those for the articulation of subtle relations of nōtan, and for the construction of pictorial spaces, not just in Chinese-style landscapes, but in his representations of the Japanese scenes as well. A mainstream preoccupation throughout Hokusai’s career seems to be the resurrection of classical conventions and for their seamless synthesis with Japanese, and sometimes Western, conventions, most successfully crystallised in *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*.

There it can be identified in the landscape subject focus, in a colour range reduced to a simple cool/warm relation, in a shallow space pictorial composition constructed of stacked bands or zones, and above all in the soft modulation of nōtan that echoes the delicate tonal subtleties of old Chinese ink painting.

Hokusai gives a clue to his obsession with time and longevity in his colophon to the first volume of *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji* – ‘…at one hundred years I will have achieved a divine state in my art, and at one hundred and ten, every dot and stroke will be as though alive.’ Henry Smith argues that really Hokusai’s central intention for this series lay in his own dreams of immortality:

…his effort to capture the great mountain from every angle, in every context, was in the deepest sense a prayer for the gift of immortality that lay hidden within the heart of the volcano. By showing life itself in all its shifting forms against the unchanging form of Fuji, with the vitality and wit that inform every page of the book, he sought not only to prolong his own life but in the end to gain admission to the realm of Immortals.

Smith’s assertion of Hokusai’s ambition to become an Immortal of Painting (*gashinsen*) may seem fanciful, but he does explain the Taoist ‘…belief in Fuji as a source for the secret of immortality’ in a ‘folk etymology of Fuji as “not death” (fu-shí), hence immortal’ sourced in the ninth-century *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, and sustained in the nō play *Fujisan*:
Thus from an early time, Mt. Fuji was seen as the source of the secret of immortality, a tradition that was at the heart of Hokusai’s own obsession with the mountain. Although none of Hokusai’s views specifically depict this tradition, it is in effect his hidden agenda. Proof that others understood this is to be found in the preface to the third and last volume of the *One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji*, where the author speculates that Hokusai at the age of ninety had indeed discovered the famed elixir on the summit of the mountain.\textsuperscript{107}

Certainly Hokusai had represented Fuji repeatedly, sometimes almost obsessively, in earlier series of prints. In one *surimono* from between 1800 and 1805 he depicted the mountain, symbol of longevity, thrusting upward through a broad thickly layered cloud of white, pink and deep pink clusters of cherry blossom, symbol of the sweetness, beauty and inevitable brevity of life. Hokusai’s aspiration to immortality may seem far-fetched, but he was deeply concerned with time and seems able, in his finest works, to regulate one’s experience of it. He manages this in several ways. In the first place the apprehension of Hokusai’s compositions forces, quite literally, the experience of time for the viewer:

...through the process by which a painting impinges on us, or rather recreates itself within us. Our awareness of a work of art evolves in time. In order to coincide utterly with the act of vision, the mind needs time – as it encounters obstacles, interprets, rejects, then repudiates or transcends its rejection, a certain lapse of time is necessary if the painter’s essential proposition is to be resurrected in us, as a way of being to which we eventually give our consent.\textsuperscript{108}

Just as it took Harunobu’s audiences time to take up and contemplate the various associations each of his pictures provoked, it took time to respond to those of Hokusai. His landscape and landscape/genre combinations are not easily apprehended in the open and straightforward way that those of Kuniyasu (Plate 7), Kunisato (Plate 8), or Kunichika (Plate 33) are. It takes time to work one’s way through a composition like *Bushū Tamagawa*, to negotiate one’s way from the little genre scene at the bottom, along the shore and across the almost tangibly broad expanse of the water, upwards, and, implicitly, backwards through the mist to the mountain beyond. It takes time to find one’s way through the apparent dislocation between the picture’s implicit depth and its actual flatness, and to register the sense of stillness he has contrived there. This state of stillness, combined with the sense of loneliness generated through the relations of scale between the figures and the landscape, encourage a deeply contemplative response in Hokusai’s viewers. This process, and the associated experience of time, is prolonged even further in Hokusai when prints like *Bushū Tamagawa* are encountered in relation to the much larger serial group of which they are a part.

The slowed, even suspended, experience of time is provoked most of all by one’s intimate experience of the complex tensions Hokusai has articulated in his compositions. The state of stillness one experiences in the pictures is generated through the apprehension of spatial tension, between deep and shallow and flat; between the finite and the expansive; the open and closed space. It is complemented by the temporal tensions he manipulates, between representations of ‘old’ Japan and the ‘new’ environs of Edo; between classical Chinese conventions and the contemporary ones of *ukiyo-e*. Hokusai’s ability to manage the finely wrought relations between all of these forces required of him a certain detachment from the world he represented, and this was, perhaps, one of the reasons why, in his landscapes, his poetic or his historical subjects he concentrated on representing worlds other than, or beyond, his own immediate surroundings – literally forcing his own
distance from his pictorial subject. An intimate experience of these relations requires a corresponding sense of stillness, detachment and contemplative absorption of the viewer.

A literary parallel for the still detachment of Hokusai’s images can be located in the work, a century earlier, of the poet traveller Bashō. Both men were restless wanderers, and, despite the apparent conviviality of their works, their oeuvres are underscored by a strong sense of loneliness and the contemplative. A sense of loneliness is evoked in Hokusai’s images by the recurrent motif of the lone traveller or pilgrim, and by the relations of scale between diminutive figures and expansive landscape. In Bashō it is the central concern of his principal texts – the journey, apparently without pragmatic reason, of the lone traveller. The image of the lone traveller was all the more poignant in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan when one considers that then, as today, travelling alone was most unusual.

Like Hokusai, Bashō sought to meld classical Chinese conventions with contemporary Japanese experience.

Bashō’s haikai…looked to the past for inspiration and authority and yet rejected it…parodied the classical (and Chinese) traditions even as they sought to become part of it, and…paid homage to the ‘ancients’ and yet stressed newness.

Like Hokusai, Bashō managed to convey something of the ‘quiet and meditative loneliness’ of sabi and the transcendence of time in his spare descriptions of his own experiences of the seventeenth-century Japanese hinterland:

-Alone, I travelled deep into the hills of Yoshino, where the mountains were high, the white clouds covered the peaks, and the smoky rain buried the valley. Here and there were the small houses of the woodcutters: the sound of a tree being cut in the west echoed in the east; the sound of the temple bells sunk deep into the heart. Many of those, who, from the distant past, have entered these hills, leaving the world behind, took refuge in Chinese and Japanese poetry. Indeed, it would be correct to call this Mount Lu in China.

-Lodging for a night at a temple inn.

-Strike the fulling block

-Let me hear it!

-Temple mistress.

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1 Both ‘conditioned by’ and determined by’ need qualification. By conditioning here I do not mean a simple causal relation – ‘x outside circumstance causes a particular and recognisable outcome in the artist’s work.’ Artists act in more complex ways than this. Hokusai learned about art from a broad range of sources; these sources did not just manifest their presence in his art, or cause him to work in a particular way. He picked through some and made decisions; he rejected some, and others he absorbed into his project, consciously or otherwise, through long years of familiarity and these were then melded together with inventions of his own device, and modified according to the conditions within which he worked. By determination I do not mean anything as simple as the artist making pictorial decisions which immediately become manifest in completed works, in some kind of isolation from other forces – artists are affected, in one way or another, by a range of factors in their own lives, or in their own worlds, some of which may infect their artistic decisions or enterprises, others of which may not. As Michael Baxandall puts it: ‘But the forms…are not determined by the circumstances, in any sustainable sense. If it were ever possible to assemble them, the circumstances would be seen to make up a vast repertory of alternative stimulations and suggestions offered by an environment to an artist; he in turn would be seen to respond to some, deny others, draw yet others out of some quite different subjective resource, and combine all into a sum and order peculiar to himself. Forms

2 By ‘intention’ here I do not mean to imply a simple relation, idea > realisation or thought > picture. I acknowledge that artists produce works within complex contextual relations in which one, several, or many intentions for their works are in a fairly constant state of flux, changing, multiplying, accruing, simplifying, sometimes even during the development of a single work, and certainly during the evolutionary exploration of a longer term project. I use the term here only in the very broadest sense of something originating with the artist or the world in which the artist is acting manifesting itself in the artist’s working procedure or the works through some sense of purpose. The issue of intention is a problem in itself. Since intentions are rarely voiced, and explanations would inevitably simplify complex and subtly acting forces, it may seem impossible to identify them with any precision or determine how they relate to outcomes. Nevertheless, artists go to work, and the artworks that audiences encounter are generally the evidence of their enterprises. Michael Baxandall prefers to frame the relation as ‘a construct descriptive of a relationship between a picture and its circumstances’. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 42. By ‘intention’ here I do not mean to imply a simple relation, idea > realisation or thought > picture. I acknowledge that artists produce works within complex contextual relations in which one, several, or many intentions for their works are in a fairly constant state of flux, changing, multiplying, accruing, simplifying, sometimes even during the development of a single work, and certainly during the evolutionary exploration of a longer term project.

3 Michael Baxandall confronts the problem of legitimacy in making explanations about pictures. He suggests three measures for legitimacy: ‘…I think of these as external decorum, internal decorum, and parsimony; but you will prefer me to refer to them as (historical) legitimacy, (pictorial and expositive) order, and (critical) necessity or fertility.’ Baxandall, 1985, p. 120. In the first, understanding must be consistent with one’s knowledge of the cultural context of the works, to other pictures in the artist’s oeuvre, or other works of the same genre. In the second, understanding must be consistent with the ‘internal organisation’ of the work – in this ‘…the explanation positing the more complete and embracing order is preferable’ (Baxandall, 1985, p. 121). In the third, they must be consistent with the facts of the art work.

4 By most counts, Harunobu is believed to have completed more than six hundred prints during the five fruitful last years of his career (1765 – 1770) – a definitive count is made difficult by the number of unsigned works, and the number of works signed ‘Harunobu gā’, but actually drawn by his successor Shiba Kōkan. The work from this period of Harunobu’s career is remarkably consistent, in terms of the subjects he chose to represent, and the pictorial problems that occupied him throughout this period. In the years leading up to this period however only about forty images appear to have survived, and these works are marked by a diversity of subject and stylistic character.


6 David Waterhouse, *Harunobu and His Age: The Development of Colour Printing in Japan*, London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1964, plate 25 and pp. 90 – 91. This work should be differentiated from other versions of the same subject in which this allusion is not made – see Waterhouse, pp. 88 – 89.

7 The lists that follow have been compiled from observation of a comprehensive range of Harunobu prints from the following sources: Lubor Hajek, *Harunobu*, London: Spring Books, n. d.


12 Clark, 1997, p. 17.


15 Waterhouse’s translation, Waterhouse, 1964, p. 82. My own preference would be ‘Seven Fashionable Komachi’.

Waterhouse, 1964, pp. 84 – 85.


‘According to Shin zōho UR, he died in Meiwa 7 (1770), 6th month, 15th day. According to Sekine (1894) he was 53, according to Sekine (1899) he was 46 when he died. Shiba Kōkan’s Shinparō hikki (written 1811; 1st pub. 1892) says “he suddenly fell ill and died, when he was not much over 40”. None of this can be verified from Harunobu’s tombstone, which has not been found, but from what we know of his work, 1770 seems correct for his death, and Sekine’s revised estimate of his age gives 1725 (by Japanese reckoning) as the putative year of his birth. Family name: Hozumi; personal name: Jihei. Art family name: Suzuki; other art names: Shikojin, Chōeikin; some seals reading Masaharu. UR makes him a pupil of Shigenaga, but Yoshida doubts this. He lived at the corner of Yonezawa-cho, Ryōgoku (according to UR) or in Shirakabe-chō, Kanda (according to Morishima) Waterhouse, 1964, pp. 30 – 31. The date of Harunobu’s death was recorded by Ōta Nampo. David Waterhouse, ‘New Light on the Life and Work of Suzuki Harunobu’, Impressions, Spring 1981, p. 6.


Waterhouse, 1981.


Pflugfelder, 1999, pp. 97 – 145. Though, as Gary Leupp explains, the attitudes of the authorities could be equivocal, depending on who was engaging in such practices, under what conditions, and where. Leupp, 1995, pp. 145 – 170.


Morris, 1964, p. 159.


Greenberg, 1946, p. 87.


One eighteenth-century account suggests ‘34 percent of all male and 10 percent of all female population could read and write, showing a higher rate of literacy than that of contemporary England’. Shimizu, 1991, p. 13.

Swinton, 1995, p. 72.

Swinton, 1995, p. 76.

Utamaro has identified himself here in two ways. Firstly, by the inclusion of the characters for uta and maro on his jacket; secondly by the inscription above his head: ‘By request Utamaro draws his own ravishing features’. Hartley, 1997, p. 71.

Kondo Ichitaro, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 – 1806), Rutland, Vermont; Tōkyō, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1956, unpaginated.

The most reliable contemporary record states: ‘Kitagawa Utamaro, personal name Yūsuke: Originally studied in the style of the Kanō school as a disciple of Toriyama Sekien. Later he did paintings depicting the styles and manners of men and women. He lived temporarily with Tsutaya Jūzaburō, the picture book seller [ezōshiya]. He presently lives in Benkeibashi, Edo. Mainly, he produces nishi-e.’ Kimura Mokurō (1774 –


48 Clark, Asano and Clark, 1995, Vol., I, p. 39. Tsutaya Jūzaburō was listed there also as ‘Tsuta no karamaru’—‘Entwined in Vines’, and Santō Kyōden as ‘Migaru no Orisuke’—‘Lightfooted Lackey’.


52 Jippsensha Ikku and Utamaro, (Seirō ehon) Nenjū Gyōji (Yoshiwara Picture Book: Annual Events, or Annals of the Green Houses, Vol., 2, final illustration: Shōho hari-tsuke saikō zu (Adding the Colours to an Inferior Painting in a House of Pleasure)). The artist depicted is not named on the print. The argument for identifying him as Utamaro is in Hillier, 1961, p. 144.


54 Kondo Ichitaro, 1956, unpaginated. Hillier notes the same portrait, but questions its authenticity as a portrait of Utamaro; Hillier, 1961, p. 147.


60 Seigle, 1993, pp. 6–7.


63 Seigle, 1993, pp. 129–168.

64 Ihara Saikaku, in Saikaku and Isogai Sutekawa, *Shin-Yoshiwara Tsunenegusa (Perennial Grass of the New Yoshiwara)*, 1689, Teihon Saikaku zenshū, Vol., 6, 1:253, Seigle, p. 77


66 Allowing for the fact that, though Saikaku’s portrait seems quite consistent with what is verified elsewhere about the standards of the day, it is a work of fiction.


68 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 73.

69 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 75.

70 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 75.

71 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 76.

72 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 92. ‘To manifest iki, disinteredness and purposelessness must be expressed on the basis of the visual sense.’

73 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, pp. 77–81.

74 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 83.

75 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 87.

76 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, pp. 95–96.


78 Kuki Shūzō, 1930, p. 41.

79 This should not imply that play needs to be frivolous – ‘We can identify two aspects of *asobi* from the *Kojiki* account, one is festive, humorous, even frivolous and the other is serious, disciplined, at its most extreme a form of asceticism’. The latter seems particularly appropriate with Hokusai. Rupert Cox, ‘Is There a Japanese Way of Playing?’ in Joy Hendry, Massimo Raveri, *Japan at Play: The ludic and the logic of power*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 171.


81 ‘In Japan, (a name) has to keep pace with and express the changeableness of a human being, the boy has one name, the growing man another, another is required when he changes his style, and a last and abiding one is only bestowed on him when he is dead. It must be admitted that Hokusai showed uncommon licence in this respect, and allowed himself more art names than any other artist, but even in that fact we can see a reflection
of the dynamism and caprice that led to his frequent changes of style, the varying allegiances, the need to try
every side-track rather than keep to the middle of the road. But for collectors and others interested in the art-
history of the period, the changes of name often led to a confusion, which is made worse – confounded by the
practice of bestowing discarded art-names on pupils, who thereafter bedevil all attempts accurately to
identify and classify the master’s works. On three occasions in his life at least, Hokusai passed on outlived
names, in 1799, Sōri, in 1800, Shinsai, and at some unknown date but about 1820, Taitō, and prints under
each signature have become the centre of minor controversy as to which are Hokusai’s, which are the pupils.’
Hillier, 1957, p. 22.
83 Lane, 1978, p. 255. Lane includes thirty-three of Hokusai’s principal pen-names. Others include variants,
often using qualifications like ‘zen’ (previously, formerly) to distinguish a new identity from its predecessor.
See also Richard Lane, Hokusai: Life and Work, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1989, p. 278
84 Lane, p. 255; Hillier, p. 25.
85 Lane, p. 255.
86 Yoko Woodson, ‘Hokusai and Hiroshige: Landscape Prints of the Ukiyo-e School’, Julia M. White, Reiko
Mochinaga Brandon, Yoko Woodson, Hokusai and Hiroshige: Great Japanese Prints From the James A.
Michener Collection, Honolulu Academy of Arts, San Francisco: The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,
87 Forrer, 1991, p. 13. Forrer suggests Hokusai’s engagement with Tawaraya Sōri was the reason for his
expulsion from the Katsukawa school.
89 ‘Stylistically, he abandoned the Sōri manner and developed a unique style strongly influenced by kanga
(Chinese-style painting) techniques; this tendency continued until around 1809, during which period he also
produced large numbers of western-style landscapes’ … Nagata Seiji, 1995, p. 16.
90 These included Katsushikaitsu hitso, Hokusai Taitō aratame Katsushikaitsu hitso, Fusenkyoitsu hitso,
Katsushikanoyayajitsu hitso, Hokusairatameitsu hitso, Getchi-röjinitsu hitso, Zen Hokusaiitsu hitso.
91 The close correspondence between changes of name and pictorial or stylistic interest was so marked as to
have encouraged several commentators (Hillier, 1957, for example) to frame their surveys of Hokusai’s
oeuvre within the structure established by these name changes.
92 Michael Sullivan acknowledges Hokusai’s investigation of western conventions, but notes that it is very
easy to overstate their importance in his work. On the contrary, Sullivan argues ‘…there is singularly little in
his large corpus of drawings, and prints made from his sketchbooks…that shows much curiosity about
western art. Where Hokusai does use western-style perspective, it is used playfully and has subordinate status
to Japanese conventions’. Michael Sullivan, The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art From the Sixteenth
93 Fenollosa, in Hillier, 1957, p. 98.
94 The wife of Hokusai’s adoptive mother, wife of Nakajimais, was believed to have descended from one of
the forty-seven loyal retainers, so Hokusai had some personal claim to interest in this subject.
95 Hokusai was born in 1760 and died in 1849. His age at death by the Japanese count, which begins one year
prior to birth, would therefore have been ninety years.
96 ‘His production was enormous, amounting to over 3,500 designs for prints alone, plus illustrations to over
250 books (many in more than one volume) and a considerable number of paintings; he must have worked
97 Forrer, 1991, p. 32.
98 The nostalgia implicit in this recreation of a bucolic ideal for the new urban audiences has its modern day
counterpart in the muraokoshi movement in which rural and village environments are re-invigorated, re-
constructed and re-defined, partly to re-animate the economic productivity of the hinterland through the
tourist trade, but partly also as a broader process of reconstruction of cultural identity. See Okpyo Moon,
The Countryside Reinvented for Urban Tourists: Rural Transformation in the Japanese Muraokoshi
– 16.
100 It is most unlikely that Hokusai could have met any of these visitors at first hand – their residencies were
confined to the port of Nagasaki: ‘The third wave of Chinese influence in Japan took place during the Edo
period (1600 – 1868). As it did not affect the totality of culture as completely as had the earlier cultural
borrowings, it has not been as thoroughly studied, but it nonetheless caused major repercussions in Japanese
art. Fundamental to this wave of influence was the Tokugawa government’s decision to rely on neo-
Confucianism rather than Buddhism or Shintō as an official way of thought. Despite the limitations imposed by the Shōgunate on foreigners Japan (Chinese were limited to the port city of Nagasaki), Chinese philosophy, ethics, history, and eventually literati arts became studied and practiced. Stephen Addiss ed., *Japanese Quest for a New Vision: The Impact of Visiting Chinese Painters, 1600 – 1900; Selections From the Hutchinson Collection at the Spencer Museum of Art*, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1986, p. 47.


102 This was unusual for the time, and was considered unorthodox even in works by other artists thirty years later. Stephen Addiss et al describe the novelty of this melding of conventions in a painting, *Misty Landscape*, of 1878 by the Chinese painter Wang Yin: ‘The overall composition of this work shows that Wang Yin used the three-part spatial formula which divides the painting surface into foreground, middleground and background as developed by the Yuan masters.’ That the artist himself saw this as unusual is evident in his own inscription to the painting: ‘…consigning my feelings to the brush and silk without concerning myself with the opinions of connoisseurs.’ Addiss, 1986, p. 103.


109 ‘For Japanese, travelling is a collective activity. It does not mean there have been no individual trips. There were also people who travelled alone and such journeys were charged with heavy sentimentalism. But, one may say that the very fact that special sentiments accompanied an act of travelling alone means that such an act is unusual (in Japanese culture). Travelling alone without specific destination is a form of journey that can be traced back to Bashō and Shaigyō in the past. It may be a pattern that is perhaps envied by many Japanese but that is still considered odd when it comes to oneself practising it. Most of us travel in groups or with groups at the back of our minds.’ Kato Hidetoshi, in Okpyo Moon, 2002, pp. 230–231.

110 ‘…Bashō sought out the spiritual and the poetic in seventeenth century every day, commoner culture, endowing contemporary language and topics, particularly those drawn from provincial life, with the kind of nuances and sentiments hitherto found only in classical or Chinese poetry.’ Shirane Haruo, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory and the Poetry of Bashō*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 12.

111 Shirane Haruo, 1998, p. 29


113 Shirane Haruo, 1998, p. 74. The fulling block is the wooden block on which cotton fibre is neated with mallets.
PLATES
Plate 1. Kitagawa Utamaro
*The Courtesan Tomimoto Toyohina as Kaoyo*
Act 1 from the series *Komei bijin mitate Chūshingura, junimai Tsuzuki* (*The Chūshingura Drama Parodied by Famous Beauties*)
c. 1795
ōban woodblock print
signed: Utamaro *hitsu*
publisher: Ōmiyo Gonkurō
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Overleaf:
Plate 2. Anonymous
_Hikone-byōbu (The Hikone Screen)_
upper: left hand panels
lower: right hand panels
c. 1620s – 1640s
assembled: 94.6 cm x 274.8 cm
six panels (originally connected in screen format)
ink, colour and gold leaf on paper
Hikone Castle Museum, Shiga National Treasure
Plate 3. Ryūryūkyō Shinsai
Awabi (Abalone, or Ear Shell) from the series of thirty-six small surimono Kasen awase (The Latter Group of Thirty-six Poem Shells)
1809
surimono woodblock print (21.5 cm x 18.1 cm)
published for the Yomo Group
signed: Shinsai
private collection
Plate 4. Katsukawa Shuntei

*Tomomori and the Anchor*

c. 1800

*aiban* woodblock print

signed: Shuntei *ga*

private collection
Plate 5. Hosoda Eishō

*Two Courtesans*

1790s

*chūban* woodblock print

signed: Eishō *ga*

publisher: Iwato-ya Kisaburō Eirindō

private collection
Plate 6. Kitagawa Utamaro

*Mitate Yamauba to Kintaro (Parody of Yamauba and Kintaro)*

1795 - 1796

ōban woodblock print

signed: Utamaro *hitsu*

private collection
Plate 7. Utagawa Kuniyasu

*Courtesan*

1818 - 1830

ōban woodblock print

signed: Kuniyasu *hitsu*

publisher: Yamamotoya Heikichi

private collection
Plate 8. Utagawa Kunisato
*Two kabuki actors*
1857
ōban woodblock print
signed: Utagawa Kunisato *ga*
publisher: Senichi
private collection
Plate 9. Katsukawa Shunei
*Samurai on horseback*
early 1790s
*aiban* woodblock print
signed: Shunei *ga*
publisher: Nishimura-ya Yohachi
private collection
Plate 10. The Kambun Master

Samurai on Horseback

ca. mid 1660s (early – mid Kambun period)

sumizuri-e woodblock print

ōban

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
Plate 11. Utagawa Toyokuni
Page from *Yakusha nigao hayageiko (Quick Instruction in the Drawing of Actor Likenesses)*
1817
woodblock book illustration
Trustees of the British Museum
Plate 12. Watanabe Seitei

*Seitei kachō gafu* (*Seitei’s Drawing Book of Flowers and Birds*)
1890
woodblock printed book
facing pages 27/28
signed: *han*
private collection
Plate 13. Utagawa Yoshiiku

Geisha Ariwara at Inamotoro (Summer in Yoshiwara)

1869

ōban woodblock print

signed: Utagawa Yoshiiku fude

private collection
Plate 14. Utagawa Kunisada
Ichikawa Danjuro VII (Ebizō)
c. 1832
ōban woodblock print
signed: Kōchorō Kunisada ga
private collection
Plate 15. Utagawa Kunisada
*Two actors in role*
1855
ōban woodblock print
signed: Toyokuni *ga*
private collection
Plate 16. Utagawa Kuniyoshi

*Act XI from Kanadehon Chūshingura*

1860s

ōban woodblock print

signed: Kuniyoshi *ga*

private collection
Plate 17. Toyoharu Kunichika and Kawanabe Kyōsai (inset)

_Tōkyō kaika meishō no uchi_ (Famous Views of Modern Tōkyō), _The Ninth Month_

Kunichika: _The Actor Iwai Hanshirō IV in the Role of Shiragikumaru_

Kyōsai: _The nō Kyōgen kuriyaki (Roasting Chestnuts)_

1875

ōban woodblock print

signed: Toyohara Kunichika _fude_; Watanabe Kyōsai

publisher: Sawamuraya (Takegawa Seikichi)

private collection
Plate 18. Andō Hiroshige

Goyū, tabibito tome-onna (Goyū, Women Soliciting Travelers, from the series Tōkaidō gojūsan-tsugi no uchi – Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō)

1833 – 1834

ōban woodblock print

signed Hiroshige ga

private collection
Plate 19. Toyohara Chikanobu

*The Emperor Meiji*

c. 1867

ōban woodblock print

signed Chikanobu *fude*

circular seal upper left: Meiji Ribbon

private collection.
Plate 20. Suzuki Harunobu
*Aki no kaze (Autumn Breeze)*
1760s
*chuban nishiki-e* woodblock print
signed Suzuki Harunobu *ga*
private collection
Plate 21. Kitagawa Utamaro

*Kaya (Mosquito Net)*

from the series *Kasumi-ori musume hinagata (Model Young Women Woven in Mist)*

c. 1795

signed, lower left: Utamaro *hitsu*
publisher: Tsutaya Jūzaburō

ōban woodblock print

private collection
Plate 22. Katsushika Hokusai

*Tsurugaoka shinzen (Before the Shrine at Shinzen)*

from the series *Kanadehon Chūshingura (The Syllabary Chūshingura)*

1806

*ōban* woodblock print

unsigned, publisher: Senichi

Plate 23. Katsushika Hokusai

_Hangan seppuku (The Suicide of Enya Hangan)_

from the series _Kanadehon Chūshingura_

1806

ōban woodblock print

unsigned, publisher: Senichi

Plate 24. Katsushika Hokusai

_Gishi yo-uchi (The Night Attack of the Loyal Samurai)_
from the series _Kanadehon Chūshingura_
1806

ōban woodblock print
unsigned, publisher: Senichi
Honolulu Academy of Arts. Gift of C. M. Cooke, 1928
Plate 25. Utagawa Fusatane
Kabuto aratame (Examination of the Helmets)
scene from Act I, Tsurugaoka shinzen (Before the Shrine at Tsurugaoka), from the series Kanadehon Chūshingura
1852
ōban woodblock print
signed: Isshōsai Fusatane ga
private collection
Plate 26. Utagawa Kunisada II

*Lady Kaoyo and Momonoi Wakasanosuke*

scene from Act I from the series *Kanadehon Chūshingura*

1866

ōban woodblock print

signed: Kunisada *ga*

private collection
Plate 27. Suzuki Harunobu  
*Settsu Kinuta-no Tamagawa (Kinuta Crystal River in Settsu Province)*  
from the series *Fūzoku Mu-Tamagawa* (*‘Customs’ or ‘Fashions’ of the Six Tama [Crystal] Rivers*)  
1768  
*chūban* woodblock print  
signed: Suzuki Harunobu *ga*  
Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Gift of the Misses and Dr E. S. de Beer.
Plate 28. Suzuki Harunobu
*Lovers Sharing an Umbrella (White Heron and Black Crow)*
ca. 1768
*chūban nishiki-e* woodblock print
signed: Suzuki Harunobu *ga*
Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Staub/Shurrock Collection
Plate 29. Kitagawa Tsukimaro
*Kintaro Conquers Fierce Eagle*
1804 – 1818
*shikishi-ban surimono* woodblock print
signed: Kitagawa Tsukimaro *hitsu*
commissioned by the Drum Group (leader: Dondontei Wataru)
Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Plate 29a. Kitagawa Tsukimaro
*Kintaro Conquers Fierce Eagle* (detail)
Plate 30. Utagawa Kunimaro

*A Nō Mask of a Girl’s face*

1850 – 1875

*shikishi-ban surimonon* woodblock print

Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Staub/Shurrock Collection
Plate 31. Katsushika Hokusai
*Mountain Landscape in the Chinese Style*
1814 – 1845
*hanshira-bon sumi-e* woodblock print book illustration
private collection
Plate 32. Utagawa Yoshitaki
Kabuki Actors in Role
1883
diptych woodblock prints; each sheet chūban
private collection
Plate 33. Toyohara Kunichika
*The actor Onoe Kikugorō V*
Meiji period
*aiban* woodblock print
signed Toyohara Kunichika *fude*
private collection
Plate 34. Utagawa Kunitsugu
*Seated samurai archer*
c. 1820s
ōban woodblock print
signed Kunitsugu *ga*
private collection
Plate 35. Andō Hiroshige

*Numazu tasogarezu (Twilight at Numazu)*
from the series *Tōkaidō gojūsantsugi no uchi (Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road)*
1833 – 1834

ōban woodblock print
signed Hiroshige ga
publisher: Hoeidō
private collection
Plate 36. Andō Hiroshige

*Kanaya Ōigawa engan* (The Distant Bank of the Ōi River Seen From Kanaya) from the series *Tōkaidō gojūsantsugi no uchi* (Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō) 1833 – 1834

ōban woodblock print
signed Hiroshige *ga*
publisher: Hoeidō
private collection
Plate 37. Utagawa Fusatane

Ichiriki agaeya (chaya) (At the Ichiriki Brothel (Teahouse))
act VII from a series of Kanadehon Chūshingura
1852
ōban woodblock print
signed Isshōsai Fusatane ga
private collection
Plate 38. Andō Hiroshige

*Kuwana*

from the *jinbutsu* version series: *The Fifty-three Stages of the Tōkaidō*

1852

*chūban* woodblock print

signed Hiroshige *ga*

publisher: Murichi

deep private collection
Plate 39. Katsushika Hokusai

*Bushū Tamagawa (The Tama River in Musashi Province, Edo)*
from the series *Fugaku sanjū-rokkei (Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji)*
1831 – 1835

*ōban* woodblock print
signed Hokusai *aratame Iitsu*
publisher: Eijudō

Dunedin Public Art Gallery
APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: HISTORICAL PERIODS AND ERAS IN JAPANESE HISTORY

I Historical Periods

Jōmon (up to c. 200 BC)
Yayoi (c. 200 BC – c. AD250)
Kofun (c. 250 – 552)
Asuka (552 – 646)
Nara (646 – 794)
Heian (794 – 1185)
Kamakura (1185 – 1333)
Muromachi (1333 – 1573)
Momoyama (1573 – 1615)
Tokugawa Period (Edo Period) (1615 – 1868)
Meiji Period (1868 – 1912)
Taishō Period (1912 – 1926)
Shōwa Period (1926 – 1989)
Heisei Period (1989 – )

II Edo Period Era Names (nengō)

Genna 1615 – 1624
Kan-ei 1624 – 1644
Shōhō 1644 – 1648
Keian 1648 – 1652
Jōō 1652 – 1655
Meireki 1655 – 1658
Manji 1658 – 1661
Kambun 1661 – 1673
Empō 1673 – 1681
Tenna 1681 – 1684
Jōkyō 1684 - 1688
Genroku 1688 – 1704
Hōe 1704 – 1711
Shōtoku 1711 – 1716
Kyōhō 1716 – 1736
Gembun 1736 – 1741
Kampō 1741 – 1744
Enkyō 1744 – 1748
Kan-en 1748 – 1751
Hōreki 1751 – 1764
Meiwa 1764 – 1772
Periodisation in Japanese History

A particular problem can arise in Japanese art history in the confusion of accepted historical periods with notions of Japanese aesthetic periods. In the West it is perhaps customary to co-relate notions of ‘aesthetic eras’ with broader shapes or patterns of epochal change. This coincidence is assumed, for example, for the ‘Renaissance’ or the ‘Reformation’. Even in European cultural history the validity of such aesthetic/historical partnerships is questionable. The loose term ‘Renaissance’ embraces a broad and heterogeneous aesthetic enterprise for example, but finding some sense of aesthetic or temperamental affinity between contemporary, but radically different, artists like Leonardo or Michelangelo is problematic.

In Japan it has long been customary to identify specific historical periods and eras. These have usually been defined by, and named after, some characteristic of government. Hence ‘Nara’, ‘Kyōto’ or ‘Edo’ periods refer to the periods when the seat of national Japanese government was located in each of these cities. Similarly, ‘Tokugawa’ or ‘Meiji’ refer quite specifically to the identity of the controlling government for each particular period (Tokugawa referring to the shōgunate dynasty, and Meiji to the restored imperial government). Within each of these major temporal periods we can identify shorter, more localized eras, each determined by and named after the particular local government of the time. Thus within the Tokugawa period we find a succession of named eras (nengō) – Genroku, Hōei, Shōtoku, Kyōhō…. Except in the broadest, and therefore least useful, sense, there seems no valid reason to find any clear conjunction between some particular kind of aesthetic character and governmentally defined historic period or era within the historical structures so defined.

Sometimes we can describe, in the broadest terms, general aesthetic characteristics common to, say, the Heian period, a different combination for Muromachi, or another for Momoyama or Tokugawa. We might find during the Heian period, for example, something of a feminine sensibility, tempered by a certain astringent restraint. In Momoyama we might locate an indulgence in luxury of pattern or material (allowing also for the austerity associated with, say, chanoyu during the same period). We can also describe aesthetic differences between historical periods. With the transition from the Tokugawa into the Meiji government for example, we can see clear coincidental changes in the pictorial
character of woodblock prints. This is evident in the jarring shifts in colour as the Japanese artists adopted European aniline dyes, or in the representation of Japanese figures in Western dress, and, increasingly, accompanied by Western figures. The problem is that these developments do not in any way represent a shift in aesthetic sensibility. Rather, they are simply responses to changing conditions. The adoption of aniline dyes, for example, simply reflects the fact that a broader range of materials was available to artists after the restoration than had been available before it, rather than any notion of a change in aesthetic concept similar to that which generated the earlier introduction of polychrome printing. As a technical development it is neither more nor less significant than any other purely technical development that occurred in the history of ukiyo-e. The representation of Western habits of dress is consistent with, rather than marking a change of, aesthetic character. Ukiyo-e had always been occupied with the representation of the fūryū, or up-to-date.

The development of ukiyo-e was closely related that of Edo, and to the period of Tokugawa government. This association was such that the distinctive aesthetic character of the period is assumed to be that of ukiyo-e. Again this is incorrect. Firstly, though most early writers occupied themselves exclusively with artists located in Edo, other ukiyo-e schools thrived in other urban centers – particularly so in Nagasaki and Osaka. Secondly, during the Tokugawa period not one but several schools coexisted, flourished, and even contributed to one another’s development – the artists of the Kanō and Tosa schools thrived beside those of ukiyo-e, and many of the ukiyo-e designers received their earliest training in one or other of these schools. The Kanō school, favoured by the shōgunate, maintained classical Chinese modes of painting; the Tosa received the support of Imperial institutions and favoured a more indigenous enterprise.

Even within ukiyo-e a number of quite different schools operated, usually under the auspices of an originating master – hence Kaigetsudō, Torii, Utagawa... – sometimes surviving through several generations. It is difficult to find any kind of stylistic consistency, or to argue for any kind of aesthetic affinity, between schools as radically different as the Torii and Kaigetsudō successions. Even within schools, however, and notwithstanding the teacher-pupil relationship on which school successions were founded, it can be equally difficult to establish affinities between individual artists. Torii Kiyonobu, the originating master of the Torii school of theatrical sign painters and woodblock print designers, living approximately from 1664 to 1729, but working mainly from about 1680; his pupil Torii Kiyomasu flourished from the late 1690’s through the early 1720’s; Torii Kiyonaga, the last great master of that school, died in 1815. Even given the close proximity of the first two of these artists it is difficult to locate anything of an aesthetic affinity between them. Kiyonobu’s oeuvre, for example, was divided between monochrome book illustrations, kabuki posters and shunga, and was distinguished by its powerfully rhythmic linear quality. Kiyomasu dealt with similar subjects, but with a lighter, more delicate and varied line. Kiyonaga focused on the women of Yoshiwara as much as on kabuki themes, and where the works of the earlier masters had been characterized by their idealism, the healthy figures and illusionist landscape settings of the later master were distinguished by their realism.

The Utagawa school flourished even longer than the Torii school. Its founding master, Utagawa Toyoharu, was born in 1735, and flourished as an artist from the mid 1760’s through to his death in 1814 – a period that overlapped with that of the Torii school, and coincided with the Katsukawa school at its very height. One of its last members was
Utagawa Yoshiiku, whose career extended until his death in 1904. The work of the founding master combined a conservative, spare and theatrical stylistic idiom with an active interest in exploring ‘new’ *uki-e* perspectival methods of articulating pictorial space. The works of the later artist were couched in a loud, theatrical and highly expressive idiom, and figures were usually represented in stylized architectural environments with shallow pictorial space. The works of other artists trained within this school emphasise his trend towards heterogeneity even further. Hiroshige’s explorations of pictorial devices for the convincing representation of pictorial depth in landscapes, for example, was radically different from the development of spatial conventions followed by any other Utagawa master.

The Utagawa school survived through almost one hundred and fifty years. Its dynasty extended from the middle of the Tokugawa period, through the imperial restoration, into the mature years of the Meiji government. It encompassed more than seventeen changes of *nengō*. The genealogy of the school thus cuts right across any pattern of governmentally defined periods or era, and the stylistic diversity of its members makes any kind of period defined house-style impossible to define.

Even within the more specifically defined individual *nengō* it can be difficult to establish a single characteristic stylistic idiom. For many writers the very height of *ukiyo-e* occurred during the Kansei era – between 1789 and 1801. Within this short time period however, and even within this single Edo based community of artists, we find difference rather than homogeneity. Sharaku’s entire oeuvre seems to have been completed during 1794 – at precisely the time when Kitagawa Utamaro and Katsukawa Shunei were at the height of their own respective careers. The problem is, that though these three *ukiyo-e* artists worked in the same place, and at the same time, their works were very different from one another. Where Sharaku and Shunei focused on the representation of theatre and literary themes, Utamaro occupied himself almost exclusively with representing the women of Yoshiwara. Where Shunei concentrated on trying to place his actor/character representations within the contexts of the narrative sequences of *kabuki* plays, and placed them in pictorial constructs that were consistent with the formal conventions of the stage, Sharaku focused on the psychological character of both actor and character. The result, for Shunei, was unusually still compositions, frozen moments of time, remarkably restrained in line, colour, and pictorial structure in ways that reflect the highly charged momentary stillness of *mie*. The result for Sharaku is facial expressions from a Western perspective of almost caricature-like exaggeration, a heightened sense of theatrical gesture, and an exploitation of luxurious and rich pigments and ‘special effects’, like ground mica which reflect the exotic textiles of *kabuki* costume. For Utamaro the preoccupation with sensuality generated limpid, softly rhythmic and delicately arranged figures whose poses and gestures subtly reflect the eroticism associated with their profession.

Trying to draw these artists together into a single group, as ‘mature-period *ukiyo-e* artists’, or attempting to categorise them simply as ‘Kansei artists’ implies some kind of affinity or common interest, but, apart from the fact that they were *ukiyo-e* artists who designed woodblock prints, and given the fact that a certain stylistic homogeneity was associated with the conditions of that medium, there is little useful common ground. It would seem that Tokugawa period audiences for art works favoured diversity, novelty, invention and variety rather than homogeneity and idiomatic consistency. It would, equally, seem that *ukiyo-e* artists, whatever allegiances they had to former masters and teachers, whatever commitment they might have to a particular pictorial genre, or artistic
problem, placed an exceptionally high value on aesthetic independence. These conditions have challenged, rather than confirmed, any clear coincidence of historical period and aesthetic affinity.

1 'Up to that time (the seventeenth century), the two principal schools were the Kanō and Tosa, each identified with one of the opposing political factions, the first being associated with the Shōgun’s circle, the other with the Emperor’s. The Kanō school, with its roots in Chinese classical painting, specialized in idealized landscapes, *kachō* and scenes of myth or legend, often with some hint, veiled or explicit, of Buddhist teaching; the Tosa, a more native product, repeated time and again scenes of court splendour, of civil war or romantic medieval adventure.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the work of both schools, for all the undeniable skill of the practitioners, was in a decline. The Kanō painters seemed content with repetitions, even less convincing, of the works of the earlier masters, the Tosa employed the old conventional devices, such as the removal of the roof to lay bare the happenings within the Palace rooms and the use of decorative gold bands across the sky, but, at this distance from the well-head of inspiration, with little of the narrative power and vigour of the ancients. Under the inspiration of painters too individualistic to submit to academic restraint, a number of separate groups emerged each composed of men drawn together by similar aims and a common technique, of which schools the Ukiyo-e, Kōrin, Shijō, Maruyama and Ganku are the most important.’ Hillier, 1961, p. 5.
APPENDIX 2: PICTORIAL FORMATS FOR WOODBLOCK PRINTS

(Within each size category there is some variation; sizes given here are averages, given in cm., height before width).

Single Sheet Prints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print Type</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aiban</td>
<td>34 x 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bai-aiban</td>
<td>46 x 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chūban</td>
<td>26 x 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habahiro</td>
<td>37.8 x 17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosoban</td>
<td>33 x 14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakemono-e</td>
<td>76.5 x 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koban</td>
<td>23 x 17 or smaller (down to 14 x 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koban tate-e (vertical format)</td>
<td>20.9 x 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koban yoko-e (horizontal format)</td>
<td>14 x 18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaban</td>
<td>50 x 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaban (surimono)</td>
<td>12 x 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naga-ōban</td>
<td>60.5 x 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hashira-e (hashira-gake)</td>
<td>70 – 75 x 12 – 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ōban</td>
<td>38 x 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ō-ōban</td>
<td>60 x 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ō-tanzaku</td>
<td>38 x 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shikishi (square surimono format)</td>
<td>22.9 x 19 – 29 x 26.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tanzaku (chū-tanzaku)</td>
<td>38 x 13</td>
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Book Formats

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<tr>
<th>Print Type</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chūbon</td>
<td>18 x 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanshi-bon</td>
<td>23 x 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ōbon</td>
<td>27 x 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yokoban</td>
<td>11 x 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surimono formats

Although the use of an entire ō-ōbosho (hōsho) sheet (c. 42 x 57 cm.) for a single print, in the so-called ‘ō-ōbosho zenshi-ban,’ continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the main formats for surimono were subdivisions of a full ō-ōbosho (hōsho) sheet, made by cutting it into pieces of equal size. The following list indicates the variety of sizes available, showing the vertical and horizontal multiples for each: thus, for example ‘three by four’ indicates that a sheet of ō-ōbosho (hōsho) was cut twice in the long dimension and three times in the short dimension to give a total of twelve sheets. (The dimensions given here would normally be a maximum for a given size, since many prints would be slightly trimmed.)

a) chōban or nagaban (‘long sheet’): two by one (about 21 x 57 cm)
b) yoko-chūban (‘horizontal medium sheet’): two by two (about 21 x 28.5 cm)
c) shikishi-ban (‘square sheet’): two by three (bout 21 x 19 cm)
d) yatsugiri-ban (‘cut into eight’): two by four (about 21 x 14.2 cm)
e) jūnigiri-ban (‘cut into twelve’): two by six (about 21 x 9.3 cm)
f) jūrokubangiri-ban (‘cut into sixteen’): four by four (about 10 x 14.2 cm)
g) kokonotsugiri-ban (‘cut into nine’): three by three (about 14 x 19 cm)
The largest format for *surimono* is a diptych of two horizontal ō-ōboshi sheets pasted together.²

APPENDIX 3

LIST OF PRINCIPAL UKIYO-E ARTISTS REFERED TO IN THE TEXT

This list is arranged in approximate chronological order. In several instances the genealogical groupings of school members interrupts this arrangement. Many of these artists worked concurrently; some maintained affiliations with more than one school.

Iwasa Matabei 1578 – 1650
The Kambun Master fl. c. 1660 – 1673
Yoshida Hambei fl. c. 1664 – 1689
Hishikawa Moronobu d. 1694
Kaigetsudō Ando 1631 – c. 1743
Kaigetsudō Anchi fl. 1710s
Kaigetsudō Doshin fl. 1710s
Kaigetsudō Dohan fl. 1710s
Nishikawa Sukenobu 1671 – 1750
Nishimura Shigenaga 1697 – 1756
Sigamura Jihei c. 1681 – 1697
Miyagawa Chōshun 1683 – 1753
Okamura Masanobu 1686 – 1764
Yoshikawa Kanpō fl. 1730s
Torii Kiyotaka active 1709
Torii Kiyomoto active from 1692
Torii Kiyonobu 1664 – 1729
Torii Kiyomasu fl. late 1690s – early 1720s
Torii Kiyonobu II fl. 1720s – c. 1760
Torii (Hanzaburō) Kiyomasu II fl. early 1720s – early 1760s
Torii Kiyoshiige fl. late 1720s – early 1760s
Torii Kiyohiro fl. c. 1750s – 1760s
Torii Kiyohide d. 1772
Torii Kiyomitsu 1735 – 1785
Torii Kiyotsugu early 1800s
Torii Kiyotoki early 1800s
Torii Kiyokatsu early 1800s
Torii Kiyosada early 1800s
Torii Kiyonaga 1752 – 1815
Torii Kiyimitsu II (Kiyomine) 1787 – 1868
Ōmori Yoshikiyo fl. c. 1702 – 1716
Ōaka Michinobu fl. c. 1720s – 1730s
Tsukioka Settei 1710 – 1787
Ishikawa Toyonobu 1711 – 1785
Suzuki Harunobu c. 1724 – 1770
Komai Yoshinobu fl. c. 1770
Isoda Koryūsai fl. mid 1760s – 1780s
Hiraga Gennai 1729 – 1779
Maruyama Ōkyo 1733 – 1795
Aōdō Denzen 1748 – 1822
Shiba Kōkan (Harushige) 1747 – 1818
Tōshūsai Sharaku active 1794 – 1795
Kitao Shigemasa 1739 – 1820
Kitao Masanobu (Santō Kyōden) 1761 – 1816
Katsukawa Shunshō fl. late 1770s – late 1790s
Katsukawa Shunchō fl. late 1770s – late 1790s
Katsukawa Shunkō 1743 – 1812
Katsukawa Shunzan fl. c. 1780s – 1790s
Katsukawa Shunei c. 1762 – 1819
Katsukawa Shuntei 1770 – 1820
Kubo Shunman 1757 – 1820
Ipputsusai Bunchō fl. c. 1765 – 1792
Eishōsai Chōki fl. late 1700s – early 1800s
Chōbunsai Eishi 1756 – 1829
Chōkyōsai Eiri fl. c. 1790s – early 1800s
Kikukawa Eiri fl. c. 1820s
Kikukawa Eizan 1787 – 1867
Ikeda Eisen 1790 – 1848
Shōtei Hokju fl. late 1790s – mid 1820s
Katsukawa Hokusai 1760 – 1849
Ryūryūkyō Shinsai c. 1764 – 1820
Utagawa Toyoharu 1735 – 1814
Utagawa Toyokuni 1769 – 1825
Utagawa Kunimasa 1773 – 1810
Utagawa Toyohiro 1773 – 1828
Utagawa Toyokuni II (Toyoshige) 1777 – 1835
Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III) 1786 – 1865
Utagawa Kuninaga 1793 – 1854
Utagawa Kunimaru 1794 – 1829
Utagawa Kuniyasu 1794 – 1832
Utagawa Kumihisa fl. 1800s -1810s
Utagawa Kunisato d. 1858
Utagawa Kunitetsu 1800 – 1861
Utagawa Kunitora fl. c. 1810s – 1830s
Utagawa Kuninao 1793 – 1854
Utagawa (Andō) Hiroshige 1797 – 1858
Utagawa Hiroshige II (Shigenobu) 1829 – 1864
Utagawa Hiroshige III 1843 – 1894
Baidō Kunimasa (Kunisada II) 1823 – 1880
Utagawa Kunisada III 1848 – 1920
Utagawa Fusatane fl. c. 1850s – 1860s
Utagawa Kuniteru fl. mid 1800s
Utagawa Kuniyoshi 1798 – 1861
Utagawa Kunimaro fl. Mid. 1850s – 1875
Utaghawa Yoshihide 1832 – 1902
Utagawa Yoshiiku 1833 – 1904
Toyohara Chikanobu 1838 – 1912
Toyohara Kunichika 1835 – 1900
Utagawa Yoshitaki 1841 – 1899
Kobayashi Kiyochika 1847 – 1915
Tsukioka Yoshitoshi 1839 – 1892
Kawanabe Kyōsai 1831 – 1889
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watanabe Seitei</td>
<td>1851 – 1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogata Gekkō</td>
<td>1859 – 1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takahashi Shōtei</td>
<td>1871 – 1944</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kawase Hasui</td>
<td>1883 – 1957</td>
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<tr>
<td>Itō Shinsui</td>
<td>1898 - 1972</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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