

Research Article

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Narratives of Omission: Cycles of Citation and the Perception of Suzuki Harunobu's Early Career

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Abstract: Already in his own time, Suzuki Harunobu's (c.1725–1770) portrayals of elegant young beauties (*bijinga*) printed in the new polychrome “brocade picture” (*nishiki-e*) technique were lauded by prominent contemporaries like Ōta Nanpo (1749–1823), Shiba Kōkan (1747–1818), and Morishima Chūryō (1756–1810). However, their accounts only convey half the story, as they all omit the first half of Harunobu's career as an illustrator of limited colour prints (*benizuri-e*) and monochrome books (*ehon*). Considering these sources in a broader context, their purpose in promoting Harunobu's image from the Edo period to the present becomes apparent. Moreover, tracing how these narratives of omission have been transmitted over the centuries through cycles of citation illuminates not only their enduring negative effect on the perception of Harunobu's early career but also the systematic marginalisation of his *benizuri-e*. As a result, false claims made about Harunobu's pre-*nishiki-e* publications, which have hindered a deeper understanding of his training as well as the development of the formal and stylistic characteristics so closely associated with his name, can be identified and dispelled.

Keywords: Suzuki Harunobu; Ukiyo-e Ruikō; *Benizuri-e*; *Nishiki-e*; Historiography

On Azuma Nishiki-e:
All of a sudden a swap to Azuma Nishiki-e
Not one Benizuri-e now sells
Torii really can no longer beat Harunobu

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In portraying men and women of the day.
(Ōta Nanpo, *The Collected Works of Master Sleepyhead*, 1767)¹

When the writer and poet Ōta Nanpo (1749–1823) composed these verses in 1767, his words would shape the perception of Suzuki Harunobu's (c.1725–1770) career for the next 250 years. Based on the above and other accounts from authors active in Harunobu's immediate circle, all of whom similarly praised his multicoloured “brocade prints” (*nishiki-e* 錦絵) while omitting his career before this print technological transition, modern scholarship, too, deals almost exclusively with Harunobu's *nishiki-e* career. As a result, the period spanning from his debut in 1760 to his breakthrough in 1765, during which he mainly published monochrome picture books (*ehon* 絵本) and single-sheet prints relating to the kabuki theatre that were produced in a technique using only a limited number of colour blocks (*benizuri-e* 紅摺絵), was all but forgotten.

Next to the uncritical acceptance of the Edo-period accounts as accurate since the beginning of institutionalised ukiyo-e scholarship in Europe and North America in the 1870s, researchers themselves have created another obstacle that has hindered the study of Harunobu's early works: the Eurocentric art categorisation practices on which the discourse on ukiyo-e was founded.² As a result, not only were *benizuri-e* regarded as “naïve” or “primitive” whilst Harunobu's multicoloured *nishiki-e* marked the beginning of the “classical period” of colour woodblock printing. Additionally, the subjects were divided according to the personal tastes of early ukiyo-e connoisseurs and collectors.³ This led to the depreciation of pictures illustrating kabuki actors during their performances (*yakusha-e* 役者絵), whose climactic *mie* poses featured in the prints were regarded as “grotesque.” By contrast, illustrations of beautiful people (*bijinga* 美人画), particularly of women who represented the Orientalist ideal of the alluring Japanese courtesan, were discussed in the loftiest terms.⁴ The combination of these two factors culminated in the continuously high praise for Harunobu's “classical *nishiki-e bijinga*,” which established his status in ukiyo-e historiography as that of an artistic genius whose career only really began along the rise of the *nishiki-e* technique in 1765. In contrast, the “primitive” *benizuri*

1 *Azuma no nishiki-e o eizu* 東の錦絵を詠ず / *tachimachi azuma nishiki-e to utsutte yori* 忽ち吾妻錦絵と移ってより / *ichimai no benizuri urezaru toki* 一枚の紅摺沽れざる時 / *Torii wa nanzō aete Harunobu ni kanawan* 鳥居は何ぞ敢えて春信に勝わん / *nannyo utsushi nasu tōsei no sugata* 男女写し成す当世の姿; cf. Ōta 1985 [1767]. For the translation cf. Tanabe/Thompson 2017: 249.

2 For a summary of the Orientalist notions in the art appreciation and art criticism of non-European art, cf. Reed 2017: 10–26.

3 On the classification, cf. Fenollosa 1896; von Seidlitz 1897; Kurth, 1911.

4 In contrast, in Edo-period Japan, well-dressed kabuki actors were frequently the subject of *bijinga* in both paintings (*nikuhitsuga* 肉筆画) and prints that combine the actor's images with poems composed by them (*hitori-tachi yakusha-e* 一人立役者絵).

yakusha-e created in the first five years of his career have been discarded as being “of precious little significance and hold[ing] more curiosity or historical than artistic value.”⁵ Although this attitude and the terminology have somewhat changed since the 1980s, especially regarding the term “primitive” with its imperialist implications, and instead the genre is now divided into an “early,” “middle,” and “late” phase, the canon established on this foundation has remained consistent.⁶

Looking beyond this narrative established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has long been hindered by the repetitive nature of the discourse, characterised by cycles of citation of the same Edo-period sources, the continued belief in these sources’ accuracy, and oftentimes also the limited access to *ukiyo-e* produced before 1765. However, when examining these accounts in terms of their purpose rather than their content and setting them in context with Harunobu’s pre-*nishiki-e* publications, deeper insights into his early career can be gained. As a result, it becomes evident that Harunobu’s *benizuri yakusha-e* were very much in line with the trends of the time and, moreover, served as the basis for his subsequent *nishiki-e*.

1 Narratives of Omission I: Ōta Nanpo and his Promotion of Harunobu’s Legacy

When Nanpo lauded Harunobu’s achievements in the above-quoted poem in 1767, the *nishiki-e* technique had already been used to create deluxe single-sheet prints for two years. This multicolour printing technique was made possible by the introduction of registration marks (*kentō* 見当), which facilitated the precise positioning of the paper on the printing block and led to an exponential increase in the number of printable colours. Consequently, the earlier colour prints created with a maximum of four colours (*benizuri-e*) were gradually replaced by multicolour *nishiki-e*. This shift in printing technology for single-sheet prints took place in late 1764 or early 1765, when the members of competing poetry clubs heavily invested in the production of cleverly devised picture calendars (*e-goyomi* 絵暦) for the year 1765.

5 The German original reads: “Denn was wir noch von seinen Dreifarbindrucken besitzen, ist herzlich unbedeutend und hat mehr Kuriositäten- oder geschichtlichen, als Kunstwert.” Cf. Kurth 1910: 15.

6 One of the last applications of the term “primitive” to denote early monochrome, hand-coloured prints (*tan-e* 丹絵, *beni-e* 紅絵), and *benizuri-e* is Link et al. 1980. Still, the description of Harunobu’s *nishiki-e* as “classical” or those of the next generation of artists as belonging to a “Golden Age” is still often encountered in exhibition titles and popular scientific publications. A recent example is “The Golden Age of Ukiyo-e: Tsutaya Jūzaburō, Sharaku and Utamarō” (浮世絵の黄金時代 — 蔦屋重三郎と写楽・歌麿) at the Kubosō Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi, Osaka, 2025.

Harunobu was one of the artists commissioned to create designs based on these poets' suggestions.⁷ As his compositions were met with acclaim, he attracted the attention of culturally powerful shogunal bannerman Ōkubo Jinshirō Tadanobu (1722–1777, pen name Kikurensa Kyosen), who subsequently became the main sponsor of his *nishiki-e* designs.⁸

Nanpo's unbroken appreciation of Harunobu's *nishiki-e* is also evident in a line in his book *Legend of the Candy-Seller Dohei* (*Ameuri Dohei den* 飴売土平伝) of 1769, which reads: "The black-and-white prints of earlier days are antiquated now, and the only thing people care for is the newly devised gorgeousness of the Eastern Brocade Prints."⁹ Nanpo's praise is not surprising given that Harunobu had provided the illustrations for this book. Additionally, its preface was written by the prominent author and polymath Hiraga Gennai (1728–1780), who is considered a possible contributor to the development of either the *kentō* registration marks or the *nishiki-e* printing technique through his fascination with technology, and who was also a friend of Harunobu's.¹⁰

Catalysed by the adaptation of the *nishiki-e* technique for commercial use and the increasing demand for his illustrations, Harunobu created hundreds of designs until his career was abruptly cut short by his sudden death in the summer of 1770.¹¹ On this occasion, Nanpo recorded in his miscellany *Leisurely Stories for Half a Day* (*Hannichi kanwa* 半日閑話, 1770):

Suzuki Harunobu died

On the fifteenth day, the *yamato-e* artist Suzuki Harunobu died. This person excelled at *ukiyo-e*. That what we today call *nishiki-e* was founded by this person. He became famous in the year of the cockerel Meiwa 2 [1765], and it is said that this person never in his life drew *yakusha-e*, saying 'I am a *yamato-e* artist. Why would I ever draw the image of such river-bed folks?' And he kept this resolution.

⁷ On the other artists contributing *e-goyomi* designs for the poetry clubs, cf. Clark 1997.

⁸ For a summary of Harunobu's network and career since the beginning of *nishiki-e* printmaking, cf. Waterhouse 2013; Kobayashi 2019.

⁹ For the English translation cf. Hillier 1970: 10. Kurth had translated *Ameuri Dohei den* into German in 1910, cf. Kurth 1910: 44–56.

¹⁰ Cf. Waterhouse 2013: 14–36.

¹¹ As Harunobu's oeuvre is today scattered around the globe, the exact number of his *nishiki-e* can only be estimated but is commonly considered to encompass at least 900 designs. Although several extensive surveys of Harunobu's *ukiyo-e* in Japanese and international collections have been conducted over the past few decades, even the most recent ones still bypass his early works. For two recent examples, cf. Waterhouse 2013; Kobayashi 2023.

鈴木春信死す

十五日、大和絵師鈴木春信死す。この人浮世絵に妙を得たり。今に錦絵といふ物はこの人を祖とす。明和二年乙酉の頃よりして其名高く、この人一生役者絵をかゝずして云、われは大和絵師也、何ぞや川原者の形を画にたへんと。其志かくのごとし。¹²

Almost thirty years later, Nanpo re-used this passage as a template first for his *Studies on Ukiyo-e* (*Ukiyo-e kōshō*, c. mid-1790s), which became the basis for his more comprehensive *Various Thoughts on Ukiyo-e* (*Ukiyo-e ruikō* c. 1800). Expanding the passage to include a note about the calendar exchanges as the motivation behind the development of the *nishiki-e* technique, which at the time of this account had already become a commercial commodity, and adding the names of the famous beauties Harunobu often portrayed in these works, he wrote:

Since the beginning of the Meiwa era [1764–1772], Harunobu designed and issued *Azuma nishiki-e*, and is now known as their originator. At this time, *daishō no surimono* [calendars indicating the long and short months] were highly popular in early spring, and when printing with five, six blocks was first accomplished, that what is today known as *nishiki-e* was invented. Through all his life, Harunobu never drew pictures of *kabuki* actors, saying ‘I am a *yamato-e* artist, why would I ever draw the forms of such river-bed folks?’ And he kept this resolution. Around Meiwa 6 [1769], two beautiful shrine dancers [*miko*] from Ishizu shrine in Izumi province were selected and performed at an unveiling of Ebisu at Yushima tenjin. Their names were O-Nami and O-Mitsu. [Harunobu] moreover drew *nishiki-e* of the girl O-Sen of the Kagiya tea stall in front of the Kasamori Inari shrine in Yanaka, and of O-Fuji, the daughter of Yanagiya Jinbei of the toothpick shop in Asakusa, he truly was one of the greatest men in this world.

明和のはじめより吾妻錦絵をゑがき出して、今にこれを祖とす。これは其頃初春大小のすり物大に流行して、五六遍ずりはじめて出来より工夫して今の錦絵とはなれり。春信一生歌舞伎役者の絵をかゝずしてはいはく、われは大和絵師なり、何ぞ河原者のかたちをゑがくにたへんやと。その志かくの如し。明和六年の頃、湯嶋天神に泉州石津笑姿開帳ありし時、二人の巫女みめよきをゑらびて舞しむ。名をお波、おみつといふ。又谷中笠森稲荷の前なる茶店鍵屋の娘おせん、浅草楊枝や柳屋仁兵衛娘おふちのゑを錦絵にゑがきて出せしに、世の人大にもてはやせり。¹³

Although it is uncertain whether the statement about the identification as a *yamato-e* artist and the expression of disdain for *yakusha-e* reflect Harunobu’s own words or whether they are Nanpo’s fabrication, these records provide important insights into the perception of Harunobu’s status in his own time, as well as into how his contemporaries shaped his legacy. First, it was not uncommon for ukiyo-e artists to declare themselves *yamato-e* artists. This convention was begun in the

¹² For the quotes and their translation, cf. Ōta 1988a [1770]: 343; Waterhouse 1991: n.p.

¹³ The name of the second *miko* was probably O-Hatsu instead of O-Mitsu. Cf. Ōta 1988b [1790]: 443. Translation combined from Waterhouse 1964: 16; Waterhouse 2013: description for #375.

mid-seventeenth century by Hishikawa Moronobu (1618–1694), the first artist to sign his name to paintings and woodblock printed media that are today recognised as ukiyo-e. Also, as ukiyo-e share thematic and stylistic features with *yamato-e* paintings from previous periods, a genre in which seasonal festivities are rendered in opaque colours and figures are framed by black outlines, as well as with monochrome woodblock-printed book illustrations of domestic literary classics that followed the formal and stylistic conventions of *yamato-e*, the appropriation of the term “*yamato-e* artist” by ukiyo-e artists served to legitimate their work in this new art form by connecting it to established traditions.¹⁴

It is also in this vein that Harunobu, or Nanpo speaking in Harunobu’s name, renounced ever having drawn the images of kabuki actors, whom he refers to as “river-bed folks” (*kawaramono* 川原者). The term “*kawaramono*” had long been used for entertainers presenting dances and skits in dried-out riverbeds during summer, when these liminal spaces outside of legal jurisdiction allowed for all kinds of leisurely amusements. In this environment, the shrine dancer Okuni (dates unknown) from Izumo Grand Shrine performed her expressive dances in the early 1600s, which subsequently became the basis for the kabuki theatre.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the reported renunciation of *yakusha-e* must be considered with caution, given that Harunobu had not only made his debut in 1760 with prints illustrating kabuki stars, but that he would publish more than forty such single-sheet compositions as well as an illustrated play synopsis in book form before the introduction of the *nishiki-e* technique in 1765.¹⁶ In other words, Harunobu spent the first half of his short career illustrating works he would later (allegedly) reject, and he would continue to allude to famous actors in many of his *nishiki-e* by incorporating objects, such as fans, bearing their crests. One reason why Harunobu suddenly dropped this subject may be sought in his privileged position as illustrator of picture calendars and other deluxe prints for private patrons, who mainly commissioned sophisticated reworkings of historical and mythical figures clad in the latest fashion (*fūryū mitate-e* 風流見立絵), whereas *yakusha-e* were mainly considered the domain of commercial publishers.¹⁷

Given that Nanpo’s entry about Harunobu is among the longest in the first edition of *Ukiyo-e ruikō* and seen in context with the information on all the other artists covered in this manuscript, it is unusual that he entirely omits, or even rejects, the artist’s early career. Instead, Nanpo begins with the *e-goyomi* and *nishiki-e* of

14 For a recent evaluation of Hishikawa Moronobu and early ukiyo-e, cf. Tanabe 2016.

15 On the connection between *Okuni kabuki* and *yamato-e* painting, cf. McKelway 2016.

16 On Harunobu’s publications related to the kabuki theatre, cf. Kobayashi 1966a, 1966b; Takizawa 1998; Asano 2002; Bradel 2018, 2024.

17 On the various subjects in ukiyo-e and the private and commercial publishing industries, cf. Newland 2004.

1765, whereas all his other records contained in this manuscript first specify the name of the introduced artist's teacher or, at the very least, name the artists on whose works he had based his own compositions. For instance, the two entries immediately preceding that about Harunobu, one about Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671–1750) and the other about Ishikawa Toyonobu (1711–1785), read as follows:

Nishikawa Sukenobu. *Gō Jitokusai*, first *gō Bunkadō*, said to have been a student of Kyoto's Kano Einō. Lives in Kyoto. Should be named the originator of the *ukiyo-e* restoration. Created many *ehon*. Among these, *Ehon yamato hiji* is outstanding.

西川祐信。号自得齋、一号文華堂、京狩野永納門人ト云 / 京都に住む。中興浮世絵の祖というべし。絵本数多くあり。中にも絵本倭比事すぐれたり。¹⁸

Similarly brief is the entry about Toyonobu, who had been active since the 1740s and whose career consequently spanned the periods of hand-coloured prints (*beni-e*), *benizuri-e*, and *nishiki-e*, and who was also involved in the production of *e-goyomi* calendars in the mid-1760s. About him, Nanpo wrote:

Ishikawa Toyonobu Shūha, student of Nishimura Shigenaga. At the beginning of Hōreki [1751–1764], he designed many *beni[zuri]-e*. Became the son-in-law to the innkeeper of the Nukaya in Kodenma-chō and took the name Shichibei. It is said that never in his life did he dally in the pleasure houses. Excelled at drawing the customs of men and women. There are many single-sheet prints. There are also illustrated books.

石川豊信秀葩 / 西村重長ガ門人也 / 宝暦のはじめ紅絵に多し。小伝馬町旅人宿る[ぬ]かや七兵衛といひしもの也。一生倡門酒樓にあそばず。しかるのよく男女の風俗をうつせり。一枚絵多し。画本もあ。¹⁹

That Harunobu, too, was considered a student of Shigenaga was only added to a later version of *Ukiyo-e ruikō*, following Nanpo's inclusion of his student Sasaya Shinshichi's (also known as Sasaya Kuninori, dates unknown) genealogy of *ukiyo-e* artists to his compilation in c. 1800. Titled *The Ancient and Modern Lineages of Yamato Ukiyo-e* (*Kokin yamato ukiyo-e no shinkei* 古今大和浮世絵の始系, c. 1800), this text included a passage stating that Harunobu was “said to have been a student of Nishimura Shigenaga” (*Nishimura Shigenaga monjin to iu* 西村重長門人と云).²⁰ When this information was eventually transferred into the main text of the *Ukiyo-e ruikō* version compiled by Saitō Gesshin (1804–1878) in 1844, the cycles of citation that would affect much of modern Harunobu scholarship commenced.

18 Ōta 1988a [1790]: 442.

19 Ōta 1988a [1790]: 443.

20 Hayashi 2011 [1964]: 26–27.

2 The *Ukiyo-e Ruikō* and Cycles of Citation

Nanpo's revised version of *Ukiyo-e kōshō*, titled *Ukiyo-e ruikō* (c. 1800), was expanded and updated several times by authors who either were ukiyo-e artists themselves or who worked closely with them for the illustrations of their novels. As time passed and the manuscript began to include a cacophony of voices, it became increasingly difficult to ascertain the claims recorded about the lives of artists who had long since passed. While these revisions of *Ukiyo-e ruikō* supported the building of the ukiyo-e canon that is still recognised today, they also catalysed the mythification of these artists and their legacies.²¹

The earliest revision of *Ukiyo-e ruikō* was undertaken in 1802 by Santō Kyōden (1761–1816, also known as the ukiyo-e artist Kitao Masanobu) *Additional Thoughts on Ukiyo-e* (*Ukiyo-e ruikō tsuikō* 浮世絵類考追考), who hand-copied Nanpo's manuscript and added individual notes. During the Bunka and Bunsei eras (1804–1830), the *gesaku* author Shikitei Sanba (1776–1822) also revised the text in collaboration with the literatus Katō Eibian (1761–?). The next revision was conducted in 1833 by the ukiyo-e artist Keisai Eisen (1790–1848), who included it in his *Essays by Mumeiō* (*Mumeiō zuihitsu* 無名翁隨筆); a title that was later changed to *Thoughts on Ukiyo-e Continued* (*Zoku ukiyo-e ruikō* 続浮世絵類考). In 1844, this manuscript was turned into the *Expanded Thoughts on Ukiyo-e* (*Zōho ukiyo-e ruikō* 増補浮世絵類考) by Gesshin. At this point, Shinshichi's information about Harunobu having been a student of Shigenaga's was included in the manuscript's main body, together with the addition that Harunobu had been born in Edo and that he was famous as a “*ukiyo bijinga*” artist. In this way, the already established image of Harunobu as an accomplished designer of *bijinga* was reinforced once more. The manuscript's latest revision into *New Expanded Thoughts on Ukiyo-e* (*Shin zōho ukiyo-e ruikō* 新增補浮世絵類考) by Tatsutaya Shūkin (dates unknown) took place in 1868, and in 1889, the text appeared in print for the first time.²²

Consequently, the absence of information about Harunobu's early career as an illustrator of *benizuri-e* and monochrome books, which are, in contrast, particularly highlighted among Sukenobu's and Toyonobu's achievements, must be viewed as a deliberate omission by Nanpo. Additionally, the lack of details about Harunobu's artistic training, which is similarly central to the entries about his senior artists, further underscores this observation. Considering Nanpo's continued reverence for Harunobu, as evidenced by his exuberant praise of the artist's achievements even decades after Harunobu's death, this omission must be regarded as serving

21 Cf. Davis 2021: 22–52.

22 On the various editions of *Ukiyo-e ruikō* and the individual contributors' additions, cf. Nakada 1941; Koyama 2020.

promotional purposes. Presenting Harunobu as an innovative artist who developed his talent seemingly independent of any formal training and emphasising his *nishiki-e* of beautiful people by highlighting Harunobu's supposed disdain for kabuki pictures, Nanpo established the narrative for all subsequent evaluations of Harunobu. Put differently, Nanpo acted as a spin doctor in shaping how Harunobu has been portrayed in ukiyo-e historiography from the Edo period to the present.

3 Narratives of Omission II: Shiba Kōkan and Morishima Chūryō

Alongside Nanpo's *Master Sleepyhead's Miscellaneous Writings* (*Neboke sensei bunshū* 寝惚先生文集, 1767), from which the above poem is quoted, *Hannichi kanwa* (1770), and *Ukiyo-e kōshō* (c. mid-1790s), other contemporary records about Harunobu have received a similar amount of scholarly attention. These include, on the one hand, *Notes by Shunparō* (*Shunparō hikki* 春波楼筆記, 1811), written by the *rangaku* scholar and painter Shiba Kōkan (1747–1818), who has been considered Harunobu's student as he took the name Suzuki Harushige for a while and published prints very close to Harunobu's hand. While the relationship between Harunobu and Kōkan has become a source for debate in recent years, they must nevertheless have known each other through Hiraga Gennai. Gennai was also the connecting agent between Harunobu and his student, Morishima Chūryō (1756–1810), who mentioned Harunobu in his *The Wastepaper Basket* (*Hōgu kago* 反故籠, early 1800s).

While these individuals' records mainly confirm Nanpo's statements and have been utilised by modern scholars to justify the depreciation of Harunobu's early career, they must again be taken with caution. This is for two reasons: First, because both authors again omit the beginning of Harunobu's career as an illustrator of *benizuri-e* prints and monochrome *ehon* in favour of highlighting his role as a specialist in designs of the customs of beautiful people for the new *nishiki-e* technique. Secondly, because Chūryō's record about Harunobu's training diverges from that of Nanpo.

Turning first to Shiba Kōkan, his account of 1811 constitutes an important source to confirm Nanpo's initial record about Harunobu's passing in 1770. Similar to Nanpo's poem and subsequent records, Kōkan also emphasises Harunobu's achievements as a *nishiki-e* illustrator:

While I was studying painting under Sō Shiseki, an artist of the ukiyo-e tradition named Suzuki Harunobu was illustrating the female modes and manners of his day. He died suddenly when he was a little over forty, and I began making imitations of his work, carving them on woodblocks. No one recognized my prints as forgeries, and to the world I became Harunobu. But I, of course,

knew I was not Harunobu, and my self-respect made me adopt the name Harushige. I then employed the coloring techniques of such artists as Ch'iu Ying and Chou Ch'en in painting beautiful Japanese women.

其頃、鈴木春信と云ふ浮世画師、当世の女の風俗を描く事を妙とせり。四十余にして、俄に病死しぬ。予此にせ物を描きて板行に彫りけるに、贋物と云ふ者なし。世人我を以て春信なりとす。予春信に非ざれば心伏せず、春重と号して唐画の仇英、或は周臣等が彩色の法を以て、吾国の美人を画。²³

Kōkan's testimony provides valuable insight into the ukiyo-e market of the time, as it demonstrates the strong association of Harunobu's name with depictions of beautiful women at the time of this record's creation.²⁴ Another keyword is the mention of the Chinese Ming dynasty (1386–1644) artists Qiu Ying (ca. 1494–1552) and Zhou Chen (1460–1535), which later provoked speculation whether such works had inspired the formation of the so-called “Harunobu beauty” as they shared the slender forms and fluid outlines. Although this assumption cannot be verified, most researchers concluded that Harunobu's compositions rather reflected the formal and stylistic traits of a variety of artists.²⁵ Nevertheless, there remains the possibility that even if Harunobu had not seen such paintings, he may well have known their reproductions from the printed painting manuals that circulated at the time and that are said to have stimulated the developments in colour printing in Japan. Also, if Harunobu was indeed inspired by Chinese works, another possible, and more easily obtainable, source would have been the colour woodblock prints from Suzhou, which seem to have also been studied by other ukiyo-e artists.²⁶

Next, an even greater source of debate became Morishima Chūryō's miscellany *Hōgu kago*, in which he recorded that Harunobu had been among the students of Nishikawa Sukenobu:

[Harunobu] is the head of a house in Shirakabe-chō in Kanda. He learnt painting from Nishikawa. He lives in the same place as Fūrai Sanjin [Hiraga Gennai] and sees him often. He was the creator of *Nishiki-e*.

神田白壁町の戸主にて画工なり。画は西川を学ぶ。風来先生と同所にて常に往来す。錦絵は翁の工夫なりといふ。²⁷

23 Cf. Shiba 1975 [1811]: 20. For the English translation, cf. French 1974: 29.

24 In Harunobu's time, the term “*bijinga*” was gender neutral and also included handsome men. As Julie Nelson Davis has demonstrated, the exclusive association of the term “*bijinga*” with “pictures of beautiful women” occurred only in the 1790s, cf. Davis 2007: 7, 62–64.

25 Cf., for example, Lane 1978: 99–104.

26 For a comparison of Harunobu's composition of a boy riding a hobby horse with a Chinese print featuring the auspicious motif of a boy riding a *qilin* (Jp. *kirin*), cf. Bradel 2018: 78.

27 For the text and translation, cf. Ishigami 1994: 369; Tanabe/Thompson: 249.

As with the previous accounts, Chūryō, too, omitted Harunobu's pre-*nishiki-e* career and emphasised his status as the first *nishiki-e* artist. While modern ukiyo-e scholars often cite this passage to support the claim that Harunobu trained under Sukenobu, it remains unclear why this statement was not included in any edition of *Ukiyo-e ruikō*. This omission is particularly puzzling given that *Hōgu kago* was written around the same time as Nanpo's first version of *Ukiyo-e ruikō* and Shinshichi's *Kokin yamato ukiyo-e no shinkei*. One possible explanation is that the authors and editors of *Ukiyo-e ruikō* were unaware of Chūryō's account. Alternatively, they may have deliberately ignored it or considered this attribution to be untrue. Additionally, the passage could simply mean that Harunobu learned how to design ukiyo-e by studying Sukenobu's books. After all, these remained in high demand in Edo and elsewhere in the decades after the artist died in 1750, and it is known that Kyosen and the members of his poetry club greatly enjoyed Sukenobu's compositions.²⁸

Hence, despite their evident contradictions in Nanpo's, Kōkan's, and Chūryō's records, they still present authentic opinions about Harunobu. What they do have in common is their shared promotion and preservation of Harunobu's reputation as the leading specialist in images of beautiful people and as the first artist to utilise the *nishiki-e* technique, even at a time when Harunobu had long since passed away and *nishiki-e* had become a common consumer good.²⁹ The lasting impact of these endeavours, including their omissions and the conflicting information regarding Harunobu's training, on the study of ukiyo-e from the Edo period to the present highlights the effectiveness of these promotional efforts.

4 Cycles of Citation: From Japan to the World and Back Again

The perpetuation of Nanpo's, Kōkan's, and Chūryō's accounts in European and North American scholarship, with their emphasis on Harunobu's *nishiki-e bijinga*, his alleged renunciation of *yakusha-e*, and his supposed training under Nishimura Shigenaga or Nishikawa Sukenobu, began in 1886. In this year appeared the British surgeon William Anderson's (1842–1900) *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of a Collection of Japanese and Chinese Paintings in the British Museum* (London, 1886), which included a translation of Gesshin's *Zōhō ukiyo-e ruikō*.³⁰ From here, the

²⁸ Cf. Kobayashi 1977 [1970]: 33–36.

²⁹ Harunobu's *ehon* publishers similarly preserved his reputation by issuing books containing his illustrations in the years following his death, cf. Fujisawa 2003: 245–301.

³⁰ The manuscript of *Zōhō ukiyo-e ruikō* that Anderson translated belonged to the collection of the British diplomat Ernest Mason Satow (1843–1929), who acquired it during one of his early sojourns in

information found its way into Ernest Fenollosa's (1853–1908) *The Masters of Ukiyo-e. A Complete Historical Description of Japanese Paintings and Color Prints of the Genre School* (New York, 1896), Ernest Leroux's (1845–1917) auction catalogue of Philippe Burty's (1830–1890) collection titled *Catalogue de peintures et estampes japonaises, de miniatures indo-persanes et de livres relatifs à l'Orient et au Japon* (Paris, 1891), Edward F. Strange's (1862–1919) *Japanese Illustration: A History of the Arts of Wood-Cutting and Colour Printing in Japan* (London, 1897), Woldemar von Seidlitz's (1850–1922) *Geschichte des Japanischen Farbenholzschnitts* (Dresden, 1897), and finally Julius Kurth's (1870–1949) monograph *Suzuki Harunobu* (Munich, 1910), which is the first ever dedicated to Harunobu.³¹ The wide array of authors using this translation reflects not only the extensive network of ukiyo-e scholars at that time, but also their access to recent publications regardless of their country of origin.

Of these, Kurth was among the first to combine the information from Nanpo's various publications with Kōkan's account. As demand for his monograph increased, he published an expanded edition in 1923, which further supported the dissemination of this information. Kurth began his discussion of Harunobu's career by establishing the artist's life dates based on Kōkan's account, and immediately added a translation of Nanpo's record about the renunciation of actor prints. While Kurth proved this statement to be untrue by reproducing three of Harunobu's *yakusha-e* as plates and referring to several more such works, he was quick to discard them, designating the actors "stage rascals" ("Bühnenrassler") and arguing that Harunobu had only created kabuki pictures in the early years of his career because his presumed teacher, Nishimura Shigenaga, had been a "painter of actors" ("Schauspielmaler"). Instead, he argued that "the great virtuoso of colour was a completely different man than the portraitist of the mimes" ("Der große Farben-virtuos war ein völlig anderer Mensch, als der Bildniszeichner der Mimen"), thus elevating Harunobu's *nishiki-e bijinga* over his *benizuri yakusha-e*.³² Later in the text, Kurth returned to Kōkan's account of having created forgeries as another means to underscore Harunobu's status as the principal *bijinga* artist, worthy of emulation in every way.

The global impact of Kurth's publications can be observed in Noguchi Yonejirō's (1875–1947) monographs on Harunobu, published first in English in 1927 and followed by a Japanese version in 1929. Noguchi not only stayed very close to Kurth's

Japan between 1862 and 1883. Anderson himself had been an avid collector of Japanese prints during his tenure at the Imperial Naval College in Tokyo, where he taught surgery from 1873 to 1880. Satow's and Anderson's extensive collections were later acquired by, or donated to, the British Museum and Cambridge University Library, cf. Brown 1998; Koyama 2020.

31 Cf. Anderson 1886; Fenollosa 1896; Leroux 1891; Strange 1897; Seidlitz 1897; Kurth 1910.

32 Cf. Kurth 1910: 12–16.

tone and opinion but further demonstrated his cosmopolitanism by having the type of his Japanese book set horizontally and by reproducing the line about Harunobu being the “great virtuoso of colour,” a direct reference to Kurth, in Roman letters.³³ Other publications from this period, such as those by Yoshida Teruji (1901–1972), who, in 1942, attempted the first catalogue raisonné of Harunobu’s oeuvre by combining Japanese, European and North American sources, also contributed to this cyclical repetition of information.³⁴

Despite the interruption to scholarship caused by the Second World War, the depreciative attitude towards Harunobu’s early career and celebration of his *nishiki-e bijinga* as the result of his collaboration with the private poetry clubs began to circulate anew through Kondō Ichitarō’s (1910–1961) monograph of 1955. As this book was part of the prominent Kodansha Art Book series, it was translated into English the following year, thus providing Kondō a similarly global platform as enjoyed by Noguchi.³⁵ This book, too, contained the reproduction of one of Harunobu’s *yakusha-e*, yet again this segment of his oeuvre was dismissed as “show[ing] hardly any of the distinguishing features that mark his subsequent work. In fact, these early prints were not much more than outright imitations of [Torii] Kiyomitsu.”³⁶ As Kondō mostly reiterated Kurth’s and Noguchi’s assessments without adding much new information, it can be said that his monograph followed a path similar to Gesshin’s version of *Ukiyo-e ruikō*, in that it was based on information recorded decades ago and passed down to European and North American scholars through its English translation. In turn, some scholars of the new post-war generation would regard it as an authentic source of new knowledge from a Japanese specialist on Japanese art.³⁷

5 “Torii Really Can No Longer Beat Harunobu”

Discussions about Harunobu’s *benizuri-e* period, and especially his *yakusha-e*, remained inconclusive throughout the next decades as these works supported neither the claim made in *Ukiyo-e ruikō* that Harunobu had been trained by Shigenaga, nor Chūryō’s account that gives Sukenobu as Harunobu’s teacher. This left the

33 Cf. Noguchi 1927: 6.

34 Cf. Yoshida 1942.

35 Cf. Kondō 1955; Kondo 1956.

36 Kondo 1955: n.p, opposite pl. 6.

37 One example is David G. Chibbett, who was the Assistant Keeper of the Japanese Collection at the British Museum at the time and also worked as a translator for the Kodansha International publishing company. Despite international scholarship having dismissed the possibility of either Shigenaga or Sukenobu having been Harunobu’s teacher since the late 1960s, quoting *Ukiyo-e ruikō* and Kondō’s publication, he still introduced Harunobu as Shigenaga’s student in 1977. Cf. Chibbett 1977.

researchers somewhat perplexed, as they struggled to interpret the stylistic similarities between Harunobu's works and those of Torii Kiyomitsu I (1735–1785) and Torii Kiyohiro (fl. ca. 1737–1773). One reason for this confusion was the exclusive association of the Torii school artists with “primitive” *benizuri yakusha-e*, despite their notable achievements in other subjects, including *bijinga*. This image was further reinforced by Nanpo's poem, in which he portrayed Harunobu as an artist whose compositions could not even be surpassed by compositions of the market-leading Torii school.

The confusion about Harunobu's training was eventually resolved through the controversial debate between Hayashi Yoshikazu (1922–1999) and Kobayashi Tadashi in the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, Hayashi was able to prove previous claims about Harunobu's training under Shigenaga to be untrue through a thorough analysis of their *ehon*. His investigations revealed that an announcement for Harunobu's sequel to Shigenaga's *Souvenirs of Edo (Ehon Edo miyage 絵本江戸みやげ, 1753)*, which appeared under the title *Souvenirs of Edo Continued (Ehon zoku Edo miyage 絵本続江戸土産, 1768)*, was only included in the third reprint of Shigenaga's book, which was published alongside Harunobu's sequel. Significantly, it was a composition in Harunobu's book that included a reference to the kabuki schedule of 1767 that served as the key to this issue. Hayashi moreover maintained that Shigenaga had passed away several years before Harunobu's debut, which rendered a direct connection unlikely. Instead, and following Chūryō's record, he argued for Harunobu's training under Sukenobu not only because Harunobu had based many of his designs on the Kamigata artist's compositions, but also because Harunobu's name was recorded in the Nishikawa family register (*Nishikawa-ke kakochō 西川家過去帳*), as Ōhashi Noriyasu had discovered in 1962.³⁸

In contrast, Kobayashi countered that Sukenobu had passed away even earlier than Shigenaga, and that the claim about the family register could not be verified either after it had been lost in a fire. He continued that there was also no reason why Harunobu worked so closely in the style of the Torii school artists in his *benizuri yakusha-e* if he had indeed trained under Sukenobu.³⁹ Over the next decades, Kobayashi continued to emphasise the importance of Harunobu's *benizuri-e* for the formation of his later *nishiki-e*, pointing particularly to the depictions of the *onnagata* Segawa Kikunōjō II (1741–1773) as serving as “the prototype for the model of the Harunobu beauty” and continuing to highlight his stylistic closeness to the Torii school artists.⁴⁰

³⁸ Cf. Hayashi 2011 [1964]: 37–41.

³⁹ Cf. Kobayashi 1966a; 1966b; 1970.

⁴⁰ Kobayashi maintained this statement over the course of his career, cf. Kobayashi 1966b: 23; 2019: 38–46.

The trope of this “Harunobu beauty” that Kobayashi evoked in these discussions had been established and carried through centuries of historiography in a manner similar to Harunobu’s supposed disdain for *yakusha-e*. Beginning with the praise of Harunobu’s *nishiki-e bijinga* by Nanpo, Kōkan, and Chūryō, and reinforced by Gesshin’s description of Harunobu as an “*ukiyo bijinga*” artist, the concept of a distinct “Harunobu beauty” was formalised in modern scholarship by Julius Kurth, when he maintained that Harunobu’s small and slender figures were “graceful creatures” (“graziöse Geschöpfe”) characterised by an “exaggerated daintiness, a volitional naiveté, a charming coquetry” (“eine Überzierlichkeit, eine gewollte Naivität, eine anmutige Koketterie”).⁴¹ In 1959, Kondō had condensed this and comparable descriptions by authors active in the early twentieth century into a notion in which “the human figures appearing [in Harunobu’s works] have, first of all, thin hands and feet, and in a sense, they are as delicate as dolls and moreover as lyrical as if seeing a dream.”⁴² Kobayashi had similarly defined the “Harunobu beauty” in the 1970s as “reveal[ing] a gentle, slender-hipped style that seems to break down at the touch of the hand and is not associated with sensual expressions.”⁴³ That this form already appeared in Harunobu’s early compositions was confirmed by Kōno Motoaki in 1985, when he, in unison with Kobayashi’s initial observation, postulated that “within these *benizuri yakusha-e*, Harunobu’s aesthetic qualities already surface, and it is a fact that elements of the so-called Harunobu style are already foreshadowed.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, despite the increasing references to Harunobu’s *benizuri-e* in surveys of his oeuvre, these works were often overlooked in favour of the *nishiki-e bijinga*, particularly his depictions of the city beauties named by Nanpo in *Ukiyo-e ruikō* or the compositions that fall into the category of *fūryū mitate-e*.

The formal outline of the slender beauty associated with Harunobu’s name was brought back into focus in 2002, when Harunobu’s book-length play synopsis of the 1761 *kaomise* performance *Young Warriors Returning Home Gloriously* (*Wakamusha kokyō no nishiki* 壮士故郷錦) was publicly presented in the 2002 landmark exhibition *Suzuki Harunobu: The Master of Youth. Appearance of Edo’s Colorist* at the Chiba City Museum of Art. Upon its inspection and comparison with Harunobu’s single-sheet actor prints, Asano Shūgō found that one of Harunobu’s earliest such compositions “could be essentially the same design”⁴⁵ as one by Kiyomitsu, with the only difference that Harunobu had drawn the actor’s figure as a mirror image of Kiyomitsu’s. It is noteworthy that Asano continued to highlight the slenderness and

⁴¹ Kurth, 1910: 11.

⁴² Kondō 1959: 75.

⁴³ Cf. Kobayashi 1973: 74.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kōno 1985: 128.

⁴⁵ Asano 2002: 300.

perceived frailty of the figures as being a shared feature with Kiyomitsu, especially when he described the “contrast between Harunobu’s slightly plump figures and the more slender images of Kiyomitsu.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he concluded that “Harunobu imbued each figure with as much spirit as possible, while the facial expressions of Kiyomitsu’s are prim and standardized.”⁴⁷ In this way, he presented Harunobu’s perceived deviation from the Torii school’s model as a unique expression of the young artist’s intrinsic individuality.

What this interpretation does not take into account is the fact that Kiyomitsu was already an established artist at the time, and that he, as the leader of the school’s third generation, must have been particularly busy during the period of *kaomise* performances. In contrast, Harunobu had only just begun his career, and as the book was his first play synopsis, he was particularly meticulous in its creation.

Hence, as the debates about Harunobu’s training cannot be resolved through textual sources alone, it is important to study his early works comprehensively and comparatively. When looking beyond the distinction of *yakusha-e* and *bijinga*, as well as between *benizuri-e* and *nishiki-e*, it seems not too far-fetched to suggest that he, as a young and emerging artist, carefully assessed the market and actively chose to use the works of specific senior masters, such as Shigenaga, Sukenobu, and Kiyomitsu, as models for his own compositions. Through this strategy, Harunobu secured a foothold in the competitive print market while also establishing himself as a versatile artist capable of creating compositions on a wide range of subjects. For these reasons, it is now generally accepted that Harunobu was, most likely, an autodidact.

6 Conclusion: Looking Beyond the Narrative

In sum, the reasons for the marginalisation of Harunobu’s *benizuri yakusha-e* does not stem solely from the limited or deliberately omitted information about his training in the accounts of his contemporaries. Rather, this tendency in ukiyo-e scholarship must be understood in the context of the cycles of citation within both past and present art historiographic practices. These cycles perpetuate earlier claims that had been made as a means of promoting Harunobu as the foremost creator of *nishiki-e bijinga*, regardless of whether these claims were made during his lifetime, based on memories of him decades after his death, or rooted in the unwavering belief in the accuracy of these accounts by subsequent generations of scholars who had limited access to his works of the early 1760s.

⁴⁶ Asano 2002: 300.

⁴⁷ Asano 2002: 300.

It is only in recent years that Harunobu's *yakusha-e* have received increasing attention, and that their significance for his *nishiki-e* compositions in terms of style and formal outline has not only been recognised but can be supported through pictorial evidence. Additionally, as exhibitions move beyond previous practices of focusing solely on very early ukiyo-e and ending in the 1740s with Toyonobu's works, or starting immediately with Harunobu's or later artists' *nishiki-e*, new insights into the trends of ukiyo-e design at the time of Harunobu's debut in the 1760s have emerged. Examples of this shift are the extensive exhibition *Early Ukiyo-e: Power of the Woodblock, Power of the Bush* (2016) and the major retrospective of Harunobu's oeuvre, titled simply *Harunobu from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (2017), both of which were held at the Chiba City Museum of Art and which presented several of Harunobu's pre-*nishiki-e* prints. Moreover, the distinction between *yakusha-e* and *bijinga*, as well as the limiting translation of the latter term to denote only "pictures of beautiful women," are increasingly being dismantled as has been demonstrated in the pioneering exhibitions *Edo's 'Handsome Men': Men within Edo culture* (Ōta Memorial Museum of Art, 2013) and *A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Edo-Period Prints and Paintings (1600–1868)* (Royal Ontario Museum, 2016).

In this regard, when the prevailing image of Harunobu as an artistic genius who suddenly transformed from an average designer of "primitive" *benizuri yakusha-e* to the celebrated star designer of brilliantly coloured *nishiki-e bijinga*, as established by Nanpo, Kōkan, and Chūryō and as continued by twentieth-century scholars, is put into perspective, new avenues for investigation emerge. This perspective allows us to address and dispel the deliberate omissions and false associations made centuries ago as a means of promoting an individual artist rather than perpetuating them through cycles of citation.

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