

Rethinking *Ukiyo-e* through the Eyes of Others

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Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe and in United States, *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵), images of the “floating world” mass-produced in Japan throughout the Edo period (江戸時代, 1603–1868), attracted particular attention from collectors and emerging artists for their perceived exoticism and artistic styles. Notably Impressionists, searching for a means to renovate academic art, found new sources of inspiration in *ukiyo-e* prints and the elements from the unfamiliar genre that looked new to their eyes. Western writers and collectors compiled collections, produced catalogues, and carried out research about *ukiyo-e*, but similar scholarly work was not yet being done in Japan.¹ Aware of both this lack of research and the importance Westerners attributed to *ukiyo-e*, Japanese writer Kafū Nagai (永井荷風, 1879–1959), himself captivated by Edo period arts produced for the *chōnin* (町人) urban commoners of Edo, was among the first to introduce Western research on *ukiyo-e* to Japan.²

In this paper, taking in consideration issues concerning the development of Japonism in Western countries, I direct my attention toward how the eyes of the others, in this case the eyes of Western collectors and connoisseurs who praised *ukiyo-e* as a form of art, enabled Kafū to rethink *ukiyo-e* as typical Japanese art. He not only quoted Western studies but also expressed his own interpretations and feelings, unveiling what *Nihon-rashii* (日本らしい, Japaneseness) meant to him. This paper aims to highlight Kafū’s searching for his own definition of Japaneseness through *ukiyo-e* and illustrates inconsistencies in his assertions.

1. *Ukiyo-e* landscapes and Western linear perspective

Kafū Nagai started to be interested in the *ukiyo-e* prints during his years in America (1903–1907) and France (1907–1908) where he obtained a systematic knowledge about the Edo period woodblock prints from books and illustrated volumes produced by European and American Japanisants.³ Then, in the Taishō period (大正時代, 1912–1926), he attempted to evaluate the Japanese beauty and essence inside *ukiyo-e* through the Western knowledge he had mastered.⁴ ‘*Ukiyo-e* landscapes and Edo famous places’ (「浮世絵の山水画と江戸名所」) *Ukiyo-e no sansuiga to Edo meisho*, 1913) is an essay in

¹ Jun’ichi Ōkubo 大久保純一, *Ukiyo-e: kara-han* [Ukiyo-e: color edition]『浮世絵: カラー版』(Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2008), i.

² Regarding publication about *ukiyo-e* available in Japan in the same period, Kafū was aware of the issue of *Consequences of a Mischievous Pen* (『筆禍史』*Hitsukashi*, 1911) by the journalist Gaikotsu Miyatake 宮武外骨 (1867–1955) which he quoted in his essay ‘Appreciation of *ukiyo-e*’ (「浮世絵の鑑賞」) ‘Ukiyo-e no kanshō’, 1914). That article, together with other essays mostly concerning *ukiyo-e*, was issued in 1920 under the title *On the Arts of Edo* (『江戸芸術論』*Edo geijutsuron*) by Shumyōdō (春陽堂) in a separate book. In that collection two other essays, one related to Edo drama, ‘Features of Edo theater’ (「江戸演劇の特徴」) ‘Edo engeki no tokuchō’, 1914) and the other about *kyōka* (狂歌) comical verse, ‘Talking about *kyōka* poetry’ (「狂歌を論ず」) ‘Kyōka wo ronzu’, 1918), prove that Kafū Nagai had a special interest in and was widely read in the literary and artistic production of the Edo period.

³ Minami Asuka 明日香南, *Nagai Kafū no Nyūyōku, Pari, Tōkyō-zōkei no kotoba* [New York, Paris, Tokyo in Nagai Kafū: Words of Landscape9]『永井荷風のニューヨーク・パリ・東京一造景の言葉』, (Tokyo: Kanrin shobō, 2007), p.319.

⁴ Minami, *Nagai Kafū no Nyūyōku, Pari, Tokyo*, p.314.

which Kafū laid out his first attempt at critiquing Edo art. It was published on July 1st, 1913 in the journal *Mita Literature* (三田文学, *Mita Bungaku*), vol.4 no.7.⁵

Western connoisseurs probably claimed that Hiroshige Ichiryūsai (一龍齋広重, 1797–1858), along with Hokusai Katsushika (葛飾北斎, 1760–1849), were the two greatest masters of landscape among Japanese artists. On the basis of the linear perspective of Western painting and the *shasei* (写生, drawing from nature) common in *ukiyo-e*, these two great masters often depicted the same landscape. However, the differences between their artistic styles are evident at a glance. Hokusai frequently added the *Nanga* (南画) style and Western painting style to the conventional *ukiyo-e*, but Hiroshige seems to conform exclusively to the style of Itchō Hanabusa (英一蝶, 1652–1724), who came from the Kanō school (狩野派, *Kanōha*). Hokusai's artistic style was intense and strong, Hiroshige's was gentle and silent.⁶

Ukiyo-e, as Kafū here writes, despite its origins in the nearly isolated Japan of the Edo period, was not free from the influence of Western art, which could be seen in the use of linear perspective in landscapes. In a few words, Western linear perspective, reinvented during the Italian Renaissance, consists of reducing three-dimensional space into two dimensions by a series of geometrical and mathematical operations. Through French research about *ukiyo-e*, Kafū knew that around the end of the Edo period, Japanese artists were influenced by Dutch copperplate engraving and they had attempted to apply perspective and *chiaroscuro* in their prints.⁷ Besides, it was partly because of the use of European perspective that Japanese *ukiyo-e* were easily assimilated and acknowledged by Western connoisseurs. European probably appreciated those prints because Hokusai and Hiroshige were trying to replicate linear perspective or something very close to it. Briefly, during the height of Japanism, Westerners did not realize that what at first looked exotic to them was instead clearly understandable because of the involvement of elements they were used to.

Concerning the *shasei*, although Hiroshige's technique was often more elaborate than that of Hokusai, it was always at a glance neater and lighter than Hokusai's *sōga* (草画, ink painting). To make a literary comparison, Hokusai is similar to the travelogues (紀行文, *kikōbun*) that largely make use of beautiful *kanji* (漢字) adjectives, while Hiroshige resembles *gesaku* writers (戯作者, *gesakusha*) who wrote in great detail, fluently and gently. As mentioned above, we think that Hokusai's masterpieces of his mature period sometimes are not Japanese (日本らしからぬ, *Nihon rashikaranu*), but on the contrary, in Hiroshige's works there is an immediate local sensibility, unique to Japan (日本らしき, *Nihon rashiki*). Hiroshige's art (美術, *bijutsu*) could not exist apart from his native land. I believe Hiroshige's landscapes and Kōrin Ōgata (尾形光琳, 1658–1716)'s ornamental flowers (花卉, *kaki*) to be the most

⁵ Tatsurō Inagaki 稲垣達郎 et al., in *Nagai Kafū zenshū* [Complete Works of Nagai Kafū] 『永井荷風全集』 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1992), vol. 10, p.354.

⁶ Kafū Nagai 荷風永井, 'Ukiyo-e no sansuiga to Edo meisho' 「浮世絵の山水画と名所」, in *Nagai Kafū zenshū*, vol. 10, pp.174–175. I use as a text source for the English translation the *Complete Works* published in 1992 by Iwanami Shoten that uses the version issued by Shun'yōdō. The reason why I chose this edition is because the editors' approach is to provide the closest version of Kafū's intent.

⁷ Minami, *Nagai Kafū no Nyūyōku, Pari, Tokyo*, p.316.

valuable art that conveys the peculiarities of the Japanese milieu.⁸

Kafū here claims that Hiroshige's prints convey more Japaneseness than Hokusai's mature period works. Looking at these great masters' works, it is true that Hokusai's prints show more dynamism, while Hiroshige's prints convey silence and sensibility. According to Kafū, Hokusai's mature works, along with the use of perspective and the addition of imported Prussian blue, also clearly presents features of Chinese art.⁹ Conversely, although the use of the Western perspective is clearly perceivable in Hiroshige's landscapes, these are more silent and simpler and for this reason Kafū defined Hiroshige's art as *unique to Japan (Nihon-rashii)*, because it conveys an immediate local sensibility.

2. Hokusai Katsushika as seen by Westerners

Some months after the publication of "Ukiyo-e landscapes and Edo famous places", Kafū Nagai began questioning why among Japanese *ukiyo-e* masters Hokusai was so highly esteemed in the West to the extent that a great number of monographs were dedicated to him. In 'Katsushika Hokusai as seen by Westerners' (「泰西人の観たる葛飾北斎」, 'Taiseijin no mitaru Katsushika Hokusai') first appearing in the magazine *Mita Literature* in 1913, he focuses his attention on Western works concerning the well-known *ukiyo-e* master Hokusai Katsushika and in the first paragraph mentions the following works.¹⁰

- Goncourt, Edmond de : *Hokusai* (『北斎研究』, *Hokusai kenkyū*, Paris, 1896)
- Revon, Michel : *Étude sur Hokusai* (『北斎研究』, *Hokusai kenkyū*, Paris, 1896)
- Holmes, Charles J. : *Hokusai (The Artist's Library, Number 1)* (『北斎研究』, *Hokusai kenkyū*, London, 1898)
- Perzyński, Friedrich : *Hokusai* (『北斎』, *Hokusai*, Bielefeld and Berlin, 1904)
- Gonse, Louis : *L'Art Japonais* (『日本美術』, *Nihon bijutsu*, Paris, 1883)

Kafū's pivotal question is "In the first place, why was Katsushika Hokusai so admired?"¹¹ Fundamentally, his responses are two. First one is that "The range of subjects is copious and limitless" and the second one is "representation of nature (*shasei*)".¹² Kafū ultimately stated that "Indeed, Hokusai's true value lies in his *shasei*".¹³

Kafū maintained that Western art critics had extensively praised Hokusai because of his *shasei*, depiction of nature, which was the element that made Hokusai closest to them among Japanese

⁸ Nagai, 'Ukiyo-e no sansuiga to Edo meisho', pp.174-175.

⁹ Nagai, 'Ukiyo-e no sansuiga to Edo meisho', p.172. Kafū uses the words Chinese painting (支那画, *shinaga*) and Chineseness (支那らしき, *shinarashiki*) in regards to the famous series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (富嶽三十六景, *Fugaku sanjūrokkei*, ca.1830-32) and *A Tour of Waterfalls in the Provinces* (諸国滝廻り, *Shokoku taki meguri*, ca. 1832).

¹⁰ October 1, 1913 published in the literary magazine *Mita Literature* vol.4, no.10. The title in the magazine was 'Oujin no mitaru Katsushika Hokusai' 「歌人の見たる葛飾北斎」, and it also displayed a chronological records of Hokusai. Tatsurō Inagaki 稲垣達郎 et al., in *Nagai Kafū zenshū*, pp.357-358.

¹¹ Kafū Nagai 永井荷風, 'Taiseijin no mitaru Katsushika Hokusai' 「泰西人の観たる葛飾北斎」, in *Nagai Kafū zenshū*, vol.10, p.186.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, p.187.

artists from the beginning.¹⁴ And he continued saying that it was for this reason the Japanists so energetically admired Hokusai as one of the best artists in the world.¹⁵ Hokusai had learned from Utamaro Kitagawa (喜多川歌麿, 1753–1806), famous for his depictions of beautiful women, and then from Kōkan Shiba (司馬江漢, 1747–1818), who was one of the Edo masters who studied and imitated Dutch painting styles, the techniques of oil painting and engraving, available to be learned during the Edo period through Dejima in Nagasaki.

Taking a view of *Hokusai Manga* (『北斎漫画』), both Japanese and foreigners equally experience an enthusiasm for the artist's *shasei* and the observation of things. Hokusai undertook detailed observations of the life of warriors, farmers, artisans, and tradesmen and the demeanor and postures of men and women of all ages, and he succeeded in drawing the characteristic peculiarities of everyone. *Hokusai Manga* succeeded in caricature and satire and for this reason Westerners associated him with Daumier (1808–1879), the French master of caricatures. Among the literary men of the same period, I would compare the brush strokes of Hokusai with the extremely sharp social observation of Sanba Shikitei (式亭三馬, 1776–1822) and Ikku Jippensha (十返舎一九, 1765–1831).¹⁶

However, an important factor should be considered here. Hokusai's illustrated books and landscape prints played a significant role in the appreciation of Japanese art among Western circles because they were more obtainable at the time of the Japanism vogue.¹⁷ Earlier *ukiyo-e* works, such as those of Harunobu Suzuki (鈴木春信, 1724–1770), were more difficult to lay hands upon, thus to collect and study Hokusai prints was easier at that time.¹⁸ A reason why French art critics such as Edmond de Goncourt (1822–1896) appreciated the works of Hokusai and elevated him to a preeminent position in art history was also connected with their contrast with the conservative academic view.¹⁹ In this sense, in Japanism circles, Hokusai's reputation was raised from “a fascinating painter” to “Japan's greatest painter.” This was also associated with a republican point of view. In fact, Hokusai, who in Japan was a common man and produced pictures for the common people, was proclaimed as a great painter for the masses by many French critics.²⁰ In addition, critics such as Théodore Duret (1838–1927) and de Goncourt called Japanese woodblock prints “impressions”. This means they had recognized an ideological affinity between those prints and the anti-academic Impressionists they were supporting, whose aesthetics were becoming definitive in the same period.²¹

Through the eyes of the others—in this case the volumes written by Westerners—Kafū realized that Hokusai was probably esteemed because Japanists found his works easier to understand. On the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nagai, 'Taiseijin no mitaru Katsushika Hokusai', p.187.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.189.

¹⁷ Toshio Watanabe, 'The Western Image of Japanese Art in the Late Edo Period', in *Modern Asian Studies*, vol.18, no.4, (1984), p.675.

¹⁸ Watanabe, 'The Western Image of Japanese Art', p.675.

¹⁹ Shigemi Inaga, 'The Making of Hokusai's Reputation in the Context of Japonisme', in *Japan Review*, no.15, (2003), p.83.

²⁰ Hiroyo Hakamata 袴田絃代 et al., *Hokusai to Japonisumu: Hokusai ga seiyō ni ataeta shōgeki* [Hokusai and Japanism: The impact of Hokusai in the West] 『北斎とジャポニスム: Hokusai が西洋に与えた衝撃』(Tokyo: Yomiuri shinbun honsha, 2017), p.29.

²¹ Inaga, 'The Making of Hokusai's Reputation in the Context of Japonisme', p.83.

contrary, it is probable that in Kafū's interpretation, Hiroshige's works, being more intimately linked to the Japanese homeland, were more difficult to grasp and thus more unique to Japan.

Conclusion

Japan's opening to the world saw Japanese arts and crafts gain widespread popularity in Europe and in the United States, and during the Meiji period (明治時代, 1868-1912) a great number of Japanese items reached Western countries. There, before Commodore Perry's arrival at Uraga in 1853, Japanese art was generally associated with porcelain and lacquer and was often mistaken as Chinese or Indian art.²² While in the rush for radical modernization in Meiji Japan, Edo indigenous production was not taken into consideration, Japanese products were exported overseas and thus Western interest in collecting printed books and woodcuts quickly grew.²³ In Europe and North America, *ukiyo-e* prints attracted particular attention among many collectors and new artists for their colors, styles, and compositions. As an example, the linear perspective that characterized *ukiyo-e* landscapes was an element that Westerners had unconsciously recognized.

In particular, French art critics have tended to praise Hokusai as one of the most important artists in art history, placing him at the same level of such European artists as Rembrandt, Michelangelo, and Goya.²⁴ Conversely, Kafū, even if he was influenced by Western research, developed a personal understanding of *ukiyo-e* landscapes that led him to praise Hiroshige's *ukiyo-e* landscapes for keeping something typical and characteristic of, and unique to Japan, which he defines as *Nihon-rashii*.

Undoubtedly, Kafū is worth considering for having introduced foreign research about *ukiyo-e* to Japan. The eyes of the others enabled him to find in *ukiyo-e* a value of Japaneseness that was unusual for the time and that makes his articles about *ukiyo-e* pioneering in the Japan of the 1910s. His considerations of Hiroshige's Japaneseness at the expense of Hokusai shows his praise and admiration for a form of art that was vanishing and that he wanted to preserve as cultural heritage, but they also demonstrate some inconsistencies. In his opinion, Hiroshige's works were more sentimental and depicted the old Japanese landscapes that were disappearing in modern Japan, but they clearly involved the use of linear perspective, which was a typical element of Western art about which Kafū was aware. Although *ukiyo-e* was developed and produced in the isolated Japan of the Edo period and conveyed an atmosphere of old Japan, it was not totally free from Western influence.

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²² Watanabe, 'The Western Image of Japanese Art', p.667.

²³ Ōkubo, *Ukiyo-e: kara- han*, ii; Ives Colta Feller, *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974) , pp.11-12.

²⁴ Inaga, 'The Making of Hokusai's Reputation in the Context of Japonisme', p.83.

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