

The Tradition of Text and Image in Edo Period Art

From early periods in Japan, there was a practice of combining text and image in art with words and pictures interacting in a symbiotic way. That is, a picture didn't merely illustrate the text, it complimented the text in some way that expressed an interrelationship between the two (text and image). In the **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: "eh-DOUGH"), this practice reached new heights of creativity.

By way of example, the *Poem Scroll with Deer* shown in the film *Edo Avant Garde* is a collaborative effort by **Tawaraya Sōtatsu** (俵屋宗達, d. 1643 CE, pronounced: "ta-WAH-RAH-yah | SOO-taht-sue") and **Hon'ami Kōetsu** (本阿見光悦, 1558-1637 CE, pronounced: "HOHN-ah-me | KOH-eh-t-sue") (see image below). The format is a handscroll, which is meant to be unrolled section by section and viewed in an intimate setting. The design consists of an interplay between calligraphy, painting, and poetry. These three arts were considered the highest of art in East Asia. The poetry is taken from the *Shin Kokinshū* (新古今集, *New Collection of Old and New Poems*, pronounced: "shin | koh-KIN-shoe"), a poetry anthology compiled in 1205 CE. This adds another layer of meaning to the painting due to the veneration of classic poetry in Japan.



The calligraphy, poetry, and paintings complement one another, hint at one another, or together make allusions or references to yet another image or idea. This is very different from the type of illustration that would repeat what appears in a text.

For example, although not pictured here, the first poem in the scroll is written *around* the painting of a buck and reads in translation:

Ah, the Musashi Plain—
No matter how far I go,
There is no end to autumn.

What sort of wind blows at its outer reaches?

[Translation by Professor Paul S. Atkins of the University of Washington. *From Masterpieces of Japanese Painting: A Symposium*, 2007. Article by Miyeko Murase “The *Deer Scroll* by Kōetsu and Sōtasu Reappraised.”]

The cry of deer is often paired with motifs or references to autumn in Japan. The **Musashi Plain** (武蔵野, pronounced: “MOO-sah-she”) was once a wild area that has been absorbed into the densely populated section of North Tokyo. But as long ago as the 10th century, Musashi was associated with autumn. Thus, the image of the deer doesn’t illustrate the poem but rather references the poetic connection of deer to autumn and Musashi Plain to autumn.

This kind of multiple references, illusions, and layers of meaning is prevalent in Edo period arts, from poetry and painting, to woodblock prints and the **Kabuki** theater (歌舞伎, pronounced: “kah-BOO-key”). It is part of the playfulness discussed in the essay in Module One on “The Art of Play in Japanese Art.” But it was also a standard way of handling text and image, even in narrative stories.

Japanese woodblock prints provide many examples of the various ways in which text and image interact in pictorial designs. Over the course of the Edo period, there was an explosion in the publishing industry and a rapid rise in literacy among the Japanese. Woodblock printed books were sold in stalls along with single woodblock prints as well as in bookstores. As in Japan today, booksellers traded in a huge variety of topics, including geography, travel, famous places, long novels, short stories, books that were tailored to specific audiences such as children or women, and so forth. As early as 1692, a catalogue of publications in **Kyoto** (京都, pronounced: “KYOH-toe”) listed over 7,000 current titles and there were over 100 shops in Kyoto alone (Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period*, University of California Press: 2006, pp. 1-2).

Sometimes, you don’t even need to know the meaning of the text in order to see visually a play between the images and text in a work. This is often best illustrated in the many woodblock prints from the Edo period. For example, in the image below, the irregular and spidery lines of text in the upper left compliment the sense of blowing wind in the clothing of the woman.



Utagawa Kuniyoshi (歌川 国芳, 1798-1861 CE, pronounced: “uu-TAH-GAH-wah | ku-KNEE-YO-she”)

No. 2 of a five-sheet set of woodblock prints of *Collecting Brine*

Woodblock print; c. 1828-1830

Minneapolis Institute of Art

Sometimes the designer plays with the images and text in other ways. In the pair of woodblock prints below, explanatory texts are contained within shapes with curved borders, the titles of the prints sit within red vertical shapes (cartouches), the identification of the figures are situated within yellow vertical rectangles, and the designer’s name (**Tsukioka Yoshitoshi**, 大蘇芳年, 1839-1892 CE, pronounced: “tsu-KEY-OH-kah | yo-SHE-toe-she”) is given within white rectangles.

That isn’t all. When seen as a pair, the vertical rectangles with Yoshitoshi’s name and the round seal above the rectangles are placed close to one another on each page, while the narrative/explanatory text within the curved borders are juxtaposed on opposite ends of each page. The red cartouches (with the titles of the prints) are both placed in the upper right portion, but only one is next to the explanatory text shape. Even if you were to switch these prints around, you will still see an asymmetrical design in which the writing emphasizes the dynamic, diagonal thrusts of the overall designs.



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892)

Left: **Kurikara Kengorō**, (俱利伽羅劍五郎, pronounced: “ku-rec-KAH-RAH | ken-GO-ROW”)

Right: **Hohodemi-no-mikoto** (炎出見命, pronounced: “ho-ho-day-me | no | me-COAT-oh”)

1867, 8th lunar month

Woodblock prints; 1867

Minneapolis Institute of Art

The juxtaposition of image and text can also be done using only black and white, with little or no color. On the next page below is a minimalist rendering of a frog next to grasses, with a poem to the left. The appearance of the writing in which Japanese *kana* (Japanese syllabic writing system, 仮名, pronounced: “kah-NAH”) and *kanji* (character, 漢, pronounced: “KAHN-jee”) run together seems to mimic the delicate nature of the grasses and echoes the curves in the frog’s legs and body.

Another aspect of this design is the use of negative space as an integral element. This is common in many Japanese arts, even to the use of silence (as a verbal type of negative space) in theatrical arts and Japanese anime. (Check out the long scene of near complete silence in the film *My Neighbor Totoro* (pronounced: “TOE-toe-row”), when two sisters are waiting for their father at a bus stop on a rainy night.) The painter of this frog painting put the frog to the right of center and the script slightly higher to the left of center, thus creating a sense of balance to the design.



Unknown artist, "Frog"
Ink and color on paper, 19th century
Minneapolis Institute of Art

An illustration can even be more abstract than one might think. In the painting on the next page, Tawaraya Sōtatsu painted a moon underneath the calligraphy by his collaborator Hon'ami Kōetsu. The poem is from the *Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times* (*Kokin wakashū*, 古今和歌集, pronounced: "koh-KEEN | wah-KAH-shoe"), and the painting dates to the early 1610s.



Poem Card by Kōetsu and Sōtasu
Ink and gold on gold-decorated paper
Minneapolis Institute of Art

The poem in this card reads:

“In the harbor / where the waters converge / the waves are deep red as the / floating autumn leaves swirl and eddy.”

A second poem card in this series reads: “The autumn moon shines brilliantly / upon the mountains / illuminating every / fallen colored leaf.”

(Translation from the Minneapolis Institute of Art website)

Autumn imagery abounds in these two poems and in the poem card shown here. Moon viewing is an activity that takes place in the autumn, and any mention of colored leaves invokes the Japanese maple trees which turn from brilliant green to many colors of red and yellow in the fall. Notice as well how the poem on the card with the moon in the background does not mention the moon directly. Instead, the image of the moon as background complements the connection made between the harbor waves and autumn leaves in the water.

Finally, text does not always have to appear within the image or illustration. In a scene from the *Illustrated Scrolls of the Tales of Saigyō* (西行, pronounced: “SIGH-ghee-yoh”) (*Saigyō monogatari emaki*, 西行物語絵巻, pronounced: “SIGH-ghee-yoh | moe-NO-GAH-TAH-ree | EH-mah-key”), the text of the story about the wandering Buddhist priest is placed on the right side of the image. An illustration from the story takes up the left portion of this section of a handscroll. A handscroll was meant to be unrolled only one section at a time, making it an

intimate type of art, viewed by only one or two people at a time. This would be somewhat like opening a book to view only two pages at a time and then turning the page to move to the next two pages. Here, the reader looks at this one section, then rolls that section up while unrolling the next section of the scroll and moving on to the next scene and narrative.



Fragment of the *Illustrated Scrolls of the Tales of Saigyō* (*Saigyō monogatari emaki*)
Ink and color on paper, 17th century
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Thus, there were many ways in which text was considered an integral part of a composition, rather than something separate from the images. The two—image and text—played off against one another in a design, with each having their own role in bringing a fuller “picture” to the viewer’s mind of whatever it was that the artists intended to express.

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Recommended further reading and resources:

The images used in this essay and many others can be found on the Minneapolis Institute of Art website: <https://new.artsmia.org>

Christine Guth, *Art of Edo Japan: The Artist and the City 1615-1868* (Yale University Press, 2010)

Stephen Addiss, *How to Look at Japanese Art* (Echo Point Books and Media, 2015)