Julie Nelson Davis


As art historians, we are usually dealing with the products of what we, for the sake of simplicity, call artists. In the case of Japanese prints in the *ukiyo-e* tradition as well as illustrations to albums and popular novels, Tijs Volker in his study *Ukiyo-e Quartet* of 1949 was probably the first to analyze the collaboration of the various craftsmen involved, that is the publisher, the designer, the block-cutter, and the printer.¹ In her recently published study, *Partners in print. Artistic collaboration and the Ukiyo-e market*, Julie Nelson Davis takes a big step forward, analyzing collaboration in the creative process that precedes the material production. In four chapters, she analyzes various forms of such processes, all set in the late eighteenth century, what we often tend to call the ‘Golden age of *ukiyo-e*.’ In chapter 1 Davis takes us to the world of the painter Toriyama Sekien (1712-88) and his students, among whom Kitagawa Utamaro (1753?-1806) is probably best-known; in chapter 2, the print designers Kitao Shigemasa (1739-1820) and Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-92) and their publishers Tsutaya Jūsaburō (1750-97) and Yamazaki Kinbei; and similarly Torii Kiyonaga (1752-1815) and his publisher Nishimuraya Yohachi in chapter 3; and finally the writer Santō Kyōden (1761-1816) and his illustrator and fellow-student Kitao Masayoshi (1764-1824) in chapter 4.

Before embarking on the four cases that Davis selected for her cultural inquiry into ‘the status of art, the definition of beauty, the physicality of the body, and the inquiry into the intellect’ (p. 19), all vital to the ‘floating world’ that *ukiyo-e* was, she presents a real in-depth analysis of that floating world. In this introduction, she discusses the city of Edo as the metropolis where it all begins as the birthplace of *ukiyo-e* culture, and where it also ends as the market,

that is the buyers, as well as what there is in between. Especially her discussion of the essence of any publication, what it is, what it requires, and for whom it is aimed, including the role of the publisher, drawing upon comparisons with their counterparts in the West, is very thought-provoking. And yet, even though this is an altogether lucid discussion of the agents and players involved, it also makes us realize that we are still ignorant about quite a few aspects. How, for example, should we understand the circumstance that some surimono prints are fairly common and others seem to be extremely rare, whereas other examples are even known in various different reprints? Nevertheless, this is indeed a very essential introduction to the four chapters that follow.

In Chapter 1, a print that was apparently made for private distribution by Toriyama Sekien (鳥山石燕), and formerly owned by the writer, poet and art critic Ōta Nanpo (大田南畝, 1749-1823), with a design of a young boy scared at the sight of a huge shishi-lion painted on a tsuitate screen and with still-lifes to the right and to the left of it, forms the inspiration for a thorough re-evaluation of the painter Toriyama Sekien and his position and role in his day. The painting on the screen is signed by Sekien, aged seventy-five, resulting in a dating to c.1786; a flowering cherry in a pot to the right is signed by Sekien’s female pupil Sekichū (石仲), and the boy, being comforted by his mother and his elder brother, is signed by Yūsuke (勇助), an early name of Kitagawa Utamaro (喜多川歌麿)—or could he just be responsible for the writing-desk with a pot of three peacock feathers?

Indeed, Sekien is now probably best-known as the assumed teacher of Utamaro, but as a painter he is almost completely forgotten and otherwise his work on spectres and ghosts is only recently enjoying some popularity in present-day Japan for some mistaken association with the contemporary world of manga and anime. (And contrary to what is stated later on, these volumes are printed in line with an extra block for delicate shading in tones of grey, cf. p. 145.) Moreover, only a few are aware that his impressively imaginative Toriyama-biko (鳥山彦) of 1773 ranks high on the list of the first ten colour-printed picture albums to have been produced. And so ‘Teaching the art of painting through print; a master painter, his students, and the illustrated book’ is a really appropriate title for this chapter dealing with major aspects in late eighteenth century ukiyo-e, a tradition where the classics and the self-created ‘floating world’ meet. A minor comment: as for the poetry that is assumed to be missing (p. 23), I would say that 1786 (the most likely date for a print signed by the ‘seventy-five years old Sekien’, born in 1712) is a time when poems were still largely absent on surimono prints. And if the presse-papier in shape of a hare would suggest a dating to 1795 (see note 80 on p. 204), I would suppose that