

CHAPTER 2

SUZUKI HARUNOBU AND HIS ENVIRONS

Nowadays the name of the ukiyo-e artist Suzuki Harunobu tends to be overshadowed by the names of the world-renowned Hokusai and Utamaro, but in the history of ukiyo-e he was a revolutionary figure we cannot forget. To be specific, within the world of ukiyo-e woodblock printing done primarily in ink (*sumizuri*) (Figure 3), Harunobu was the first artist to produce gorgeous woodblock illustrations printed with many colors (Figure 4). The sumptuousness of these prints, which added brilliant colors and delicate technique to what formerly were basically black and white ukiyo-e prints, created a sensation among Edo people of that time, truly overwhelming the entire country. These prints were called *Edo-e* (Edo pictures) or *nishiki-e* (literally “brocade pictures,” i.e. pictures that were like gorgeous textiles woven in multicolored patterns). They became a famous product of Edo overnight and were disseminated throughout the country as Edo souvenirs. Harunobu’s unique charming figures of women, depicted with the multiple color printing techniques at his command, took the world by a storm and gave rise to many imitators.

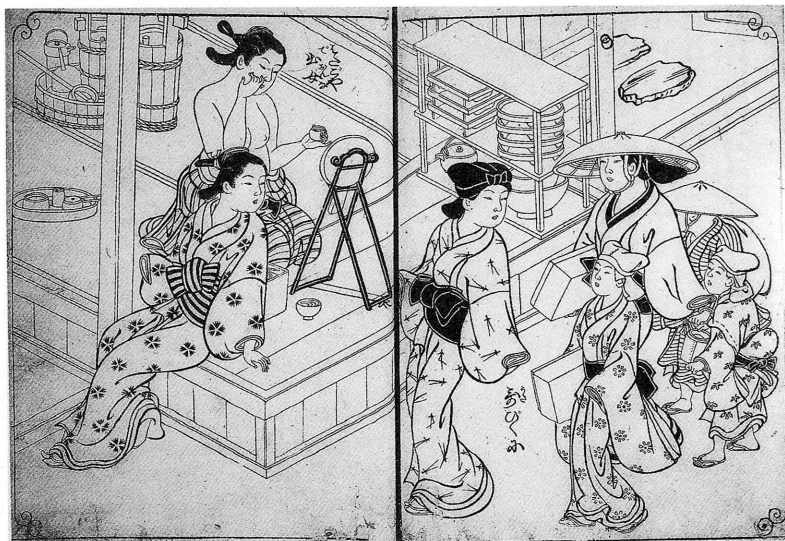


Figure 3. From the *Ukiyo zoku* (Sequel to the Floating World) by Hishikawa Moronobu, after *Ukiyo-e to jōnen*, vol. 10 of *Ningen no bijutsu*, Tokyo: Gakushū Kenkyūsha, 1990.

Early ukiyo-e woodblock prints were printed in ink only, but it seems that colors were desirable, so some were colored by hand.



Figure 4. *Weaving* by Suzuki Harunobu (*nishiki-e chûban*), after *Harunobu*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1965.

The bright color combinations of the kimono, along with the brilliant red background, must have astonished the people of that time used to *sumizuri* printing.

However, Harunobu's period of activity was surprisingly short, encompassing only about ten years from 1760 to 1770. Harunobu died in 1770; he is said to have been forty-six years old, so one could say he died at the prime of his life. Calculating backwards from his death date, he would have been in his mid thirties when he started producing ukiyo-e for the public, an age which is a little unusual for that time. As is the case with most ukiyo-e artists, we do not know very much about Harunobu's birth and upbringing or his career. Hayashi Yoshikazu, in his book *Enpon kenkyū: Harunobu*, explores Harunobu's background in great detail and draws some very interesting conclusions.³ Hayashi's research illuminates some important relationships between Harunobu's biography and his work, and I would like to treat some of those here.

Since the name Suzuki Harunobu seems befitting for an ukiyo-e artist, at first glance one might think that Harunobu is a sobriquet or art name. However, in reality this was his real name. Harunobu's ancestor Suzuki was a retainer of Tokugawa Ieyasu (the first shogun of the Edo bakufu) when he was living in Mikawa (present-day eastern part of Aichi prefecture), and accompanied Ieyasu when he moved to Edo (present-day Tokyo) and established Edo castle. Thus Harunobu was from a samurai family of good lineage. For generations, the family served as *batamoto* (high-ranking direct retainers of the shogun). Since Harunobu's father Shigekazu continued the family line, he should have been a *batamoto* as well. However, Harunobu's grandfather Shigemitsu had been exposed as having been involved in the financing of gambling and entertainment and he was sentenced to exile. Shigekazu was also implicated and evicted from his post. When Harunobu's grandfather and father were relieved of their posts and banished, they moved to Kyoto and made it their home.

While it is not certain whether Harunobu was born in Edo or Kyoto, it is speculated that he was brought up in the city of Kyoto and in due course became a pupil of the great Kyoto ukiyo-e artist Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671-1750), whereupon he aspired to become an ukiyo-e painter. Curiously, Suzuki Harunobu's name and death date appear in

3. Hayashi 1964, pp. 15-110.

the Nishikawa family death registry. Harunobu's achieving fame for freely and skillfully using the artifice called "*mitate-e*," modeled upon the classical world, after returning to the newly risen metropolis of Edo, is probably connected with his having been a pupil of Sukenobu in the traditional city of Kyoto.

Harunobu's spectacular success after returning to Edo in large part can be ascribed to his talent, but the realization of such epoch-making achievements probably would not have been possible through his endeavors alone. Here I must bring forward the name of Ôkubo Tadanobu (1722-1777), one of the patrons responsible for making the world aware of Suzuki Harunobu as an ukiyo-e artist. Tadanobu was a *batamono* drawing a high salary of 1600 *koku* from the government. At the same time he was a *haikai* poet with the pen name of Kikurensa Kyosen—a dilettante with multiple interests who also enjoyed composing *kyôka*, writing *gesaku* (popular literature), and painting. One of Kyosen's passionate interests was the production of *egoyomi* or calendar prints.

Egoyomi were illustrated calendars indicating the "large months" (months with thirty days according to the lunar calendar) of the year, which were produced as gifts for presentation the beginning of the year. Kyosen was zealous about the production of *egoyomi*, and made ingenious plans sparing no extravagance (Figure 5). This passion gave rise to an explosive fad among cultivated Edoites, and in 1765 another *batamoto* named Abe Masahiro (*haikai* name: Suikôdô Sakei) even held *egoyomi* exchange meetings with a group called "Daishokai" (Large and Small Association). Members of this group came to vie for superiority in the workmanship and design of *egoyomi*. Spurred on by their mutual enthusiasm, they unstintingly poured the wealth and cultivation at their disposal into the production of these prints, commissioning specialized ukiyo-e artists to do drawings and engaging carvers and printers as well. An artist who caught Kyosen's eye amid this craze was Suzuki Harunobu, as yet largely unknown in Edo.



Figure 5. *Mitate of Ebisu* by Suzuki Harunobu. *Egoyomi* calendar print (*nishiki-e chûban*), after *Komachi-biki*, vol. 3 of *Ukiyo-e hizô meihin shû*, Tokyo: Gakushû Kenkyûsha, 1992.

This young man with a cloth tied around his cheeks and holding a fishing pole and sea bream is a *mitate* of Ebisu (god of commerce and prosperity). Hidden within the lines describing the toy sea bream are the Chinese characters for the numerals 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, which designate the “large” months in 1765.

One could say that ukiyo-e *nishiki-e* was born from Kyosen's passion for *egoyomi*. Yet there is another important patron who was involved in the development of the technique for printing multiple colors—Hiraga Gennai (1728-1779), who lived in the same part of Edo as Harunobu (Shirakabe-chô in Kanda). Gennai was also of samurai stock, but he was an unconventional person who relinquished his samurai status to become a scholar of natural science (*bakubutsugaku*) and a writer of fiction. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the birth of *nishiki-e* was made possible through Kyosen's conception and financial resources, together with the inventor Gennai's instruction in the new technique. Moreover, as can be surmised from the production process of *nishiki-e*, one must not forget the masterful skills of the carvers and printers in bringing it to completion.

Lastly, I would like to touch upon the people who enjoyed and appreciated Harunobu's ukiyo-e. The generally accepted idea that ukiyo-e was something for commoners prevails, but as seen in the backing of the production of *nishiki-e egoyomi* by the shogunal retainer Ôkubo Tadanobu and Hiraga Gennai, a scholar formerly of the Takamatsu domain, the appreciators of Harunobu's pictures were initially cultivated persons of the samurai class. A pivotal figure was Shokusanjin, alias Ôta Nanpo (1749-1823). Nanpo was a *bakushin* (shogunal vassal) of superior ability who had studied at the Shôheikô (school directly controlled by the bakufu) and attained the position of *kanjôshihai yaku* (post presiding over the bakufu's financial affairs). A well known dilettante, Nanpo was also a *kyôka* poet and writer of fiction. Harunobu was commissioned to design the illustrations for Nanpo's illustrated books (*ebon*). As can be surmised from the fact that these samurai had pen names as *haikai* and *kyôka* poets, also in the background were affluent townspeople (*chônin*) with refined tastes, such as the Edo *haikai* master who was the owner of the Miuraya in the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter, Fudasashi of Kuramae in Asakusa, a merchant who handled the management and conversion into money of rice paid by bakufu retainers, and the pharmacist Komatsuya Hyakki (?-1792), who was a great collector of Nishikawa Sukenobu's woodblock books. Harunobu's ukiyo-e initially gained favor in the places where such people

of taste gathered, and in due course, bookstores learned of his reputation and took over the woodblocks and republished the prints, disseminating them widely among the populace. The extremely broad ranging audience for Harunobu's ukiyo-e is an important point to consider when reading and trying to understand his works.