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Flight of the Eagle: Kawanabe Kyosai and His Influences

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BIOGRAPHY

Jaques Gillis is a third-year undergraduate at City University of New York studying art history. He has a special interest in the arts, languages, and philosophy of East and South Asia.

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Introduction

Kawanabe Kyosai (1831 – 1889) was famed during his lifetime and afterwards for his artistic and intellectual independence as well as for the fertility and liveliness of his imagination. English art historian Timothy Clark has claimed that though Kyosai's interest in Western art is well documented, it was little more than curiosity and did not significantly influence his finished art. *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* (1885) (Figure 1, Appendix I) incorporates elements from a group of European paintings that includes Titian's *Tityus* (1549) (Figure 6) and Jacob Jordaen's *Prometheus Bound* (1640) (Figure 10), showing that Kyosai considered these Western works to be suitable as sources of inspiration. Kyosai's possible indirect exposure to Western art through Western influence on other Japanese artists in the Tokugawa (1603 – 1867) and the Meiji period (1868 – 1912) and Kyosai's direct exposure to the West through relationships with Western artists had influences on his work.

> *"...Kyosai considered these Western works suitable sources of inspiration."*

Historical Background

Japan's isolation began in the seventeenth century, when Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651) expelled most foreign merchants, diplomats, and missionaries, and continued for two centuries (Jansen, 2000). Japan had by this time developed a rich painting tradition with many distinct styles, including styles marked by Chinese influence (*kara-e*, or "Chinese style") and those marked by early Japanese innovations (*yamato-e*, or "Japanese style"). The Kano school, in which Kyosai, like most Tokugawa artists, trained (Mason, 2003), had already become prominent during this time. This school, and the competing Rinpa school, preserved established themes and styles, such as Chinese bird-and-flower painting and the Japanese decorative blue-and-gold style (Mason, 2003). Fresh influence from China was limited to Chinese refugees from the newly founded Qing dynasty (1644-1912), who brought *bujinga*, a landscape style favored by the literati (Fenollosa, 1912).

Nevertheless, throughout the period from Iemitsu until the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry with a squadron of warships in the nineteenth century, a small number of Dutch merchants were allowed to trade in Japan, and some Japanese scholars dedicated themselves to the study of the West through Dutch imports (*rangakusha*, or "Dutch scholars") (Beasley, 1963). Some Japanese artists were imitating Dutch art by the late eighteenth century. One of these artists, Shiba Kokan (1738 – 1818), pointed to two differences between traditional Japanese painting of the time and Western painting– one in their treatment of surface detail and the other in the method of modeling. "Take, for example, the manner in which the Japanese draw hair and beards: every single strand of hair is drawn individually. The Western technique of drawing hair, however, is to suggest the hair in just a few strokes so that the resulting appearance is one of real hair, not a mere mass of lines" (de Barry, ed, 2005, p. 385). By employing shading, Western artists can represent convex and concave surfaces, sun and shade, distance, depth, and shallowness(Ibid, p. 386). There was, in addition, a difference in the way Japanese artists treated space, which endured in traditional Japanese painting. This is the flattening or the ambiguity of space that was to have such an influence on James Abbot McNeill Whistler (1834 – 1903) and the Impressionists (Sandberg, 1964).

By drawing this distinction between these features of Japanese and Western art, we can see the early influence of Dutch art on some Japanese artists, like Shiba Kokan (Mason, 1993). His painting *The Barrel-maker*

(Figure 3) shows a much greater concern for shadow and depth than for surface detail or pattern, breaking with Japanese tradition and embracing Dutch techniques. Other early Japanese artists working in the Western style included Hiraga Gennai (De Barry, ed, 2005) and Watanabe Kazan (Mason, 1993).

There had been an awareness of and interest in European art, especially Dutch art, in Japan for centuries when Kyosai painted *Eagle Attacking a Monkey*. However, *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* treats a recurring subject in Kano School art, and the technique is consistent with earlier Kano School art. So aside from a superficial similarity in subject between the *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* and the European paintings of eagles attacking Tityus and Prometheus, there may not appear to be a link between this Japanese painting and the European paintings.

There are two links: one in the posture of the eagles, and the other in the composition of the pieces. The eagles in the Kyosai painting, in Titian's *Tityus* (Figure 6), in Cornelius Cort's *Prometheus Chained* (Figure 7), in Rubens's *Prometheus Bound*, and in Jordaens's *Prometheus Bound* (Figure 10) all tear at their victims' flesh while dramatically turning their heads to the side. An eagle eats by tearing flesh from the prey, which requires the eagle to maximize force by pulling directly away from its talons. It grasps the prey with its talons, takes a piece of meat very close to the talons, and yanks its head back. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate how this results in the eagle looking forward as it eats. The posture of the eagles is a significant link because it combines two motions, a dramatic turning of the head and the tearing of flesh, that are rarely observed together in nature.

In the Western paintings, the surprising posture of the eagle seems to have its origin in Michelangelo's *Tityus*. Jordaens, who had painted the eagle in Rubens's *Prometheus Bound*, simply repeated it in his own *Prometheus Bound*, and art historian Julius Held argues that many features of Rubens's *Prometheus Bound* were adopted from Cornelius Cort's *Tityus Chained*, itself inspired by a painting of the same subject by Titian (Held, 1963). The eagles' necks have the peculiar twist in all of these paintings. For Titian, the choice to turn the neck may be partly explained by his heightened interest in mannerism at the time he painted it (1549) ("Titian," n.d.). Comparing the Titian and Cort to a previous depiction of Tityus being eaten by an eagle by Michelangelo (Figure 8), in which the eagle's neck is straight, it is reasonable to suspect that the line of transmission of the peculiar eagle from Titian to Cort to Rubens is a solitary thread in Western art.

For Rubens, exaggerating the turn of the eagle's neck emphasized the dramatic composition. The primary element of this dramatic composition is the strong diagonal formed by Prometheus's body. Rubens emphasizes the diagonal with the eagle's outstretched wings, which are parallel to Prometheus's body. The eagle was painted by Rubens's frequent collaborator Frans Snyders, but Rubens's collaborators usually worked within a composition laid out by Rubens ("Titian," n.d.). This choice requires him to make the eagle's torso (shorter than the wingspan and mostly shaded out) perpendicular to the diagonal, which means that if the eagle were to eat in the usual posture, its head, the center of the action, would be perpendicular to the diagonal. Thus Rubens, who had studied and absorbed the dramatic elements of Tintoretto's and Caravaggio's compositions, as seen in his planning of *The Raising of the Cross* (Harris 2005; Belkin 1998), was guided by compositional concerns to turn the eagle's head into the diagonal, greatly enhancing the painting's dramatic power.

Kyosai's painting does not give him similar reasons to turn the eagle's head in violation of nature. His monkey is, like Rubens's Prometheus, on a diagonal, but the turn of the eagle's head does not emphasize that diagonal. Arguably the composition would have been

more dramatic if Kyosai had given the eagle's head a straight posture. A comparison of Kyosai's *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* with the older Kano-school *Eagle Catching a Monkey* shows how Kyosai may have assimilated some elements of the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings. In *Eagle Catching a Monkey*, the eagle and the monkey are shown in profile, without much depth. The painting shows some of the traditional Japanese concern with delineation of surface elements and decoration, as the feathers of the eagle's wings seem to be etched lines in solid masses (Figure 14). Kyosai's *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* is different in all of these respects. The monkey and the eagle are both on diagonals, and they are both foreshortened, giving the painting depth, another link to the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings. Also, there is little attention to the surface of the animals, the eagle in particular. The feathers on the eagle's wings are not patterns on the surface but rather splay independently to form a loose and light fringe to the wings (Figure 1). In all of these respects, the Kyosai painting is like *Prometheus Bound*, which achieves depth by radical foreshortening of the diagonal figures and in which the eagle's spread feathers emphasize the action of the wings.

It seems possible that Kyosai, without having the overriding concern with composition that Rubens had, adopted the peculiar posture of the eagle along with the foreshortening and depth. And it is not implausible that Kyosai would have adopted novelties from another artist. Despite Kyosai's emphasis on the importance of nature as a teacher, he also considered it to be important to study the techniques of other artists by imitating them (Conder, 1911), and this probably included the assimilation of content as well as technique. Conder relates that Kyosai's first teacher admitted that Kyosai could not learn to show samurai fighting in all the configurations he needed until he saw a Chinese painting "representing over a hundred fighting warriors" (Conder, 1911). We may take from this story the lesson that it is beneficial to learn how the body moves from older works of art. Conder also describes seeing Kyosai create paintings inspired by older masterworks that they had seen together earlier (Conder, 1911). In addition, it is certain that Kyosai saw Western art as possessing greater authority with respect to anatomy and spatial representation than Japanese art possessed. Conder wrote, "He regarded with profound respect the scientific knowledge of anatomical form, perspective, and sciography, revealed to him in foreign works, and the more realistic developments of painting as unfolded in the West" (Conder, 1911).

"By the late nineteenth century, when Kyosai was active, Japanese interest in the art of the West had greatly expanded."

While there is an ensemble of features shared between the Kyosai painting and the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings and the possibility that these features were imitated, it might seem implausible in the days before photographic reproductions of most paintings were readily available that Kyosai would have seen and studied any of the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings. By the late nineteenth century, when Kyosai was active, Japanese interest in the art of the West had greatly expanded. Even before Japan agreed to open trade with the West in 1858 many Japanese scholars began aggressively importing Western books and technology after China's defeat by the British in the First Opium War (1842) in an effort to defend Japan from the technical superiority of the West (Jansen, 2002). One Japanese scholar of the time wrote that "foreign learning is rational and Chinese is not" and that this was the cause of China's defeat (Beasley, 1963, p. 48). After the downfall of the Shogunate, the new imperial government prioritized reform, and among the Westerners who took up residence in Japan were educators with appointments at Tokyo University, including

the Italian scholar Antonio Fontanesi, who brought photographs and copies of famous European works of art (Checkland, 2003) and American scholar Ernest Fenollosa, who knew Kyosai (Sato, 2011). In this time, Japanese artists produced many works emulating trends in contemporary Western painting, such as Realism and Impressionism (Figures 4 and 5).

"These relationships were characterized by artistic curiosity"

At the same time, Western awareness of and interest in Rubens's *Prometheus Bound* increased. *Prometheus Bound* was publically exhibited in 1850, 1857, and 1867 (Held, 1964). During the 1867 exhibition, it received very favorable mentions in two French reviews, one by Charles Blanc (1857) and the other by W. Burger (1867). Thus, many young European artists in training in the mid-nineteenth century were likely to have seen the painting in one of these exhibits and possibly even to have sketched it. The painting was, in fact, copied in a drawing by Sir George Scharf in 1856 (Held, 1963). In addition to publishing his drawings in books, Scharf became director of the new National Portrait Gallery at South Kensington in 1857 ("Sir George Scharf, Timeline," 2013) and lectured on portraits at South Kensington in 1866 and 1868 (Lee, 1897), years in which Josiah Conder, who would soon have great influence in Japan, was studying there (Checkland, 2003).

Like many Japanese artists at the time, Kyosai had relationships with many Western artists, including Conder (Sato 2011). Conder became his student, and Kyosai spent a great deal of time working side by side with him (Conder, 1911). Conder had trained at the Royal College of Art (then generally known as the South Kensington Art Schools) and also at the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London (Checkland, 2003). At the latter, Conder had access to the collection of works for study at Slade, which was assembled by John Ruskin and would have included at least one Rubens drawing ("Study of a Nude Man Tormented by Demons") (Parker, 1938).

"...Kyosai sat still for a moment but then, unable to bear being left out, took up a brush and began painting a portrait of the portrait-painter."

Among the other Western artists who knew Kyosai personally were Emile Guimet (French), Felix Regamey (French), Ernest Fenollosa (American), Mortimer Menpes (Australian-born), and Francis Brinkley (Irish). These relationships were characterized by artistic curiosity. Emile Guimet recounts in *Promenades Japonaise* that when he and his artist friend Felix Regamey visited Kyosai and Regamey asked him to sit for a portrait, Kyosai sat still for a moment but then, unable to bear being left out, took up a brush and began painting a portrait of the portrait-painter (Guimet, 1880). Ernest Fenollosa, who also taught in Tokyo, had studied for a year at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts after taking his bachelor's degree in philosophy at Harvard (Brooks, 1962). Mortimer Menpes, like Conder, studied at the Royal College of Art, and went on to work with Whistler (Checkland, 2003) and to publish a book on Rembrandt (Menpes, 1905). Any of these scholars would have been knowledgeable about the important artists of Europe.

While it is uncertain what these Western artists might have shared with Kyosai, it is certain that Kyosai was familiar with and studied some Western works. From his academy, we have drawings by Kyosai copied from foreign sources. Among these are "Examples of Heads and Skulls Copied from Foreign Drawings" (Collection of the Kawanabe Kyosai Memorial Art Museum) and a drawing based

on Laocoon struggling with serpents (Figure 16) (Jordan, 2003). We also know that he and other Japanese artists used photographs and drawings from the West along with contemporary accounts to represent it in their artwork. Kyosai illustrated Kanagaki Robun's novel *Seiyo Dochu Hizakurige*, "By Shanks' Mare through the West", (Clark, 1993), published serially between 1870 and 1876, which was a chauvinistic parody of the West but nevertheless required some research (Keene, 1984). Kyosai's depiction of the British Museum shows familiarity with its appearance, perhaps from drawings of the kind Scharf published (see for example Figure 20) or perhaps from photographs. Kyosai also worked with the great dramatist Kawatake Mokuami (1816 – 1893), whose innovations included two styles of Kabuki (*katsureki* and *zangirimono* plays) that relied heavily on research for accurate depiction (Keene, 1984). Figure 19 shows a sketch of the Paris Opera done by Mokuami, for which Mokuami said he had a photograph (Clark, 1993).

There were plenty of resources available for these artists to use for their research. In 1959, the bookseller Maruya (later known as *Maruzen*) had a 53-page catalog of foreign books, most in English but about 125 in German and 50 in French, (Checkland, 2003). When Regamey visited the Tokyo Fine Art School in 1899, he recorded seeing a copy of a Bernardino Luini painting and copies of two Giovanni Bellini paintings (Regamey, 1899). As noted above, Fontanesi also brought reproductions of famous Western works with him to the University of Tokyo (Checkland, 2003).

When Kyosai painted *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* in 1885, there were a number of ways he could have been exposed to one of the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings. There had been a particular awareness of Dutch art for more than a century, and some Japanese artists had adopted Dutch artists' methods. There was also a new interest in Western arts and sciences as part of Japan's drive to reform, and

> *"...it illustrates that the extent and depth of the cultural exchange between Japan and the West merits greater appreciation and further exploration."*

it is quite possible that new reproductions of works taking elements of *Prometheus Bound* were circulating in Japan. Kyosai had close relationships with Western artists, any of whom might have had reproductions of *Prometheus Bound*. Finally, Kyosai collaborated with other artists in Japan who might have had or seen copies of *Prometheus Bound*.

It is important to note that Kyosai need not have owned a reproduction of one of the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings or even to have studied it very deeply to have assimilated these elements. Kyosai believed visual memory was critical for the artist. In Conder's description of Kyosai creating paintings inspired by older works, he notes Kyosai's memory for detail, saying the paintings were "remarkable for showing his wonderfully retentive memory for the minutest detail observed in the work of an old master....I never remember him referring to his notes or sketches while reproducing them" (Checkland, 2003).

A link between *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* and the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings thus becomes plausible. *Eagle Attacking a Monkey* adopting elements from one of the *Tityus-Prometheus* paintings shows that Western influence on Japanese art extended to Kyosai, who has been seen as an artist with purely domestic influences. More broadly, it illustrates that the extent and depth of the cultural exchange between Japan and the West in the 19th and 20th centuries merits greater appreciation and further exploration.

Appendix

Figure 1. Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889). Eagle Attacking a Monkey (1885). Ink and color on paper, hanging scroll, 111 1/2 x 43 1/2 in. (166.5 x 83.8 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art. Charles Stewart Smith Collection, Gift of Mrs. Charles Stewart Smith, Charles Stewart Might Jr., and Howard Caswell Smith, 1914.

Figure 2. Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). Prometheus Bound (1611-1612). Oil on canvas, 95.9 x 82.5 in. (243.5 x 209.5 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Purchase, the W. P. Wilstach Fund, 1950.

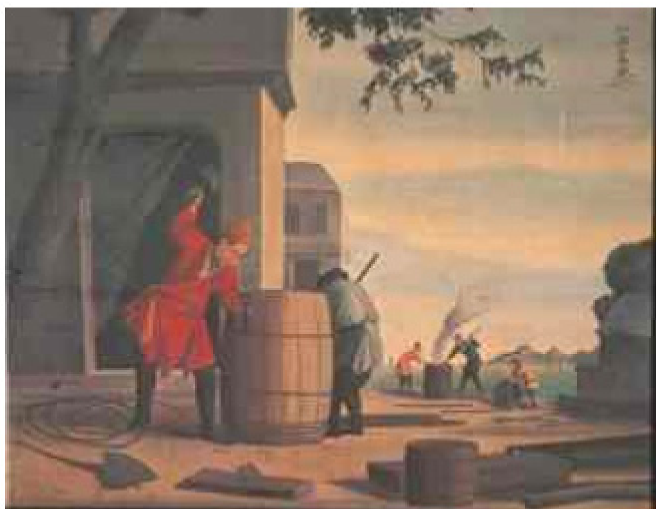

Figure 3. Shiba Kokan.The Barrel-maker (c. 1789). Oil on silk, hanging scroll. 18 ¾ X 23 5/8 in. (47.6 cm X 60 cm). Private collection, Yokohama.

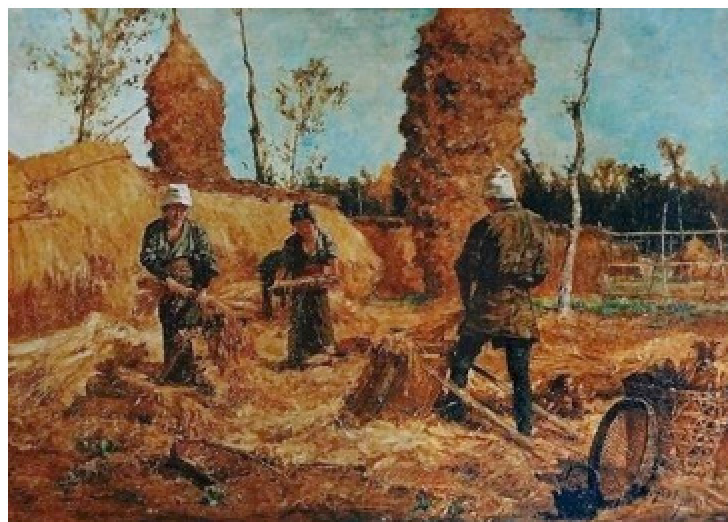

Figure 4. Asai Chu. Harvest (1890). Oil on canvas. 27 ¼ X 37 7/8 in. (69 cm X 98.5 cm). Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.

Figure 5. Kuroda Seiki. By the Lake (1897). Oil on canvas. 68 cm X 83 cm. Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties

Figure 6. Titian. Tityus. 1549. Oil. (215X217 cm). Museo del Prado.

Figure 7. Cornelis Cort. Prometheus Chained. 1566. Engraving.

Figure 9. Michelangelo. The Punishment of Tityus. Chalk. (33 X 19 cm). Royal Collection, Windsor Castle.

Figure 10. Frans Snyders. Sketch of Eagle for Prometheus Bound. 1610. Pen and Brown Ink. (2.80 X 2.02 cm). The British Museum.

Figure 11. Jacob Jordaens. Prometheus Bound. c. 1640. Oil. (245 X 178 cm). Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

Figure 12. Golden eagle (Aquila chrysaetos) feeding on a red fox in the Cairngorms National Park. Copyright Peter Cairns. http://northshots.photoshelter.com/image/I0000NYTH4.xDMP4

Figure 13. Bald eagle eating prey. Copyright Fred Lang, 2009. http://www.pbase.com/image/117416191

Figure 14. Eagle Catching Monkey. Ink painting, hanging scroll. 17th century. Kano school. Sotheby's London. Japanese Works of Art, Prints and Paintings. London, 19 June 2001. Lot 233.

Figure 15. Nobukazu. Eagle and monkeys. Early nineteenth century. Wood. 5 cm. from Expressions of Style: Netsuke as Art, no. 182. reproduced at: http://www.scholten-japanese-art.com/nstyle34.htm

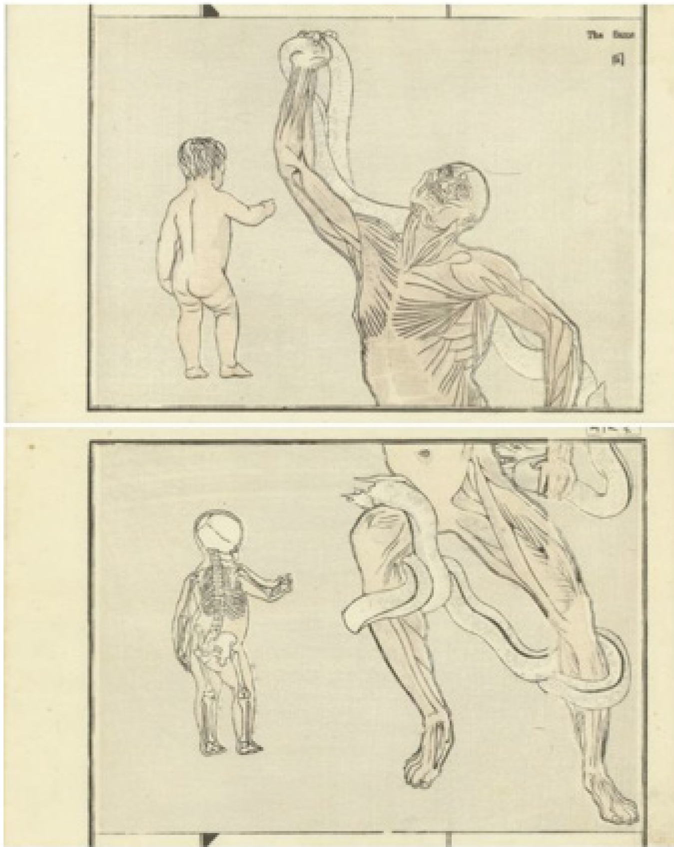

Figure 16. Kawanabe Kyosai.Sketch of Laocoon and His Sons. from Kyosai Gadan, Volume 1, Tokyo: Iwamoto Shun, 1887. Reproduced at http://www.myjapanesehanga.com/home/artists/kawanabe-kyosai-1831-1889-/gyosai-gadan-laocoon-and-his-sons

Figure 17. Laocoon and His Sons (c. 1st century BC), copy of the 3rd century B.C. original. Found in the Baths of Trajan, 1506. Vatican Museum, Museo Pio Clementino, Octagon, Laocoon Hall. Photograph by Marie-Lan Nguyen, 2009.

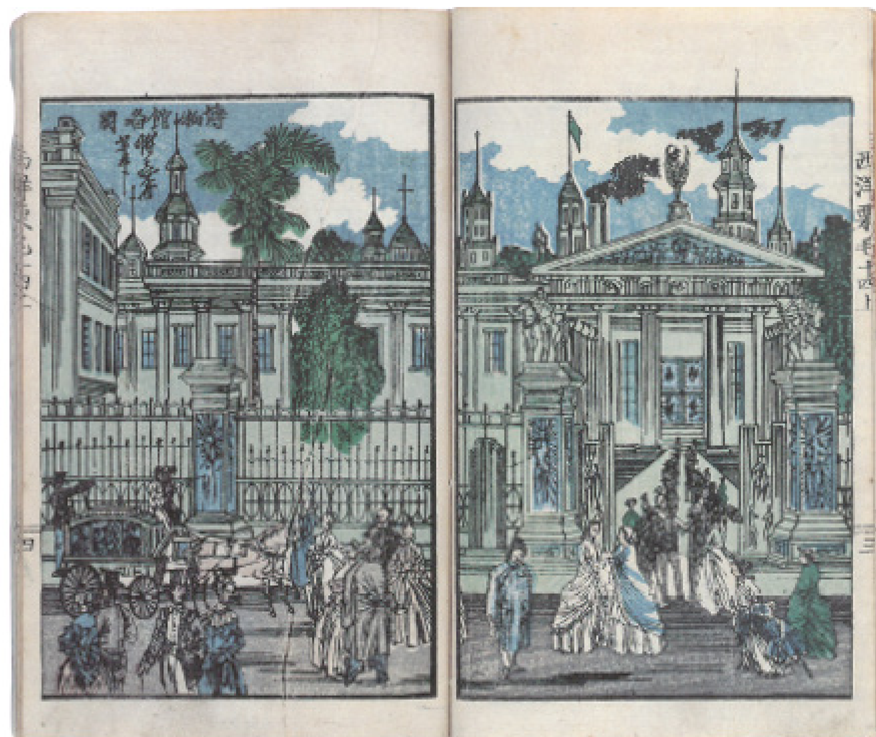

Figure 18. Utagawa Yoshiiku, Utagawa Hirshige III, and Kawanabe Kyosai. "The British Museum." Shank's Mare Round the West. (by Kanagaki Robun). Kawanabe Kyosai Memorial Museum.

Figure 19. Kawatake Mokuami, "In Front of the Paris Opera," The Strange Tale of the Castaways: A Western Kabuki. 1879. Kawanabe Kyosai Memorial Museum.

Figure 20. George Scharf, "Drawings of Westminster," Great George Street, Top floor, Front room. 24 September 1868. British Museum

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