

Shells in prints<sup>1</sup>

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Interest in shells is universal. Shapes and colours abound in endless variety. In many cultures, shells were used as currency, or employed as artistic material. They were, and are, collected as well. We will even be attracted by the relatively modest specimens during a stroll on the beach – let alone by the fanciful shapes of large exotic ones. Those who have read Rascha Peper's novel *Rico's vleugels* ('*Rico's wings*', 1993) will know that a passion for shells can have fatal consequences.

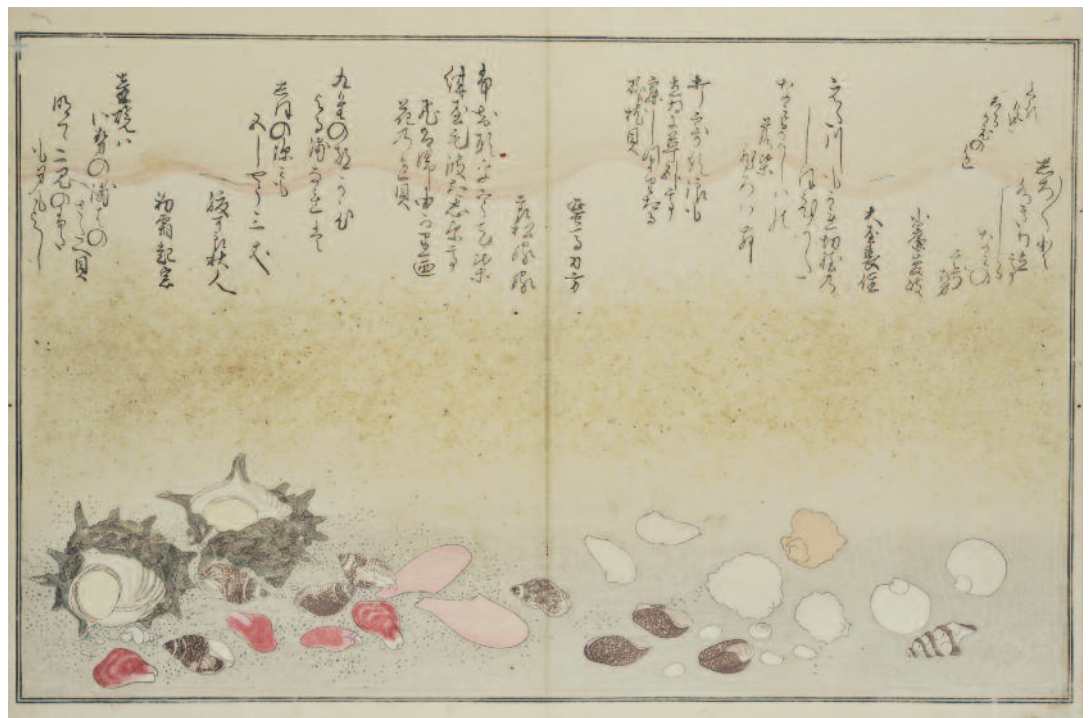
Given the almost universal interest in shells, it comes as no surprise that they also became a subject in the visual arts. To many *aficionados* of Japanese prints, Utamaro's 'Shell book' (*Shiohi no tsuto*, or '*Gifts from the ebb tide*', 1789) will immediately come to mind (fig. 1). 36 types of shells, divided over six double-pages, are represented as lying on the shore, and preceded

by a double page showing the collecting of these 'gifts', whereas the final image shows women in an interior engaged in a game of matching the separated halves of clam shells (*kai awase*).<sup>2</sup> The number of 36, as well as the obvious fact that the shells are accompanied by verse, show that these images are not just natural arrangements or recordings of social pastimes but the product of a highly sophisticated literary culture. 36 was the canonical number of the *kasen* (lit. 'the immortals of poetry'), the outstanding poets from the seventh to the tenth century. Over time, anthologies were compiled consisting of the poets' portraits coupled with a representative verse. As early as the 17th century, 36 classical poems, or newly composed ones, were matched with natural objects, including shells, in other anthologies.

The principle of matching 36 shells and poems

■ Fig. 1. Kitagawa Utamaro (d. 1806).  
A double-page from *Shiohi no tsuto*, (*Gifts from the ebb tide*), 1789, colour woodblock print.

Courtesy British Museum



■ Fig. 2. Totoya Hokkei (1780–1850). 'Shells', a surimono from the series *A series of shells (Kaitsukushi)*, 1821.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam  
 RP-P-1958-346



■ Fig. 3. Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). 'A pipe and a box of salt', a surimono from the series *A matching game with the Genroku poem shells (Genroku kase kaiawase)*, 1821.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam  
 RP-P-1958-269



■ Fig. 4. Unknown, *Surimono* with painted shells for the *kai awase* game, woodblock print.

Allan Memorial Art Museum,  
Oberlin College, USA



also underlies a series of shell *surimono* by Hokkei, issued by the Fundarika poetry club in 1821 (fig. 2); the 13th and final *surimono* shows a group of people gathering shells on the island of Enoshima, one of the places of Japan traditionally famous for its shells and shellwork. Sumptuous as well as visually complex is Hokusai's series of 36 *surimono* issued in the same year. The imagery of every print alludes in one way or another to a particular shell, which is represented in a small fan-shaped cartouche on the right-hand side (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> Besides these three series, many other *surimono* with shells exist; I reproduce here a rare *surimono* depicting painted shells for the *kai awase* game (fig. 4). Also the collecting of shells on the shore, either for pleasure or for consumption, was occasionally represented in prints and hanging scrolls.

■ Fig. 5. Rembrandt, *Conus marmoreus*, etching, 1650, 97 x 131 mm.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam  
RP-P-1962-63



Ever since the establishment of the still life in Western art, shells have been an important component. Dutch painters of the Golden Age sometimes arranged whole compositions

consisting exclusively of mostly exotic shells. In tune with the taste of collectors, single prints or even series of individual shells were also produced, one of the best known being Rembrandt's small etching of a *conus marmoreus* (fig. 5).

Shells continued to fascinate printmakers, and a late representative of this tradition is Evert Musch (1918–2007), an artist from the north of the Netherlands (and little known outside that part of the world). During the last years of the German occupation he was hiding in his home in Groningen, quietly making lithographs of still lifes, particularly shells; eight of the larger ones were published after the war in a portfolio under the title *Monumenten der zee* (*Monuments of the sea*). I happen to own some and I am fond of them. All the shells are meticulously rendered, but the variety in size and composition is quite astonishing. Some lithographs show just a few shells that almost entirely fill the picture field, others are underwater representations featuring one large shell or a group of smaller ones; in the smaller prints, Musch focused on groups of shells shown against a neutral background. One of the larger ones, from 1944, is particularly interesting (fig. 6), showing as it does a still life of four shells, arranged on some sill or shelf (and including Rembrandt's beloved 'marbled cone'). The background features a picture of three turtles swimming amidst sea weed and other plants, thus providing an indirect marine context for the shells. It was only recently that I realized that Musch had copied a print by Hokusai (here obviously shown in reverse, fig. 7).

It may well be that Musch was familiar with Hokusai thanks to one of his teachers at the Groningen art academy, Arnold Willem Kort (1881–1927). Kort was a great lover of Asian art, and is known to have taken books on Chinese and Japanese art to school for his students to study.<sup>4</sup> Later, he was also in contact with Ferdinand Lieftinck (1879-1959), an avid collector of Japanese prints, who lived in nearby Haren. Presumably Musch copied the print from a reproduction, although I have been unable to trace the source. Today, the design is quite popular (you can even order an iPhone case with the image), but the print itself is quite rare.<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, like many Westerners before him, Musch paid his

■ Fig. 6. Evert Musch,  
Shells, lithograph, 1944,  
30 x 22.5 cm.

Private collection



■ Fig. 7. Hokusai,  
Swimming turtles, colour  
woodblock print,  
1832–1833, nagaban tate-e  
(49.9 x 22.7 cm).

Honolulu Museum of Art



homage to one of the best-known artists of Japan. His lithograph is not only a combination of four 'gifts of the ebb tide' with three living 'monuments of the sea', but also a very sympathetic monument to Hokusai. As such, the print really belongs to the world of art. In 1944 the Second World War was still in full swing, with the Netherlands and Japan in the two opposed camps – but that was part of a different world.

## Notes

1. To the memory of Harro Nikkels (1944-2013).
2. Roger S. Keyes, *Ehon. The artist and the book in Japan*, The New York Public Library, New York, 2006, pp. 112-123, no. 25; Matthi Forrer, *Surimono in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, Hotei Publishing, Leiden, 2013, pp. 41-42, no. 38. For the shell matching game see the on-line Japanese Architecture and Net Users System (JAANUS) <<http://www.aist.or.jp/~jaanus/>> s.v. 'Kaiawase'.
3. For Hokusai's series, see Forrer, *Surimono*, pp. 153-155, nos. 278-283, for Hokusai's series, *ibidem*, pp. 122-131, nos 229-244, and Matthi Forrer and Roger Keyes, 'Very like a whale? – Hokusai's illustrations for the Genroku poem shells', in: Matthi Forrer, Willem R. van Gulik and Jack Hillier (eds.), *A sheaf of Japanese papers in tribute to Heinz Kaempfer on his 75th birthday*, Society of Japanese Arts and Crafts, The Hague, 1979, pp. 35-57.
4. Francis van Dijk, *Leraren van de Academie Minerva. Een keuze uit twee eeuwen kunst en kunstonderwijs in Groningen*, Benjamin & Partners, Groningen, 1998, p. 87. For Musch in general, see also Mieke van der Wal, *Evert Musch, schilderijen / tekeningen / grafiek*, Assen, Drents Museum, 1988.
5. The website ukiyo-e.org only lists two copies. For the copy in Honolulu (fig. 7), see also Gian Carlo Calza, *Hokusai. Il vecchio pazzo per la pittura*, Electa, Milan, 1999, pp. 494-495, no. V.40.3. As far as I could ascertain, Lieftinck did not own a copy of the print. His print collection was acquired in 1956 by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.