

# **The medium is substance in Hokusai's production**

**i.e.**

**The Mokuhanga technique at the service of the visual narration:  
the sample of the set of ten prints “Shiika Shashinkyô”  
 (“A True Mirror of Chinese and Japanese Poems”)  
by Katsushika Hokusai**

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I would like to dedicate my talk  
to **Toru Ueba** sensei, who taught me the art of printing with a baren  
during my artist residency at Nagasawa in 2008  
and to **Keiko Kadota**, to whom I am and will always be grateful for  
having conceived and led the Nagasawa residency and - in general - for  
having thought that mokuhanga could become an instrument of  
knowledge and cultural exchange.

# Shiika Shashinkyô

“A True Mirror of Chinese and Japanese Poems  
Brushed by the former Hokusai, changing his name to Iitsu”



A series of 10 literary prints produced by Hokusai in 1833-34

"Shiika Shashinkyô" series:  
the seventh, titled "Tokusa Kari":

This subject is based on the Nô drama "Tokusa Kari", where an old reed-gatherer seeks and finds his lost child in the mountains of Shinano. The Nô chant refers to the autumn moon emerging from the trees on Mount Sonohara.

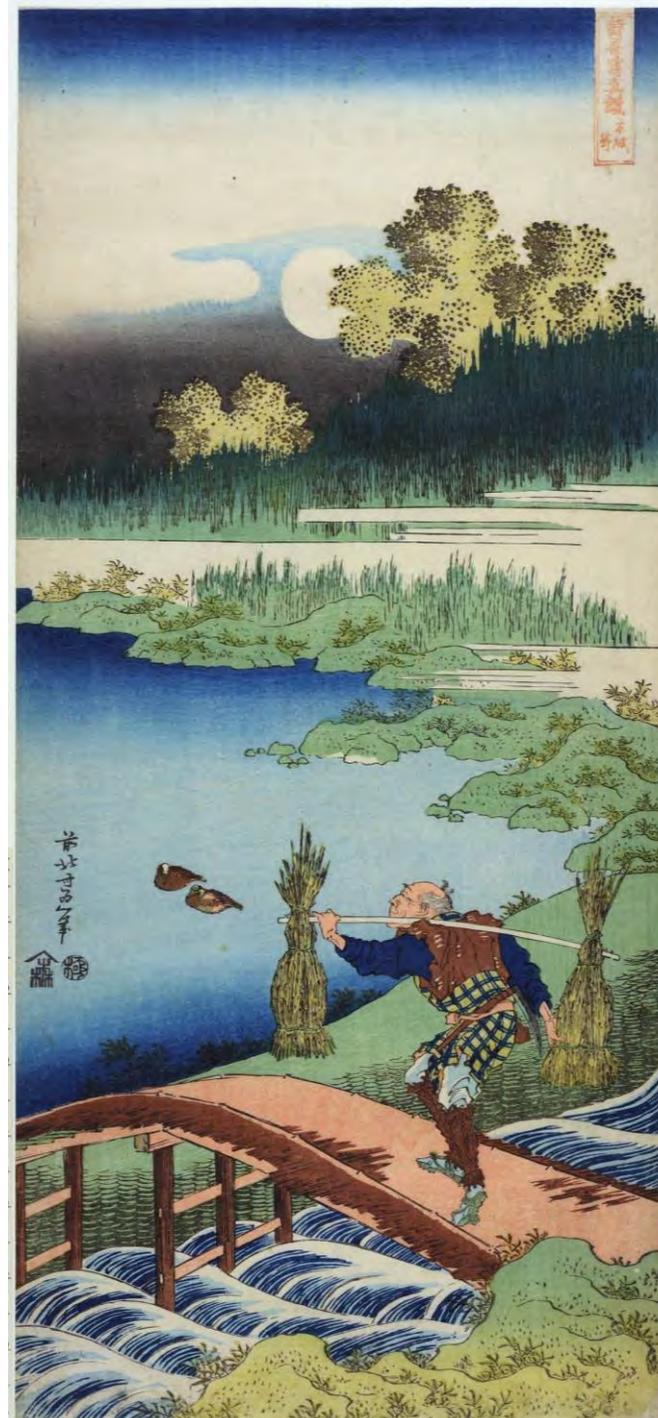


attractive in this work:  
the controlled, almost  
grammatical use of the space

**Instead of using ideograms and words that speak to the rational mind**, the space is described by following a compositional syntax made of alternations weighted and distributed with great care:

- alternating the three dimensions: vertical, horizontal and diagonal;
- alternating gradients and lines;
- using void of signs and fullness of color;
- using density or rarefaction of signs;
- rhythm;
- "talkatives" or "silents" areas

depending on the need of visual narration.



As **narrative components**, rocks, mountains, water mirrors, watercourses, sky, waves, and bridges **acquire a syntactic value**: rock in the foreground alternating with watercourse waterfalls alternating with fog alternating with the cane thicket, all point to a precise visual rhythm in accessing the image.

It is as if each natural element constituted a descriptive phrase.



Starting from the first stage, we  
have the rocks...



...then the rhythm of the small waterfall of the river, followed by the curved Chinese bridge on which the protagonist walks...



...then there is a ground  
embankment and the  
protagonist's facing up gaze  
drives us...



...to the other stretch of  
water - this time quiet -



...wedging at a corner  
in a rocky shore...



...leading us to the fog...



...and then to a cane thicket...



...followed by a descriptive silence  
consisting of the fog...



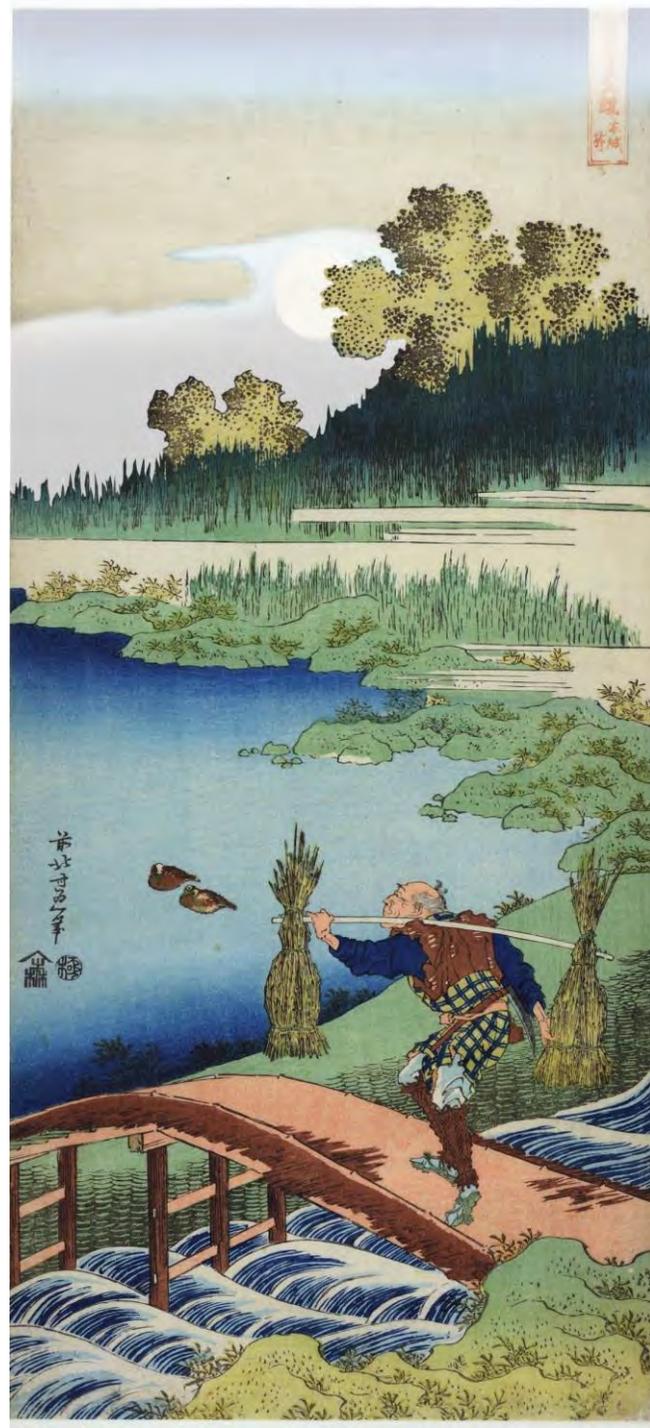
...followed by the density  
of cane thicket's marks...



...the clear contrasting spots  
of two trees...



...behind and above which opens the night,  
described at first with a misty cloud...



...then the full moon...



...and finally the sky, described only by the color and by the bokashi gradient.



The depicted space is a **naturalized human space**, where nature is organized to communicate and connect with the human being.

We can think that these prints represent **landscaped gardens**.



Print number 6 of the series: the protagonist is Minister Minamoto no Toru (822-895), who **had recreated a maritime landscape of northern Japan in his garden**.

The print represents him while finding his fictional landscape in the surrounding nature.

Printing from wooden matrices with semi-transparent colors allows to give the color **multiple features**:

**flat surface**, uninterrupted transition from one color to the other, tone depth thanks to the repetition of print passages, all without the "heating" and personalizing presence of the brushstroke.

The appearance that comes is **abstract but vital**, detached but radiant, profound and **meditative**, as eastern aesthetics requires art.



ARIGATOU!  
**MAHALO!**  
THANK YOU!  
GRAZIE!

Images credits: British Museum, London