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BRUEGEL'S *NETHERLANDISH PROVERBS* AND CORRESPONDING IMAGES IN OLD JAPANESE ART

Among old Dutch proverbs and those in Japanese there are many similar views of life, wisdom and moral lessons, even though the phrasing may differ. The present author discusses twelve proverbs from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) in Berlin and corresponding old Japanese proverbs and sayings in Japanese art to compare expressions, items of each proverb, meaning, degree of morality and other concerns. The present author also refers to some literary (Erasmus, Anna Bijns, Donaes Idinau and Carolus Tuiman and other literati) as well as visual background (misericords, engravings by Frans Hogenberg, Nicolaes Clock and other artists) before and after Bruegel's time as parallel examples.

Proverbs in Ukiyoc, illustrations of proverb books, and cartoons by Japanese artists, such as those by Utagawa Toyokuni the Elder, Utagawa Kuniyoshi and Kawanabe Kyōsai, make good comparisons of Bruegel's work. Bruegel's representation of "Casting roses before swine" corresponds to Kuniyoshi's "Gold coins to a cat." Both indicate almost the same meaning to give valuable advice or things to those who are unable to appreciate them. However, Bruegel's "He falls from the ox onto the ass" is meant to denote falling from a higher position to a lower one, while Kyōsai's "To jump from a cow to a horse" signifies the opposite situation; that is, a man exchanges his old wife for a young wife. In general, Japanese proverbial images give us the impression of a more comic and humorous sentiment than we find in Bruegel's didactic world.

Keywords: Bruegel, Netherlandish proverb, Bijns, Idinau, blind, Japanese proverb, Kyōsai

Several Dutch proverbs depicted in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) in Berlin, seem to correspond closely to old Japanese proverbs in meaning, although the way in which they are phrased is sometimes slightly different. However, there are, in fact, a few proverbs with almost the same phrasing in both Dutch and Japanese. Focusing on Bruegel's painting, I would like to compare Dutch proverbs with those found in Japanese art.

Before entering the comparison, it is worth mentioning how proverbs became popular in Bruegel's time. Proverbs in general played an important role in European medieval life and were used for pronouncing sentences at court, in giving speeches in parliamentary sessions and sermons in churches, for example. Proverbs were also considered an essential part of the structure of people's thoughts. It is noteworthy that from the end of the fifteenth century onwards there was an increase in enthusiastic interest in collecting, editing and publishing ad-

ages, proverbs and sayings from ancient writings, the Bible, medieval ethical writings, folk tales and the like. In particular, the Latin-Dutch book, *Proverbia Communia*, published in Deventer around 1480, and Erasmus' Latin books, *Adages*, published in Paris in 1500, in Venice in 1508 and many other versions stimulated this new trend. During the Renaissance, people were less concerned with the *ars moriendi*, or the art of dying. They became much more interested in the art of living, in how to lead a fully-aware life of knowledge and experience. Proverbs were considered to be a useful way to obtain wisdom, lessons, warnings, humor and courage, leading to a positive life. Many humanists and educated families may well have owned some books of proverbs, considering them truly indispensable. From the late fifteenth century, numerous collections of proverbs were published all over Europe, for example, in Antwerp, Kempen, London, Mechelen, Paris, and Rouen. They are for instance:¹

- (1) Caxton, William: *The dictes or sayengis of the philosophhres*, London 1477.

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- (2) *Proverbia Communia*: Deventer, ca. 1480; ca. 1497.
- (3) Vergilius, Polydorus: *Prouerbiorum libellus*, Venezia 1498.
- (4) Erasmus: *Adagiorum Collectanea*, Paris 1500.
- (5) Erasmus: *Adagiorum Chiliades*, Venezia 1508.
- (6) Bebel, Heinrich: *Proverbia Germanica*, Grüninger 1508.
- (7) Tunnicius, Antonius: *Germanorum paroemias studiosae iuventuti per utiles Monosticha...*, Köln 1514.
- (8) Lydgate, John: *The Puerbes de Lydgate*, London 1515?
- (9) Gilles De Noyers, Jean: *Proverbia gallicana secundum ordinem alphabeti reposita...*, Paris 1519.
- (10) Berthelet, Thomas: *Dicta sapientu. / The sayenges of the wyse me of Grece / in Latin with the Englyssche folowyng, whiche are enterpretate and truely castigate, by the moost famous/doctour maister/Erasmus/Rote...* London 1526.
- (11) Agricola, Johannes: *Dreyhundert gemeyner Sprichwörter*, Hagenau 1529.
- (12) Palsgrave, John: *L'esclarcissement de la langue Francoyse...*, London 1530.
- (13) Caroli, Bovelli: *...proverbiorum vulgarium libri tres*. Paris 1531.
- (14) Frank, Sebastian: *Sibenthalbhûdert Sprichwörter, Wie vñ wo sie in Teutsch er Spraach, von zier vñ bkürtzung wegen der rede, gebraucht werdenn*, Frankfurt 1532.
- (15) Agricola, Johannes: *Sybenhudert und fünfzig Teütscher Sprichwörter...*, Hagenau 1534.
- (16) Tauerner, Richard: *Prouerbes or adagies: with neue addicions gathered out of the Chiliades of Erasmus by Richard Tauerner*, London 1539.
- (17) Franck, Sebastian: *Sprichwörter / Schöne / Weise / Herrliche Clugreden / vnnd Hoffsprüch...*, Frankfurt 1541.
- (18) Erasmus (trans. Nicholas Udall): *Apophthegmes that is to saie, prompte quicke, wittie and sententious saynges...*, London 1542.
- (19) *Le jardin d'honneur, contenant plusieurs apologies, proverbes, et ditz moraux...*, Rouen 1545.
- (20) *Bonne response à tous propos Liure fort plaisant & delectable, auquel est contenu grand nombre de prouerbes, & sentences ioyeuses...* Traduit de la langue italienne et reduty en nostre vulgaire françois par order d'alphabet, Paris 1547/ Antwerpen 1555.
- (21) Egenolff, Christian: *Sprichwörter / Schöne / Weise Klugreden*, Frankfurt 1548.
- (22) *Seer schoone Spreckwoorden, oft prouerbia, in Franchoy's ende Duytsch, ...Motz tresbeaux ou dictons et prouerbes en Franchoy's et Flemmeng*, Antwerpen 1549.
- (23) *Ghemeene Duytsche spreckwoorden, adagia oft proverbial ghe-noemt...*, Kampen 1550.
- (24) Zegerus, T. N.: *Proverbia Teutonica Latinitate Donata...*, Mechelen 1550 / Antwerpen 1571.
- (25) *Rencontres à tous propos, par proverbes...*, Paris 1554.
- (26) Godefroy, Pierre: *Proverbiorum liber*, Paris 1555.
- (27) Meurier, Gabriel: *Colloques ou nouvelle invention de propos familiers ...Tsamencoutinghen, oft nieuwe inventie van ghemeine redenen*, Antwerpen 1557.
- (28) Goedthals, François: *Les proverbes anciens flamengs et françois, correspondants de sentence les uns aux autres*, Antwerpen 1568.
- (29) Le Bon, Jean (dit Hétropolitain), *Adages et proverbes de Solon de Voë*, Paris 1576.
- (30) Meurier, Gabriel: *Thrésor de sentences dorées, proverbes et dict's communs...*, Rouen 1578.
- (31) Estienne, Henri: *Les prémices, ou le s. livre des proverbes épigrammatizez...*, Genève 1594.
- (32) *Questions, proverbes et enseignemens profitables à un chacun*, Paris 1599.

It is also worth noting that from the late fifteenth century, proverbs were already expressed in an illustrated manuscript of collected French poems using proverbs,² in a tapestry³ and stalls with carvings, namely, misericords.⁴ From the first half of the sixteenth century, visualized proverbs, as well as the written world of proverbs, became very popular, especially in paintings and engravings. Therefore, I refer to the sixteenth century as the "Golden Age of Proverbs." This visual tradition of proverbs continued until the second half of the seventeenth century in the Netherlands. Therefore, Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (Fig. 1), which includes almost more than ninety proverbs, can be seen as the highlight of the Golden Age for the visual world, in juxtaposition to Erasmus's *Adages* for the written world.

More than one hundred Japanese proverb books appeared before the Meiji era (1868–1912), although many proverbs have their origins in Buddhistic scripts or old Chinese moral writings, like those by Laozi, Kongzi and other philosophers. It is a parallel feature of the strong interest in proverbial representations in Japanese art, especially during the Edo period (1600–1867), as seen in illustrated proverbs, such as *Tatōe Gojuku Karuta* (Fifty Playing Cards of Proverbs) by Utagawa Kuniyoshi of the mid-Edo period, *Gengaen* (150 Illustrated Proverbs Book) by Kuwagata Keisai of 1808, *Ukiyo Kotowaza gusa* (The Collection of Proverbs of the Ephemeral World) by Jippensha Ikku of the late Edo period, and others. In Japan, it is remarkable that numerous proverbial expressions are found on all kinds of items, such as carvings on beams, helmets, votive pictures, *netsuke* (a ornamental toggle of a little container), *tsuba* (an sword hand guard), *menuki* (ornamental pieces on sword-hilts), cupboards, cups, kimonos (clothes) through the Meiji era; and souvenirs, toys and other daily necessities sold even up to today.

However, there was no example in European painting before Bruegel's time comparable to his *Netherlandish Proverbs* in which numerous proverbs were included in a single composition. At the early stage of his artistic career, Bruegel was very much interested in the encyclopedic world, and he succeeded in representing countless figures of various classes, occupations and

ages, involved in their own activities. He also included different places such as a village square, a field of grain, a river and the sea in the distance, and various buildings such as a farm, an oven-house for baking bread, a tannery and more. This picture does not necessarily symbolize the behavior of peasants, as some art historians have suggested.⁵ Some scholars have argued that Bruegel confined the scene to rural peasant society, showing the reality of irrational and foolish peasant life. This is not the case. Although the majority of people in this painting are peasants, it represents people of all classes and occupations in his time, such as a young prince, a rich landlord, some monks, a knight, soldiers, a craftsman, old and young housewives, a fool, and many more. Even a prisoner and two devils appear here. In other words, this painting illustrates the universal world of human behavior; that is, the deception, folly, failure, abuse and weakness found in any human society. In sum, it represents not only the negative aspects of human beings, but also living prudence, moral lessons and humor, by means of proverbs. In this sense we must regard this picture as a representation of the human world.

I would like to explain several proverbs from Bruegel's painting and compare them with some corresponding Japanese proverbs.

"She can bind the devil on the pillow" (Fig. 2, in Dutch "Zij zou de duivel op het kussen binden"). This means that this woman is so strong that even the devil cannot do anything against her. In Bruegel's painting, an ugly and powerful woman binds the limbs of a devil on a pillow. As a weapon beside her, a spindle, a typical piece of household equipment, is ready for punishing the devil. A spindle has been represented as an important instrument for a wife to beat her husband as seen in the earlier engraving of Master b x g, "Henpecked husband," from about 1480.

The proverb was repeated in Bruegel's later painting, "Dulle Griet" (1562). There are some wives binding or beating dreadful devils on a pillow or the ground. Carolus Tuinman, an eighteenth century Dutch philologist, in his *De Oorsprong en Uitlegging van dagelyks gebruikte Nederduitsche Spreekwoorden* (Middelburg 1720) says the following: "It was the best Griet to be found who bound the devil on a pillow."⁶



Fig. 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1559, oil on panel, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie



Fig. 2. Pieter Bruegel, "She can bind the devil on the pillow," (detail of Fig. 1)



Fig. 3. Kawanabe Kyōsai, "She sits on her husband," (above), "A wife paints mud on her husband's face," (below), 1863-1866 woodcut from *Kyōsai Hyakuzu*

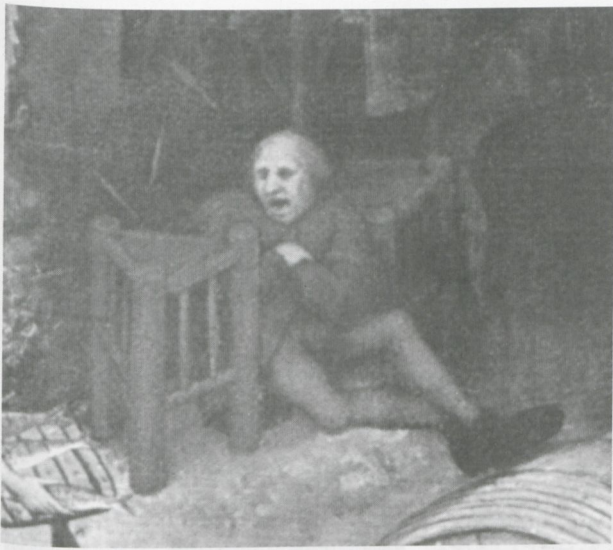


Fig. 4. Pieter Bruegel, "He falls between two chairs in the ashes," (detail of Fig. 1)

Griet originated from the diminutive form of St. Margaret whose legend tells of her victory over a dreadful devil. Therefore, the strong and powerful housewife was nicknamed Griet in old Flanders.⁷

There is a similar Japanese proverb, "She sits on her husband" (in Japanese, "Teishu o shiri ni shiku"). The Japanese painter Kawanabe Kyôсай (or Gyôсай), well-known for his aggressive style as well as critical subjects against folk morality, depicts in his *Kyôсай Hyakuzu* (1863–ca.1866 or later),⁸ a wife sitting on her husband, who holds her tobacco kit while she smokes (Fig. 3). She is carelessly dressed, and in the trace of smoke one can read the words in Japanese "Noromayarô" or "You are stupid." While Bruegel emphasizes a powerful wife conquering a devil, Kyôсай rather amuses us with the contrast between a dominating wife and a weak husband.

"He falls between two stools in the ashes" (Fig. 4, "Hij zit tussen twee stoelen in de as"), means to let the right moment or good profit slip by while unable to decide between two things, or by wanting to get both at the same time. This is one of the most popular proverbs in Europe, because an equivalent, "One cannot catch any rabbit at all, if one chases two," which originated in Greek literature and was introduced by Erasmus,⁹ subsequently became well-known in European literature. Later, a Jesuit priest, Donaes Idinau, a pseudonym of Jan David,



Fig. 5. Kuwagata Keisai, "To catch neither horsefly nor bee," 1808, woodcut from *Gengaen*

adapted a proverb in his *Lot van wijsheyd ende goed geluck* (1606, *The Fate of Wisdom and Good Fortune*), a kind of collection of proverbial poems. It reads under the title of "To sit between two stools in the ashes": "They sit between two stools in the ashes; They fail to make the appropriate choice among many. Too much confidence / and too much deceit / Often make things worse. Follow the good advice, / and trust in God."¹⁰

A corresponding Japanese proverb from Kuwagata Keisai's *Gengaen* of 1808 is "To catch neither horsefly nor bee" ("Abu mo torazu, hachi mo torazu").¹¹ An assistant of a Shinto shrine is caricatured as a foolish man not being able to catch horsefly or bee; instead, he gets stung by both insects which imply his big loss (Fig. 5). The same sentiment is expressed in another Japanese proverb, "Not catching a horsefly, but getting stung by a bee" ("Abu mo torazu, hachi ni sasareru").

"She hangs a blue cloak over her husband" (Fig. 6, left, "Zij hangt haar man de blauwe huik om"). After the mid-sixteenth century, "Blue Cloak" became the title of proverb prints, as found in Frans Hogenberg's engraving of 1558. "It is widely called The Blue Cloak, but it is more suitable to name it the" follies of the world."¹² In this scene, the behavior of the wife hanging a blue cloak over her husband apparently means that she is an unchaste woman. Bruegel gives a good reason for the woman's



Fig. 6. Pieter Bruegel, "She hangs a blue cloak over her husband," (left; detail of Fig. 1), "One fills the well after the calf has drowned," (middle; detail of Fig. 1), "Casting roses before swine," (right; detail of Fig. 1)

Fig. 7. Utagawa Kuniyasu, "Repentance comes too late," 1828, woodcut from *Ukiyo Kotowazagusa* by Jippensha Ikku

Fig. 8. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, "Gold coins to a cat," late Edo period, woodblock print

adultery in the painting; her husband is so old that he needs a staff to help him walk, and he seems to have lost his teeth. His young wife appears very charming and sensual, and is ready for some adventure. Therefore, Bruegel painted an unhappy couple. Bruegel might have known Lucas Cranach's, *Unequal Couple* as well as *Unequal Couple* by Quentijn Massys. The old man is interested in her youth and beauty, but she accepts his caresses only because of his heavy purse. A few years later after Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*, for the occasion of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Antwerp on August 15, 1563, seven allegorical wagons paraded in the city, and the third one demonstrated the device: "Old Betrayal makes everyone so blind with the blue cloak that one looks for oneself without success." As a tableau vivant, "Private Profit," with the help of his servant, "Practical Falsity," covers the old and licentious man with the blue cloak.¹³ The negative meaning of the "color blue" was also described in the Dutch literature of the sixteenth century, and it reads, "Even if he tells a lie or if his words are blue, one has to believe him because his words cannot be verified."¹⁴

The Japanese painter Kyôsei depicts "A wife paints mud on her husband's face" ("Teishu no kao e doro o nuru") in a similar context (Fig. 3)

probably influenced by a Hokusai cartoon. The proverb means that a wife's action is a dishonor to her husband. She paints mud on his face with a plasterer's trowel in order to hide his sight, because she is giving her love letter to a young man. Kyôsei depicts two different proverbs on the same sheet where one first sees a dominant and lazy wife smoking tobacco, becomes unfaithful and disdainful of her dull husband. It is only coincidental she also wears a blue dress.

"One fills the well after the calf has drowned" (Fig. 6, middle, "Als 't kalf verdronken is, dempt men de put"). Here we really admire the genius of Bruegel in the way he depicts the repentant peasant who was careless of the dangerous empty well. His face, with his hair blown back, is incomparably expressive. The admonition of this proverb is very clear, expressing that one should tend to business lest unfortunate happenings occur. A good literary example of the proverb can be found in *Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt 1566-1568...* by Marcus van Vaernewijk, a sixteenth-century chronicler in Ghent: "In the west end [of West Flanders] many armored men with firearms went about, after the damage had already occurred. So people say, 'After the calf has drowned, then the men fill the well'."¹⁵

There are two Japanese proverbs which have the same meaning: "Repentance comes too late" ("Kôkai saki ni tatazu") and "After the feast," ("Atono matsuri"). The text of the illustration from *Ukiyo Kotowazagusa* by Jippensha Ikku in the Edo period (Fig. 7) says in short: "Repentance came after he ate the (poisonous) blowfish and suffered from a serious stomachache. It is indeed too late ('after the feast'). As a result, he left many debts."¹⁶ There is a big difference between the expression of Bruegel and Jippensha Ikku. Bruegel depicts a tragic situation for a peasant who is deeply repentant, while a Japanese debtor merely tries to apologize to a bill collector explaining he is going to buy lottery tickets many times until he wins, at which time he will repay his debt.

"Casting roses before swine" (Fig. 6, right, "Rozen voor de varkens strooien"). It is more familiar as "casting pearls before swine" which comes from Matthew, Chapter 7:6. In the narrow sense, it means to give something precious to a person who does not understand its value. The broader meaning is to give important advice or a warning to someone who does not pay attention. Although pearls are in general associated with pigs in the proverb, a fifteenth-century German proverb says, "Man soll die berli oder schöne rosen nit den suwn furschutzen."¹⁷ Also, misericords both in Kempen and Hoogstraten show a peasant throwing roses to pigs. Tuiman lists the proverb in his book as "'t Is roozen voor de verken gestroot." ¹⁸ He explains that pigs cannot endure the smell of roses, because they always prefer the foulest dung to the most fragrant roses.

A corresponding Japanese proverb would be "Gold coins to a cat" ("Neko ni koban") which is one of the most popular proverbs in Japan even today. Koban is a very old gold coin used between ca. 1573 and 1868. Kyôsei painted a cat standing on a bag of straw, but the cat is certainly not at all interested in the gold coins. An Ukiyoe woodblock print by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, the so-called cat painter (Fig. 8), is fun to look at, because he opposes "Gold coins to a cat" to "Bonito to a cat" ("Neko ni katsuobushi"). Dried bonito is one of Japanese cats' favorite foods, so this proverb is a warning against the danger of putting tempting things in front of those who like them very much. Here, as well as elsewhere,

Japanese painters do not illustrate the proverb very seriously, and they simply want to amuse the viewers. The intention of the warning appears less important.

"He looks through his fingers" (Fig. 9, "Hij ziet door de vingers"). The meaning of this proverb is to tolerate another's failure in order to gain profit by giving a soft punishment, or after receiving a bribe from the offender. A misericord in Hoogstraten represents a civil servant or a judge who does not want to buy from a peddler the glasses which are an instrument for clear sight, because he will not see the reality through the glasses (Fig. 10). He seems to say: "I don't need any glasses, because I see everything through my fingers."

The Dutch print of 1602 by Nicolaes Clock (Fig. 11) demonstrates the exact meaning of the proverb in the accompanying legend telling of the complaint of a peddler. It reads: "Everything is lost. What shall I do first? / I cannot sell my glasses. / Everyone desires presents. / Through their fingers they look, and it causes many people grief."

The corresponding Japanese saying would be "To look with one's big eyes" ("Ômeni miru") or "One pretends not to look" ("Mite minu furi o suru"). There is an interesting usage of "To look with one's big eyes" in an illustration to the text by Ueda Kagetsu in *Kibidango Magazine* of 1881 (Fig. 12), and it reads in short: "My wife's lover is hidden in my eyelid. When three or four thieves also enter it, I can hardly see them. Someone said, 'You have strange and big eyes!' I replied, 'They would not hurt anybody!'... I am hearing also with my big ears (I don't care)." This means, although her husband has big eyes, he does not try to look at those offending him, instead, he overlooks both the love affair of his wife and the theft of his money. It is worth comparing this with chapter thirty-three, "On Adultery," of Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* (1494) in which the husband looks through his fingers at his adulterous wife.¹⁹

There are many interesting scenes related to "To look through one's fingers" in medieval Japanese picture scrolls, in which onlookers cover their faces with their fans, masking themselves when they were confronted with watching unexpectedly serious events at public places through their fans, in order not to be influenced or changed themselves by demonic spirits.



Fig. 9. Pieter Bruegel, "He looks through his fingers," (detail of Fig. 1)



Fig. 10. Albrecht Gelmers, "He looks through his fingers," 1532-48, misericord, Sint-Katarinakerk, Hoogstraten



Fig. 11. Nicolaes Clock, "He looks through his fingers," 1602, engraving



Fig. 12. Ueda Kagetsu, "To look with one's big eyes," 1881, Kibidango Magazine

"He falls from the ox onto the ass" (Fig. 13, "Hij valt van de os op de ezel"). This proverb had two meanings in the sixteenth century. One is to go from a higher position to a lower one, namely, a regression. In his *Adages*, Erasmus comments on a similar proverb, "From a horse to an ass, as if he turns away from honorable

studies to less honorable ones, from a philosopher to a chorister, from a theologian to a grammarian, from a merchant to an inn-keeper, from a steward to a cook, from a craftsman to

an actor." The other meaning is to talk incoherently, and in German they say "Vom Hundersten ins Tausendste kommen," that is, coming from the hundredth to the thousandth. The French manuscript of collected proverbial poems from the fifteenth century gives an example of the proverb: "Qui n'a l'entendement / Pour son cas exposer / Bien aourneement, / Se devoit reposer; / Mieulx vouldroit charryer. / Pierres jusqu'a Bredane, Car par son varier/Il sault du cocq a l'asne."²⁰

It is striking that there is exactly the opposite expression in Japanese, "To jump from a cow to a horse" ("Ushi o uma ni norikaeru"), meaning one can go much faster on a horse than on a cow; one goes with the superior thing, leaving the inferior one behind. While Keisai literally depicts, an officer jumping from a cow onto a horse in his album, *Gengaen*, Kyôsei uses his own interpretation of the proverb. A middle aged man rides with a charming, young new wife on a swift horse, as he looks back at his former, older wife who is now with a slow cow (Fig. 14). His behavior is reminiscent of another old Japanese proverb, "There is no comfort like new straw mats and a new wife." ("Nyôbô to tatami wa atarashiihoga yoi"). Also his former wife puts a tobacco box and a pipe beside her, which characterize her as a spendthrift and lazy woman. He pulls a face at the older woman, what we call in Japanese "akanbe." This behavior very often means a Japanese way of bidding a malicious goodbye.

"To throw sprat in order to catch a mackerel" (Fig. 15, "Een spiering uitwerpen om een kabeljauw te vangen"). A fisherman is about to throw sprat into a river to catch a codfish in front of him. In English, there is a similar proverb "To throw sprat to catch a mackerel." As Bruegel often juxtaposes proverbs with different but related meanings, he represents here a codfish as a fisherman's target, while this fish plays another role in the proverb, "The big fish eat the small."

In Japan "To catch a sea bream with a shrimp," "Ebi de tai o tsuru," is almost the same proverb as Bruegel's. In Keisai's illustration, a happy looking man looks proud fishing for sea bream, a luxury fish, which is usually served on special occasions, such as the ceremony for a baby's first solid food, a wedding feast, an old

person's birthday and other important events (Fig. 16). The appearance of this fisherman reminds one of "Ebisu," a patron god of the sea and fishermen, therefore Ebi (shrimp) is a pun on Ebisu. This proverb is still in use today, when one receives an expensive gift in compensation for a smaller gift.

"To hold an eel by the tail" (Fig. 17, below, "Een aal bij de staart hebben"). Bruegel's fisherman sitting by the river is eager to catch an eel with all his effort, but foolishly attempts to catch it by the tail. It is a really long, thick eel. There is a French proverb from the fifteenth-century manuscript mentioned above, "Aux grands pêcheurs échappent les anguilles."²¹ The same proverb in German, quoted by Friedrich von Logau (pseudonym Salomon von Golaw) of the seventeenth century, characterizes a man disappointed in love, and it reads, "Wer einen Aal beim Schwanz / und Weiber faßt bei Worten, / Wie feste der auch hält, / hält nichts an beiden Orten."²² This reminds one of the verse by Johan de Brune in his *Nieuwe Wijn in oude le'erzacken* (1636).²³

If we compare Bruegel's fisherman with an engraving of 1577 by Johannes van Duetecum, we see that Bruegel skillfully emphasizes the meaningless effort of the fisherman, while van Duetecum's fisherman easily catches an eel as if he held the tail of a winding snake caught in a field.²⁴

A sermonizing poem by Donaes Idinau is a good example of the meaning of the same proverb. His poem reads as follows: "He holds the eel by its tail. / If one cannot take one's matters in hand / Take good advice, as you please. And be completely sure of your situation. / Keep your mind on what really matters."²⁵

A beautiful Imari porcelain figurine (Fig. 18), produced in 1661-1662 representing the Japanese proverb, "To catch a catfish with a gourd," ("Hyotan de namazu o osaeru"), seems to be similar to Bruegel's, because an eel, a catfish and a gourd are slippery. However, the meaning is quite different. The Japanese proverb signifies a person who dawdles about or who has an ambiguous attitude. Although the onlooker will enjoy the cute boy with colorful clothes formed by the high quality of Imari, one may at the same time realize how important it is to learn from the eagerness of a pure-minded



Fig. 13. Pieter Bruegel, "He falls from the ox onto the ass," (detail of Fig. 1)

child trying to catch the eel with a slippery gourd without considering the complications. If an adult also attempts difficult and seemingly impossible tasks with a pure mind like a child, he may succeed in everything.

"It is easy to cut straps out of other people's leather" (Fig. 17, above, "Het is goed riemen snijden uit een andermans leer"). This means to spend other people's money, or to use the property of others for one's own advantage. The tanner's workshop in Bruegel's painting on the right is located on the river, because he needs a lot of water to tan the leather. Beside him an apprentice helps his master, who cuts a piece of leather. However, it appears rather too wide for a man's belt. Antoine de La Sale (1451) admon-

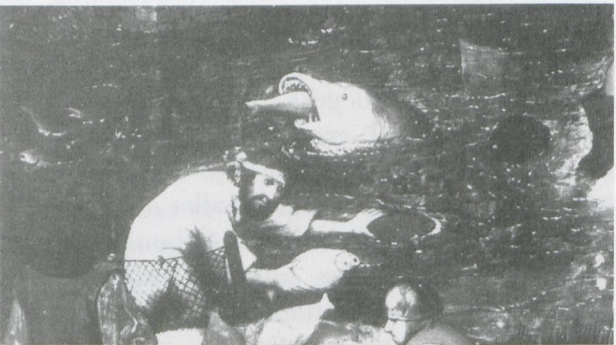


Fig. 15. Pieter Bruegel, "To throw sprat in order to catch a mackerel," (detail of Fig. 1)



Fig. 14. Kawanabe Kyōsai, "To jump from a cow to a horse," 1863-ca.1866, woodcut from *Kyōsai Hyakuzu*



Fig. 16. Kuwagata Keisai, "To catch a sea bream with a shrimp," 1808, woodcut from *Gengaen*

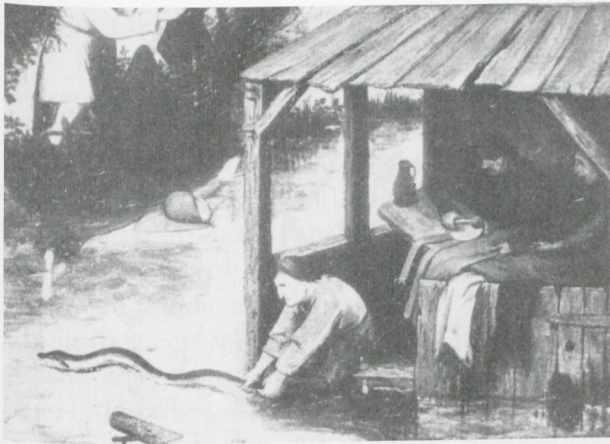


Fig. 17. Pieter Bruegel, "To hold an eel by the tail," (below; detail of Fig. 1), "It is easy to cut straps out of other people's leather," (above; detail of Fig. 1)



Fig. 18. Unknown artist, "To catch a catfish with a gourd," 1661–1672, Imari



Fig. 19. Ôtsuki Takashi, "To play sumo wearing someone else's loincloth," 1912, illustration from *Gyôten Hyakuga*

ishes people to practice the virtue of liberality with one's own belongings, not with others, and not to make a wide belt out of other people's leather. It reads: "Aussi ceste vertu de Liberalité doit estre faite du sien, et non pas de l'aultruy: non mie faire d'aultruy cuir large couroye."²⁶ A Japanese proverb with a similar meaning is, "To play sumo wearing someone else's loincloth," ("Hito no fundoshi de sumo o toru"). Ôtsuki Takashi, illustrates this (Fig. 19) in his *Gyôten Hyakuga* (Book of one Hundred Amazing Pictures) published in 1911, and he emphasizes the physical features of two men, a fat "Bruegelian" type and a scrawny one. The powerful sumo wrestler is ready to fight wearing someone else's loincloth. The scrawny, naked figure looks like a weaker wrestler, and wears a silk hat which became a new Japanese style during the Meiji era (1868–1912), when Western culture was introduced to Japan.

"If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." (Fig. 20, middle left, "Als de ene blinde de andere leidt, vallen ze beiden in de gracht"). Referring to Mathew 15:14, Bruegel situates three tiny figures of blind men in the further background, namely, in the less prominent place in his *Netherlandish Proverbs*. As they walk in the field, not in the direction of the cliff, they seem to be safe for the moment. In his later painting, *Parable of the Blind* (1568) in Naples, Bruegel depicts this proverb on a monumental scale. Here the blind leader has already fallen into a deep river, and all of his

companions will sequentially suffer the same fate. Six different types of blind conditions of that time are represented. From right to left, one sees an unidentified eye disease, empty eyes possibly because of their extraction as punishment, cataracts, adhesion, eyelids disease and crushed eyes.²⁷ According to Luis Th. Maes, there was a punishment of extracting the eyes of a criminal who secretly returns home after being banished.²⁸ It is interesting to note the partially visible hurdy-gurdy with its belt carried by the leader. Several examples of blind hurdy-gurdy players already appeared before Bruegel's painting, such as in an engraving by Pieter van der Heyden after Hieronymus Bosch's lost drawing which is considered by K. J. Hellerstedt as "the first artistic representation of the theme."²⁹ Cornelis Massys also depicts a hurdy-gurdy hung on the waist of the second of four blind beggars. The hurdy-gurdy had been acknowledged as an attribute of beggars in Netherlandish art since the fifteenth century. Besides as an attribute for blind players, the hurdy-gurdy was painted by Bosch as a dominant instrument of torture in the "Hell" panel of his *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Bruegel represents a hurdy-gurdy transformed into a body of a strange demonic creature in his early work, *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562). In his *Triumph of Death* (ca.1562), an uncanny personification of Death riding on a skinny horse plays a hurdy-gurdy. Thus all hurdy-gurdies in Bruegel's paintings have a specific function.

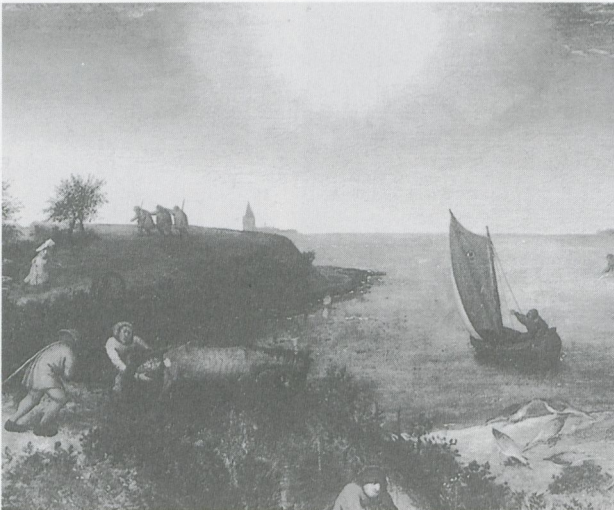


Fig. 20. Pieter Bruegel, "If the blind man lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch," (middle left; detail of Fig. 1), "Everything, no matter how finely spun, will come finally to the sun," (top; detail of Fig. 1)

Since the Middle Ages, numerous writings have mentioned blindness as a human folly, such as *Dietsche Doctrinale* of 1345, by an anonymous author who describes the blind as follows: "Those who are wise and know how to learn, yet act foolishly, are like seeing men who are blind: They cannot follow the right way and fall into the ditch while looking ahead, and there they perish."³⁰ In Bruegel's time, Anna Bijns, a

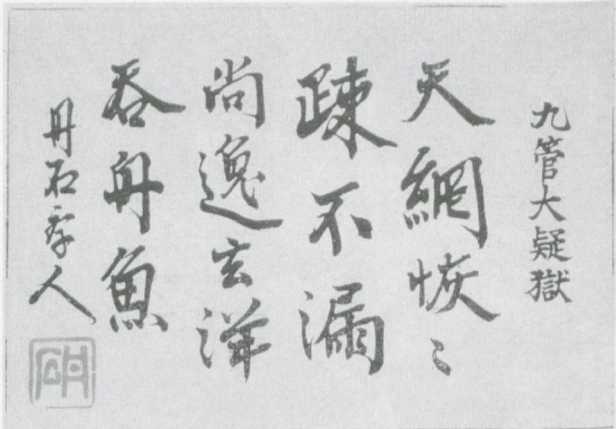


Fig. 22. Itô Chûta, "Even if Heaven's net seems coarse, it never fails to catch every evil," 1917-1918, illustration from Ashuracho



Fig. 21. Utagawa Toyokuni, "A blind leads blind people", late Edo period, woodblock print

fervent Catholic poet living in Antwerp, strongly criticized in her refrains the Lutherans as heretics spreading “the worst of plagues.” She warns: “Where was more blindness ever heard of? There are almost as many beliefs as heads. The heart cries and sighs. Although the word of God is spread abundantly, the people are so stunned by heretics, that it bears no little fruit... They are blind and they walk in the dark. Those who think they can see and who wander about carelessly, will soon fall into the ditch.” Further, Bijns describes the Lutherans as “They are wolves, though they are wearing a sheepskin, they are blind leaders.”³¹

There is almost the same Japanese proverb, “A blind person leads blind people” (“Ichimo shûmo o hiku”), although the second part of the proverb, “both shall fall into the ditch,” is missing. One of the earliest literary sources would be Ching-tê-chuan-têng-lu (1004), a Buddhist script composed by a Chinese monk. However, when the proverb was quoted by the editor, Wu-mên-Hui-kai, a Zen priest of the Nan Sung period, in his *Wu-mên-quan* (1228), the collection of 48 catechistic cases for meditation by Zen priests of different times, he used it in a completely different context. “When one stands on a hundred *shaku* (100 feet) high pole, how can he proceed forward?” “If he loses his (mental) sight on the top of the pole, he will be dazzled by meaningless matters. By throwing and sacrificing himself he is able to be ‘the blind who leads people.’”³² The last passage reveals Wu-mên-Hui-kai’s Zen thought of “a person who can save all the creatures in the world,” because he considered that this earthly world itself is blind and people in it are all blind. The person who stands on top of the pole and knows how to step forward is a true leader. Thus the proverb, “The blind lead blind people” is interpreted by Wu-mên-Hui-kai as having a positive meaning. The *Wu-mên-quan* was introduced into Japan by Muhon Kakushin who had been taught by Wu-mên-Hui-kai during his stay in China between 1249 and 1254. Kakushin translated it into Japanese after his return from China.

The procession of fifteen blind people by Utagawa Toyokuni (1770–1826), an Ukiyoe painter of the Edo period, would be a proper image for comparison with the above mentioned *Parable of the Blind* by Bruegel. When Toyokuni

depicts blind people passing on a log bridge (Fig. 21), he seems to imply two proverbs: “A log bridge of blind masseurs” (“Zato no hitotsubashi”) which is meant to represent a dangerous situation, and “A blind person leads blind people”. Zato, blind masseurs, are passing on a narrow log, but it is very dangerous for them because the bridge is both very narrow and unstable. Thus, the blind people are all walking closely together, touching each other for support. Some blind people crawl on hands and knees, and some cling to the clothes of other blind companions. A few in the middle are about to step forward, not in the direction of the end of the bridge, but over its edge. Possibly they will fall into a fast-flowing river together after the next step. Some people carry a biwa, a Japanese musical instrument, often played by the blind, just like the hurdy-gurdy of beggars in Netherlandish painting.

Although the three blind people in front have safely passed over the bridge, the impression from the entire scene is very frightening. Toyokuni seems to satirize contemporary famous actors who rapidly became top stars in spite of their lower social status, and some of them have specific family crests on their clothes.

“Everything, no matter how finely spun, will come finally to the sun” (Fig. 20, top, “Niemand ooit zo klein iets spon, of het kwam wel aan de zon”). This proverb is located at the top right of Bruegel’s painting. It is remarkable that Bruegel places the proverb specifically in a very prominent place in the painting. In the present author’s view, this proverb seems to provide a summary of the entire painting of *Netherlandish Proverbs*. It is a warning to all of the people who participate in the various proverbs in the painting, implying that “it will eventually come to light, even if you believe your mistake or evil behavior is successfully hidden.”

Surprisingly, there is an almost identical Japanese proverb, “Even if Heaven’s net seems coarse, it never fails to catch every evil” (“Ten mo kaikai sonishite morasazu”), which originated in the writing by Laozi, founder of Taoism.³³ The Chinese philosopher admonishes not to be aggressive in one’s behavior and activities, not to compete with others, and recommends having the courage to keep modest in spite of one’s distinguished capacity in all fields. Other-

wise one may kill both others and oneself. One should not need to worry that evils breed in the society, if one stays in the inactive attitude. As the proverb says, "Even if Heaven's net seems coarse, it never fails to catch every evil"; Heaven will punish the wicked mercilessly, while the good will come in to prosperity. Itôh Chûta was interested in illustrating the proverb to satirize a current event of 1918 (Fig. 22), known as "Kyu-kanjigoku," a scandalous case of bribery involving costly entertainment, cash and clothes given to an officer of the Kyushu National Road.³⁴

In conclusion, we can see that Bruegel's world of proverbs does not represent the world of peasants in the least, but the world of everyman's moral behavior. Therefore, it convincingly reflects the prevailing philosophy of Bruegel's contemporaries. Comparison with some Japanese proverbs reveals that Bruegel's proverbs have a common structure of human thought and

ethics shared by different countries and over a long period of time. However, there seem to be significant differences between European and Japanese illustrated proverbs. Bruegel's painting, and also numerous copies made by his son, together with the many engravings of "The Blue Cloak," are very instructive, giving serious moral lessons to the viewers; that is, how to live honestly, guard against deceit, be wise and avoid foolish behavior. In contrast, the Japanese visual world is less moralistic to the viewers. Rather its intention is to provide a lot of humor, entertainment and slight satire. Edouard Suenson, a Danish citizen active as a French naval officer, wrote in his *Skitser fra Japan* in 1866, that Japanese people of all classes had a tendency to love humor and make jokes.³⁵ The observers of the illustrated proverbs in the Edo period without question enjoyed those pictures as a kind of divertissement.

NOTES

This paper is largely revised from my Japanese lecture, "The Wisdom of Bruegel's Proverbs as Found in Japanese Art," which later appeared in the *Bulletin of the Language Institute of Gakushuin University*, No. 22, 1998, pp. 40-55 without footnotes, and which was circulated among a limited number of institutions in Japan. I greatly appreciate the efforts of Mr. Tadao Shimomiya, Professor of Gakushuin University for organizing this lecture, Mr. Kenyû Sakuma, Associate Professor of Tomakomai Komazawa University, for the Buddhist scriptural materials and especially Mr. Masamizu Tokita, scholar of Japanese proverbs, for his informative advice on illustrated Japanese proverbs. I received scholarly assistance from Dr. Eric de Bruyn in translating the Old Dutch texts into English. I am also truly indebted to Ms. Sandra Lucore, Associate Professor of Tokyo University, for her astute commentary and suggestions about English usage.

¹ From the list of publications above, 2, 4, 9, 11, 14, 20, 23, 24, 27 from Roger H. Marijnissen, *Bruegel*, Antwerp 1988, p. 134.

² Frank, Grace and Dorothy Miner, ed.: *Proverbs en Rimes*, Baltimore 1937.

³ Siple, Ella S.: Art America - 'Flemish Proverb' Tapestries in Boston, *Burlington Magazine*, 63 (1933), pp. 29-35.

⁴ In the following churches are preserved misericords related to Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*:

In the Netherlands: De Oude Kerk (Amsterdam), Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Breda), Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Dordrecht), Sint-Martinuskerk (Bolsward);

In Belgium: Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Aarschot), Sint-Katharinakerk (Hoogstraten), St. Materne (Walcourt), Sint-Sulpitiuskerk (Diest);

In Germany: St. Martin, Emmerich, Propsteikirche (Kempen).

⁵ Kunzle, David: Bruegel's Proverbs Painting and the World Upside Down, *Art Bulletin*, 59 (1977), pp. 197-202. Keith Moxey: Pieter Bruegel and Popular Culture, in *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, Exhibition catalogue,

Bridgestone Museum of Art, ed. by Curatorial Department of the Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo 1989, p. 45.

⁶ Tuinman, Carlus: *De Oorsprong en Uitlegging van dagelyks gebruikte Nederduitse Spreekwoorden*, Middelburg 1720, vol. 1, p. 23. I received help from Dr. Eric de Bruyn in translating this and all other passages from Old Dutch into English.

⁷ Grauls, Jan: *Volkstaal en Volksleven in the Werk van Pieter Bruegel*, Antwerpen-Amsterdam 1957, pp. 28-29. The Dutch proverbs quoted in the present paper are adapted from Grauls' book.

⁸ Kawanabe, Gyôsei: *Kyôsei Hyakuzu*, Edo 1863-ca. 1866, n. pag., reprinted Gyôsei Museum, Tokyo 1982, Fig. 15.

⁹ Erasmus: *Adagiorum collectanea, Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, Andrea W. Steenbeek ed. Hildesheim 1961, vol 2, p. 790.

¹⁰ Idinau, Donaes: *Lot van wüsheyd ende goed geluck*, Antwerpen 1606, p. 11.

¹¹ "Die sitten tusschen twee stoelen in d'asschen; / Die tusschen veel middelen swijcke slaen. / Te veel betrouwen / en te seer ver-rasschen / Doen dickmael een dinghen te qualicker gaan. / Wilt goeden raedt volghen / en op Godt staen."

¹² Keisai, Kuwagata: *Gengaen, Kotowaza Kenkyû Shiryô Shûsei*, Edo, reprinted Tokyo 1994, vol. 21, n. pag.

¹³ Lebeer, Louis: De Blauwe Huyck, *Gentsche Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis*, 6 (1939-40), pp. 183-185.

¹⁴ De Keyser, P.: Rhetorische toelichting bij het hooi en den hooiwagen, *Gentsche Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis*, 5 (1939/40), p. 123.

¹⁵ Eric de Bruyn: *De vergeten beeldentaall van Jheronimus Bosch*, s-Hertogenbosch 2001, p. 425.

¹⁶ Vaernewijck, Marcus van: *Van die beroerliche tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt 1566-1568...*, F. Vanderhaeghen ed., Gent 1872-1881, vol. 1, p. 218.

¹⁷ Jippensha, Ikku: *Ukiyo Kotowazagusa*, Edo (Tokyo) 1828, p. 7. Reprinted *Rigen Kotowaza Shiryô Shûsei*: Kôichi Kitamura and Masazumi Tokita ed., Tokyo 1986, vol. 5, n. pag.

¹⁷ Stoett, Frederik A.: *Nederlandsche Spreekwoorden, Spreekwijzen, Uitdrukkingen en Gezegden*, Zutphen 1943, vol. 2, p. 133.

¹⁸ Tuinman 1720 (see note 6), vol. 1, p. 372.

¹⁹ Brant, Sebastian: *Narrenschiff*, H. A. Junghans ed., Stuttgart 1964, p. 119.

²⁰ Frank and Miner 1937 (see note 2), p. 72.

²¹ Maloux, Maurice ed.: *Dictionnaire des proverbes, sentences et maxims*, Paris 1977, p. 121.

²² Friedrich von Logau, in idem: Lutz Röhrich, *Das große Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, vol. 1, p. 53.

²³ Johan de Brune: *Nieuwe Wijn in oude le'erzacken*, Middelburg 1636, p. 176. Also see Grauls 1957 (see note 7), p. 107.

²⁴ See the engraving by Johannes van Dueticum: in idem: Luis Lebeer: *De Blauwe Huyck, Gentsche Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis* 6 (1939–1940), p. 568.

²⁵ Idinau 1606 (see note 10), p. 14: "Den paelinck by den steerte houden. / Hy houdt den palinck by den steerte / Soo wie zijn saeck niet vast en heeft. / Neemt rijpen raedt / tot uwer begheerte / Ende u stuck alle versekerheydt gheeft. / 'T' is toe-siens weerdt / daert al aen-kleeft."

²⁶ James Woodrow Hassell: *Middle French Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases*, Toronto 1982, p. 87.

²⁷ Torrilhon, Tony: *Brueghel était-il médecin?*, *Connaissance d'Art* 80 (1958), pp. 68–77.

²⁸ Maes, Luis Th.: *Vijf eeuwen stedelijk strafrecht*, Antwerpen 1947, p. 417.

²⁹ Hellerstedt, Kahren Jones: *Hurdy-gurdies from Hieronymus Bosch to Rembrandt*, Unpublished Dissertation from University of Pittsburgh 1980, p. 105.

³⁰ *Dietsche Doctrinale*, 1345, in idem: De Bruyn 2001 (see note 14), p. 425.

³¹ Bijns, Anna: *Refereynen*. Lode Roose ed, *Meer zuurs dan zoets*, Hasselt 1968, p. 48, pp. 51–52. The English translation is by Dr. Eric de Bruyn.

³² *Mumonkan*, ed.: Eisin Nishimura ed., Tokyo 1994, pp. 171–173.

³³ Abe, Yoshio, Toshio Yamamoto and others: *Lôshi and Zhuangzi*, Tokyo 1976, pp. 119–121.

³⁴ Itô, Chûta, *Ashuracho*: Tokyo 1914–1919, Fig. 340, n. pag.

³⁵ Suenson, Edouard: *Skitser fra Japan, Fra Alle Lande*, Copenhagen 1869–1870 (*Edo Bakumatsu Taizaiki*, Tokyo 1989, pp. 89–90).

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