

A scene from *Warabebanashi akahon jishi* concerning *kohitsugire* connoisseurship

Glynne Walley
(Introduction and translation)

One of the major themes of this digital exhibition is the culture of collecting and connoisseurship that grew up around calligraphy in the early modern period. People learned to prize examples of calligraphy from centuries past not only as beautiful objects of art but as valuable possessions, even investments. An authentication industry appeared, in which expertise in analyzing not just writing styles but papers as well was marshalled to assure collectors that what they were about to buy (or sell) was what it claimed to be. On the other side of the equation, counterfeiters appeared, ready to fool unwary collectors with fake antiques, calligraphy that tried to pass itself off as something it wasn't.

Both of these phenomena – authentication and counterfeiting – are depicted in a fascinating scene from a popular novel published in 1824 (Bunsei 文政 7). The book is called *The Beginnings of the Redbook: A Children's Story* (*Warabebanashi akahon jishi* 童蒙話赤本始, with the last word sometimes glossed *kotohajime*). It was written by Kyokutei Bakin (曲亭馬琴, 1767-1848) and illustrated by Utagawa Kunisada (歌川国貞, 1786-1865). The book belonged to a genre known as *gōkan* 合巻 or “bound volumes,” in which text and image were intertwined in ways reminiscent of modern comic books. *Gōkan* featured long, complicated storylines involving quests, vendettas, and other adventures.

One of the plotlines in *The Beginnings of the Redbook* concerns a wealthy man known as Fukutomi who is seeking a husband for his daughter Suzuhime. He announces a “trial of treasures,” in which would-be suitors are to bring some sort of collector's item as an indication of their discernment. This set-up reflects the culture of collecting alluded to above. The motif of a contest for a daughter's hand in marriage shows up in many old stories, but in previous ages the contest tended to take the form of feats of strength or daring, such as the tasks assigned to the would-be suitors in ancient *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketori monogatari* 竹取物語; this was the basis of the 2013 Ghibli anime *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*). Fukutomi is more interested in testing the suitors' connoisseurship.

Two men in particular show up to display their treasures. The first is a samurai named Sarukurō, who claims to have a poem-strip inscribed with a poem by Sarumaru Dayū, in Sarumaru Dayū's own hand. Sarumaru Dayū was a Heian-era courtier-poet, well known to later generations for having one of his poems included in the widely-used anthology *A Hundred Poets, One Poem Each* (*Hyakunin isshu* 百人一首), despite the details of his life being unclear. The “Saru” in Sarumaru's name means “monkey,” and is the same element in the samurai Sarukurō's name, which is probably why Sarukurō thinks he can get away with claiming the poet as an ancestor.

But Fukutomi is a savvy collector. First he notes that there's no *kiwame*, or authentication slip – no expert has vouched for the calligraphy's authenticity or the sample's provenance. Then he notes that the poem is written on a *tanzaku*, or poem-strip, which is a problem because poem-strips didn't exist in Sarumaru Dayū's day. Fukutomi is too polite to call Sarukurō a forger, but the implication is clear. The samurai has been trying to pull a fast one, but the tycoon knows too much about the history of calligraphy and paper to be fooled.

The other would-be suitor, Kanijirō, displays another treasure related to calligraphy, this one an inkstone with seemingly magical properties. That takes us away from the theme of this corner, however, so we'll just note that it leads to accusations of theft, a brawl, and more adventures...

Here's the the scene:

...Fukutomi the Tycoon called his wife Muratake and his manservant Kumahachi close and said, "Recently I have been surreptitiously seeking a groom for Suzuhime, but I haven't found anybody I like. I desire somebody who doesn't lack for personal treasure, but I don't necessarily prefer somebody with his own dowry. I simply wish for someone of superb family lineage, a talented, manly man, as my son-in-law. But it's no easy matter to just summon men one by one and examine them. Therefore I mean to do it under cover of a trial of treasures, to which I'll invite men of class from all over. My intention must be written on a notice-board and posted, or else most men will never know of it. Make it so."

Kumahachi proceeded to write a notice about the trial of treasures, which he then posted, so that soon men from all over learned of it. There was no shortage of connoisseurs, so many men came, bringing what they thought were great rarities, but how could they hope to match the Tycoon's treasures? Needless to say, he found not a single man worthy of becoming his son-in-law.

The third day of the trial arrived, and two more men came bearing treasures to compare. One was a country samurai from Persimmon Tree Village, near Sugita in the country of Musashi: his name was Kotsutai Sarukurō. The other was a country samurai from Ananoya, near Shinagawa, named Ashinobe Kanijirō. Fukutomi the Tycoon addressed them. "What sort of curiosities have you brought?" he asked.

Sarukurō came forward and said, "One of my ancestors was the Sarumaru Dayū included in the *Hundred Poets, One Poem Each*. I have here a poem-strip written in his own hand. Behold."

Beaming with pride, he reverently took it out of the poem-strip case he had brought, and Fukutomi the Tycoon accepted it and examined it for a while. Then, knitting his brow, he said, "Calligraphy in Sarumaru Dayū's own hand is extremely rare. Even if he is your ancestor, it's hard to say this is indeed an example of it without proper authentication. Moreover, there was no such thing as a poem-strip in Sarumaru Dayū's

day, and indeed this poem is written on a modern poem-strip. There is so much here that is doubtful – how can I accept this?”

Under this interrogation, Sarukurō’s apelike face grew red, and he fell silent. Then Fukutomi the Tycoon turned to Kanijirō and said, “What sort of curiosity do you have, sir?” Kanijirō came forward and said, “I have an inkstone. It’s shaped like a half-moon, and it has the marvelous property of being self-moistening – water appears in it all by itself. Pray take a look.” He offered up the inkstone.

Fukutomi the Tycoon looked at it and said, “How strange! This inkstone is one of my own treasures, named Persimmon Pit. Over ten years ago a thief broke into my treasury and stole it – I never knew where it went. How mysterious that the lost inkstone should reappear now – I can’t understand it. From whom did you get this, sir?” Kanijirō was very surprised...

Link to the illustration:

https://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/he13/he13_03413/he13_03413_0002_p0009.jpg