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Prompt #1: Ukiyo-e: The Application of Beni-iro

Ukiyo-e, a genre of art developed in Japan during the Edo Period, is a genre with a fascinating history of production, social implications, and a surprising number peculiar conventions that in their application express much to the viewer about the production of the image, the image itself, and the audience of such an image, termed by Gillian Rose in her book *Visual Methodologies as the sites of an image* (Rose, pp. 19.) Rather than looking at the historical context behind the name of the genre, or broadly into the lifestyle of the people present in Japan during the period in which this genre most flourished, this paper will focus on just a few of the implications of one particular hue used in the production of prints, especially among those created by both Hiroshige I and Hiroshige II. I have a particular affinity for the color palette used in Ukiyo, which is my motivation for taking a deeper look at this particular aspect of the genre.

This hue I have previously referred to is Beni, and according to a flier for an event put on by the Shizuoka City Tokaido Hiroshige Museum of Art, it was the kind of red “most often used for Ukiyo-e” (pp. 1). To add further, historically beni was produced from large amounts of Safflower, which was a rather expensive material, which meant that this particular hue was often used sparingly in its application, but would nevertheless stand out as a dominant element of the prints it was applied in. One more rather unique quality about this color’s application mentioned

in the event flier was its use for creating particular temporal effects and depicting weather for similar purposes (pp. 2). I will also make an argument for why I think that this color in its application as created spatial illusions in the images themselves. All of this we will take a look at in a collection of Hiroshige II's works titled "One Hundred Views of Famous Places in the Provinces."

In two prints from this collection, the titles of which are respectively translated as "Great Waterfall, Nachisan Temple, Kishu" and "Naritasan Temple Precincts, Shimousa" there are a couple of qualities that are shared between them, those being the fact that they are both depictions of temples nestled somewhere in Japan's mountainous forests, and the positioning of red clouds just outside of the temple's sites. As I alluded to earlier, I don't believe that these clouds are merely pretty representations of the normal weather phenomenon, but seem to be creating a kind of spatial isolation, the one case between the Nachisan Shrine and the Great Waterfall from the rest of the surrounding world, and the other being Naritasan Temple Precincts and the surrounding world respectively. This kind of effect could be thought of as an artist method to emphasize the actual sites depicted in these two images. Whether that was the intent or not I cannot confirm with scholarly research. I do however find this kind of visual effect (rather ironically) suited for a print from the genre that's name is often translated into English as "pictures of the floating world" (Garcia, pp. 26).

A different aspect of the use of beni, that of informing the audience on the images temporal positioning, can be seen in two images coming from the same collection, one that goes by the translation of "True View of Naruto", and the other being "Catching Lamprey and Rockfish at Lake Suwa, Shinshu." In the former print's case, the red hue is very much used to

evoke the glow of either the time of dawn right before the sun begins to creep over the ocean's horizon, or dusk after it's descended below the same line as can be surmised by the layering of color's present in the sky. In the latter print, one can interpret a rather similar information in terms of temporality due to the application of the beni hue in the far horizon. A more thing to note in the latter print is how the crimson-red hue is rather effectively used in order to set a bold contrast against the snowy landscape, bonfire, and the changing color of the horizon. This effect is made even more effective with the dark billowing smoke positioned in the center of the print, surrounded by the dominantly white landscape.

Concerning the artist's intent behind these four images, I believe it was nothing more than to capture the natural beauty of each geographical setting for an audience that would either be familiar with these landscapes those or would have an interest in traveling to these landscapes to see them for themselves, which at this time would have been exclusively Japan's population. In modern times, this audience though has expanded along with the popularity of Ukiyo-e, and perhaps too the number of visitors of these sites entranced by the allure of the floating world.

Works Cited

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