Navigating the Artistic and Religious Influences on Weather Depiction in Japanese Art

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Long vertical lines cut through Ryūryūkyo Shinsai's *Cherry Blossoms in the Rain*, implying a steady rainfall that erases portions of the tree beneath it. While many cherry blossoms cling to the tree, some have fallen to the ground as whole blooms. This fleeting moment of growth and change captures the impact the rain has. The rain does not affect the tree entirely; rather, its intensity only hastens the release of the flowers that are ready to fall. This interaction between the weather and nature invites the viewer to contemplate the beauty of the tree and the conditions that can change, or perhaps enhance, this beauty. The moment Shinsai captures in *Cherry Blossoms in the Rain* is just one instance of a larger choice made by Japanese printmakers.

Climatic variations appear as recurring motifs within Japanese woodblock prints, also known as *ukiyo-e*. Whether an artist is attempting to preserve the rain or snow in ink, their understanding of the range of climates and religious environments around them enables Japanese printmakers to capture the beauty of the weather patterns in their country. As a result of their keen ability to capture their environment, Japanese woodblock prints are exemplary at capturing the human conditions of facing the weather.

One example appears in Ryūryūkyo Shinsai's nineteenth-century print *Cherry Blossoms in the Rain*, which depicts the natural phenomenon of rain and the cultural importance of cherry blossom trees in Japan. Since ancient times, cherry blossoms have played an important role in Japan's cultural and social identities. They were largely introduced into major cities in Japan during Ieyasu Tokugawa's creation of the Tokugawa government; in a period of peace that brought the development of many cultures, including horticulture. Over time, cherry blossoms have become recognized as a symbol of Japan. They appear throughout everyday life, including the 100-yen coin, and in the children's song *Sakura, Sakura*.

Beyond their presence in art, objects, and song, the natural cycles of cherry blossom trees also function as a unifying experience through which Japanese people share rituals. Cherry blossom trees bloom towards the end of March and mark the beginning of spring. During this time, the *Hanami* Festival occurs, and Japanese citizens go with their families to watch them bloom and ultimately shed their petals. The word, *hana* means 'blossom,' and the word *mi* means 'to look'. Since at least 794, *sakuras* have symbolized delicacy, and this persists today. People are fascinated by the brief period when cherry blossoms remain on the trees, watching them in the dark and as the petals fall.

This fascination extends to another cultural symbol: the samurai, who were once compared to the cherry blossom. They, too, should ideally die honorably in the height of their strength and battle, the same way in which cherry blossoms do, instead

of waiting to wilt. Cherry blossoms are contrasted with plum blossoms, which are popular in China and bloom around a similar time. The cultural distinction is that the plum blossoms remain on the tree for a much longer period. Cherry blossoms are valued in Japan because they embody a Buddhist philosophy of impermanence, reflected in the belief that,

"All worldly things are transitory." (Gilberto Mejía Salazar)

Sakura is the name given to the cherry blossoms. *Su* refers to the deity of the rice fields and *kura* translates to "seat for god". Together, the name implies that these trees are a seat for the god of the rice fields. This name is not coincidental; it is tied to the cultural and agricultural significance associated with these trees. These trees mark the beginning of rice season. Before calendars were widely circulated, these trees were important since people relied on them to mark when to begin cultivating rice.

These intertwined cultural meanings are conveyed in prints not only through subject matter, but also through the print style. *Cherry Blossoms in the Rain* is created in the *surimono* print style. Surimono translates as "rubbed thing," and is known for its technical refinement and delicate coloring that is applied to soft paper. The images and poetry can depict folklore, history, nature, and portraits. However, the prints were often used to commemorate important occasions including birthdays, gatherings, and calendars. Sometimes they would have metal dust—copper, silver, and gold—and embossing.

Additionally, surimono prints often accompany poems or collections of poems. Another surimono by Ryūryūkyo Shinsai, *Spring Rain Collection (Harusame shū), vol. 2: Cranes at Tsurugaoka Hachimangō Shrine in Kamakura*, similarly portrays another instance of a transitory spring season. Cranes, an important animal in Japanese culture, that symbolize prosperity and good fortune, are soaring through the center of the composition. Placed within a fleeting moment, this print reinforces how important new beginnings are, rather than permanence.

Since surimono is a print style that pairs images with poetry, the emphasis on the beauty of nature is prevalent in Japanese poetry. In *waka*, an earlier form of Japanese poetry, because of the damage the heat brought, the topic of summer was omitted. Many festivals, however, including the Gion Festival, which originated in the mid-Heian period, 794 to 1185, occur at the end of summer because they are meant to align people with the gods of nature, to protect them from natural disasters. This led to a shift in poetry; poems written about the season and the festival were idyllic, focusing solely on the beauty of the four seasons. This poetry illustrates what the conditions should be, rather than their harsh realities.

In visual representations of rain, artists also depict human responses to changing weather conditions, revealing contemporary fashion and daily habits. Katsushika Hokusai's *Shower at the New Yanagi Bridge* and Ando Hiroshige's *Light Rain at Shono (from the Series 53 Stations of the Tokaido)*, despite being created a few years apart, both highlight the use of umbrellas.

In response to summer monsoon rainstorms, individuals in these prints use umbrellas to keep themselves dry. *Wagasa*, or Japanese paper umbrellas, trace back to the 16th century. Originally used only by nobility and those of high status, these umbrellas were multipurpose, designed to block the sun, rain, wind, and to ward off evil spirits. During the Edo period, wagasa became widespread among all social classes. Typically made from washi paper and bamboo, these durable umbrellas could be widely distributed across Japan.

Alongside meteorological data on snow and rainfall, Japanese depictions of weather are equally shaped by religious beliefs. Within Japanese woodblock prints, many Shinto shrines and gods

are depicted. In Shinto religion, Raijin is regarded as the god of thunderstorms and Fujin as the god of windstorms and tornadoes. Raijin, also known as Raiden, derives his name from the Japanese words *rai*, meaning "thunder," and *shin*, meaning *kami* or "deity". Although they were kami, or gods, their visual representations were closely aligned with that of *oni*, demonic figures in Japanese folklore. It was written that,

"The rolling thunder is made by Raijin…. When he beats his drums, the thunder rolls through the sky and puts fear into the people on earth." (Dennis J. Edgell)

When lightning strikes an object, it is usually red or orange just above where it strikes. The buildings in Edo Japan were usually made of wood and therefore susceptible to fire if Raijin's lightning struck. Furthermore, volcanic eruptions can also produce a phenomenon known as volcanic lightning. Despite the many elements that render Raijin as a frightening figure, his appearance is also tied to the positive aspect of rain: that it is good for agriculture. It helps rice crops grow, and lightning fertilizes plants by fixing nitrogen.

While Shinto deities, including Raijin and Fujin, offer spiritual explanations for weather phenomena, Japan's climate can also be understood from its geographical location. Surrounded by the sea, Japan's climate is largely influenced by the East Asian monsoon system, which impacts the country's distinct seasonal changes. Monsoons are seasonal shifts in wind patterns that bring rain, creating an environment of alternating wet and dry seasons. Due to differences in monsoon circulation between India and East Asia, the Asian Monsoon system has been divided into two: the South Asian (or Indian) and the East Asian monsoon systems. The main difference between them is the length of the wet and dry seasons. For Japan, summer monsoon winds from the Pacific Ocean produce increased precipitation. In the winter, the winds from the Eurasian continent carry cold, drier air.

The religious and environmental realities explain why weather is a key aesthetic in Japanese prints, in contrast to Western artistic choices. For a long time, within Western aesthetics, weather was depicted because it was practical in capturing a landscape's condition. In contrast, Japanese artistic tradition often creates harmony between nature and themselves, Western artistic tradition often emphasizes seeking to control the land and nature around them. There are several reasons this could have happened. The first being that using weather as an aesthetic, something typically regarded as part of everyday life, was not valued in the study of fine arts. The second is that an object or something solid is more aesthetic and important than the weather. Weather is also a conditional occurrence that shifts frequently and is therefore not as easy to define.

While Japanese woodblock prints embraced weather as an aesthetic subject earlier than Western art, snow emerged more gradually as a central theme. Although Japan's winters are currently affected by global warming, Japan experienced significant snowfall, particularly during the Edo period. In Takehiko Mikami's *The Climate of Japan*, heavy snowfall is defined as 20 cm or more. Between 1940 and 2021, 25 instances of this heavy snowfall had been recorded. In Tokyo, the deepest snowfall since the JMA Tokyo Observatory was established in 1875 was on February 8, 1883, with a recorded 46 cm. This event is isolated, as other places in Japan may experience heavier snowfall than Tokyo. Snow is depicted in many ukiyo-e prints from the Edo period, which portray it as gradually accumulating and its impact on residents' daily lives.

Despite data showing that snow has fallen heavily for a long time and its prevalence in ukiyo-e prints, the mention of snow did not appear in classical Japanese literature or poetry. The occurrence of snow was similarly viewed to the overbearing monsoon weather. The intense snowfall was viewed as hazardous and an affliction. It was

not until *haikai*, or popular linked verse, appeared from poets including Kobayashi Issa, that this meteorological occurrence was first mentioned. However, it was not until the early nineteenth century that snow became heavily prevalent in poetry.

Kawase Hasui's *Snow at Ochanomizu* captures what a more modern snowfall looks like. Using the paper as the snow rather than creating white ink, he develops a stark contrast between the buildings and the snow. There is a defined directional pattern to the snow; it begins in the top left and moves to the bottom right. This printing technique creates a layering effect that makes snowfall appear thicker in certain areas. The covered boat and bare tree indicate that this is not a freak accident, and people were preparing for this weather. The thick blanket of snow depicts that it has been falling for a long time before the moment this print captures.

As a visual and emotional motif, snow possesses a clarity that invites artistic and literary interpretation. The blankets of snow and pristine white, traits within this print, are common descriptions of snow. There is comfort and discomfort with snow's ability to take over everything it touches. Japanese literature discusses how snow muffles all sounds, except for the wind and the sound of the snow, allowing for it to amplify a person's individual conditions.

Feelings of loneliness or waiting are often portrayed in scenes shaped by snow. Suzuki Harunobu's *Lovers Walking in the Snow (Crow and Heron)* evokes a peaceful yet melancholy emotional response. The snow creates an intimacy in this scene, as the two lovers share an umbrella as they walk through it. This is a nishiki-e or full-color print, in which Harunobu displays his artistic talent. By contrasting the black outfit with the white and the snow, he creates a complex image.

Historical relationships between people and the natural world further shaped how snow was represented. In the eleventh century, aristocratic women rarely went beyond the layers of screens, curtains, and sliding doors. Their lives were not ones that frequently interacted with the natural world, and only in rare instances did they make pilgrimages to hills or temples. They went into the gardens of their palaces, which were known as *shinden-zukuri*, and these moments were captured on picture scrolls, screen paintings, and door paintings. The connection between the Japanese aristocrats and nature developed from this period through the Edo period, from 1600 to 1867, and during which a harmony between people and nature was firmly established.

While Utagawa Kuniyasu's *Beauty in snow* depicts a similar composition to Harunobu's, by including a figure standing in the snow holding an umbrella, this print displays another key element in Japanese culture. Adorned in a delicately designed kimono with an intricate umbrella, this figure embodies the ideal image of a Japanese courtesan woman. Within the Edo period, these women were not only skilled in singing, dancing, and acting, but also in intellectual pursuits. Known for creating thoughtful poetry, the expression on this woman's face speaks to the qualities high-class women were expected to possess.

Within rain-soaked cherry blossoms, monsoon storms, and snow-covered people, Japanese woodblock prints position weather as a force that shapes human experience. Whether through fallen blooms or figures shielding themselves with umbrellas, these prints capture moments of transition. Rather than overpowering the compositions, the weather exposes the artist's adaptation, appreciation, and observation of natural elements. The natural phenomena of monsoon rains and heavy snowfall are carefully captured within these prints, merging science with cultural beliefs. Shinto and Buddhist beliefs coexist in Japanese culture; Buddhist beliefs of impermanence and

harmony appear in Ryūryūkyo Shinsai's works. The prints featuring rain not only capture the impact of monsoon systems, but also of the Shinto gods who control the wind and rain. By preserving these fleeting moments in ink, Japanese printmakers capture glimpses of life in lasting prints. The artists do not seek to conquer the weather; the individuals in their prints show how to adapt to coexist with it.

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