

HISTORICAL SUBJECTS REPRESENTED IN THE FELIKS JASIEŃSKI COLLECTION OF JAPANESE WOODBLOCK-PRINTS

Everybody knows about Feliks Jasiński's collection of beautiful landscape prints from the Edo period. The Great Wave of Kanagawa inspired Andrzej Wajda and Arata Isozaki to create a wave-shaped roof for the building which houses the collection (and, currently, all of us!)¹⁾. The numerous series of famous views by Edo or other prints by Hiroshige, Hokusai and many other masters are well-known to those who visit Manggha Museum.

Therefore, today I would like to talk about another part of Jasiński's collection, one which concerns historical subjects. According to the vernacular of Western art history, I should use the term "historical subject" when I think about any narrated story such as the illustration of the life of Minamoto-no Sugiwaras as well as those of the Genji monogatari or of the forty-seven loyal retainers²⁾. Thus, included among "historical subject" prints there should be mentioned all prints which are not landscapes or portraits. However, this time I would like to use the term only as a key-word for stories widely known in Japan, either based on facts or not, i.e. Heike monogatari, Soga monogatari, Chūshingura, Suikoden and similar narratives. These are different stories but

¹⁾ Ingarden (2009: 46).

²⁾ "History painting (...) subjects can be taken from the Bible, from mythology or other forms of secular literature, from historical events; or they can be allegories." (NG) "History painting is a painting genre defined by subject matter rather than an artistic style (...). The historical events chosen may be iconographic, not only depicting important events, but ones of particular significance to the painter's society (...)." (PU)

all of them were very popular among citizens (chōnin) during the Edo period, and connected with such popular cultural aspects as Kabuki, Bunraku, e-hon, and in the end – with woodblock-prints³⁾. Mostly they concern warriors and their dramatic adventures. It should be mentioned that they are also a great illustration of the social relations within Japanese societies during different periods. Here I should note that I will not mention the *Genji monogatari*, which is an outstanding story worthy of separate research.

But prior to this let me say a few words about Jasioński himself and the origin of his Japanese art collection.

Feliks Jasioński was born in 1861 in Grzegorzewice (in Mazovia province)⁴⁾. His parents were well-to-do landowners. Taking advantage of the family's wide contacts, Feliks studied political economy, philosophy, history of literature, art and music in many European cities. Unfortunately, a serious eye illness which recurred throughout his life interrupted his studies but this also led Feliks to shift his interests to art criticism and collecting. His great adventure with Japanese art began in Paris where, in the mid-1880s, Feliks Jasioński was accepted into the milieu of writers, painters, critics, art experts and collectors who knew the current trends in aesthetics and art. At that time, Japan was the subject of many discussions and articles of people such as Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. Influenced by this atmosphere, Jasioński started to buy Japanese woodblock-prints, lacquerware, bronzes and other kind of art pieces. This interest became a passion which he deepened by studying Japanese culture. He was interested in its history, aesthetics, and symbolism⁵⁾. Thanks to his knowledge and the sound advice of experts, Jasioński created a collection of high quality art pieces. However, more importantly, he had an idea of what he wanted to acquire. After he came back to Poland, he wanted to share his collection with Polish society. Unfortunately, his attempts to introduce Japanese art to Poland failed. Nonetheless, he enlarged the collection while living in Poland – purchasing art pieces through agents in Paris, London, Berlin and Japan. He collected with the aim of showing the Polish people how important art is in Japanese daily life. He wanted to teach them through these art pieces how crucial art is for preserving culture and history. Many patrons of art (and Jasioński among them) would show their art collections to artists in order to inspire them. Jasioński was fascinated by the high quality of Japanese art made

³⁾ Martini (2008: 3–11).

⁴⁾ Alberowa (1994: 10).

⁵⁾ Alberowa (1994: 12).

by almost all Japanese and he therefore wrote a series of articles about Japanese art. He would invite friends (such as Leon Wyczółkowski, Jan Stanisławski, Stanisław Wyspiański, Józef Mehoffer, Józef Pankiewicz and many others) to show them Japanese prints, textiles and lacquer and he would discuss the topic of Japanese art on each occasion. He also organized the far eastern department of the Krakow municipal museum in his own apartment or Krakow workshops which were attended by girls from neighboring villages who could learn artistic techniques such as Javanese batik⁶⁾.

Let me return now to the stories I am especially interested in. For what reason might they have been so interesting for Jasiński? I intend to show a few representative examples of the large group of prints within the Jasiński collection.

Firstly, let us examine the *Kanadehon Chūshingura* or the story of the loyal retainers as an example. This is a story based on the so-called *Akō* affair which took place in 1701–1703 and concerns some faithful samurai who avenge their master's unjust death. The story was so moving that within two weeks after the final events, the first theatrical plays were staged⁷⁾. In the published texts (such as the theatrical synopsis) the period and names were slightly modified to be recognizable by the reader⁸⁾. The best known version is *Kanadehon Chūshingura* written by Izumo Takeda, Shōraku Miyoshi and Senryū Namiki for the *bunraku* theatre.

On a symbolic level, the *Chūshingura* is mainly about being (or not) faithful to the ideals of a code of honour. It is clearly stated who is a righteous man – in other words one who is also ready to die in a good fight – and who is not. This long story consists of many minor events presenting either good or bad choices in the context of fighting for the master's honour. A good example might be one of the subplots – the story of Kanpei (Fig. 1, 2).

He is a young samurai of lord Enya Hangan who, while his master is being arrested, has a meeting with his wife or fiancé Okaru. When Enya is given a death sentence, Kanpei runs away with Okaru to her parents. But one day he meets his old fellow-samurai – now *rōnin* – who had decided to avenge their former master. Kanpei asks them to join the conspiracy. Meanwhile, his father-in-law, Yoichibei, sells Okaru to a brothel to help fund Kanpei's attempted revenge. While coming back home with the money, another former

⁶⁾ Wrońska-Friend (2007:20).

⁷⁾ Keene (1971:3).

⁸⁾ Görlich (2009:61–69).

retainer – but now an outlaw – Sadakurō kills him and steals the money. Now the action returns to Kanpei. His fellow-rōnin says they will answer him the next day whether he may join them. It's getting dark and as Kanpei is coming back home he shoots a wild boar. Unfortunately, he is in error – the wild boar appears to be a dead man with a pouch. He takes it and goes back home. The following day two hunters bring Yoichibei's corpse and someone recognises his pouch. Kanpei, who realises that he had shot his father-in-law, goes to commit seppuku. At this moment, in comes his fellow-rōnin. Examining Yoichibei's body, they notice that he had been killed by a sword rather than shot. Finally, Kanpei is included on the list of avengers and dies an honourable man⁹⁾.

So, in this little part of *Chūshingura*, there are examples of honour, dishonour and sacrifice. During the preparations for revenge, the whole group of rōnin live partly beyond the law and tarnish their good name to fulfil their duty to the former master. In the end, bad characters are punished, the rōnin accomplish their revenge and give themselves to the court to be punished for the murder they have committed. In this way they show that the revenge was a part of their samurai duty, rather than a fight against the system and government¹⁰⁾. In the Jasiński collection there are more than one hundred prints illustrating this story. Among them are complete series, separate prints and albums. In this part of the collection, it is the largest group devoted to a single subject.

Another interesting example is *Heike Monogatari* or the story of the rise and fall of the Heike. Actually, the novel which is the basis for many prints is – as in the previous example – only a part of the (well-known) tradition of war from the end of the 12th century. It goes without saying that during that period, two clans – Taira and Minamoto, who symbolized the old and new order in the Japanese empirical court – would fight, which resulted in the destruction of the Taira clan and establishment of a shogunate system. *Heike Monogatari* is a key-word for many events which might have occurred during that war and for heroes such as Minamoto-no Yoshitsune who are symbols of the samurai life.

In contrast to the previous story, the prints of *Heike Monogatari* are not in a series illustrating all subplots. Ukiyo-e artists often presented spectacular battles, such as the naval battle of Dannoura which was a triumph of Minamoto, or the adventures of Minamoto-no Yoshitsune's life. Yoshitsune is the main hero of this story: he was the ninth son of Minamoto-no Yoshitomo, murdered after an unsuccessful plot against his former ally, Taira Kiyomori. Yoshitsune is

⁹⁾ Görlich (2009:85–90).

¹⁰⁾ *Chūshingura* (1971:175).

kept in ignorance of his parentage, and trained as a monk. Later, at the age of eleven, he discovers his lineage and begins his struggle against the Taira clan. After the victorious Dannoura naval battle, he is forced to commit seppuku by his half brother, Yoritomo¹¹⁾ (Fig. 3).

Yoshitsune's adventures, among them receiving instructions in martial arts from Sōjōbō – the king of the local tengu – or encountering his faithful retainer-to-be, Benkei (their duel on Gojō bridge was one of the most famous in Japanese history) were narrated and presented for hundreds of years. Several prints on these subjects can also be found in the Jasiński collection¹²⁾ (Fig. 4).

While on the topic of Heike monogatari, in the same period of war the events of the Soga monogatari or the Story of the Soga Brothers took place. This story's origin dates from the 15th century when it was narrated by travelling entertainers. Many elements were added. Therefore – as in all other examples mentioned today – there is no official version of the adventures of the Soga brothers. The main plot is the story of revenge sought by some brothers against their father's murderer: another colourful story about defending family honour. Prints illustrating the adventures of the brothers mainly depict one of them during his journey or escape. The illustration is narrated by an accompanying text describing this part of the story such as this illustration by Hiroshige (Fig. 5).

Another story represented in the collection is Hakkenden – Story of Eight Dog Warriors¹³⁾. These heroes were eight sons of a human mother and a demonically-possessed dog. Therefore, they were called "Hakkenshi" ("hachi" means "eight", "ken" or "inu" is "dog" and "shi" is "warrior" in Japanese). Each of them has a virtue which characterises him. These virtues originate from Confucianism and they are as follows:

- jin (仁) – sympathy and benevolence. According to Confucianism, this is the greatest and most perfect virtue of all.
- gi (義) – duty and obligation, but it can also be translated as righteousness
- rei (礼) – courtesy or proper form, i.e. an extensive knowledge and proper observation of tradition and manners
- chi (知) – wisdom
- chū (忠) – loyalty
- shin (信) – faith

¹¹⁾ The Tale of Heike (1988).

¹²⁾ Romanowicz (1994:21), Martini (2008:12, 18).

¹³⁾ Keene (1956:423–428).

- kō (孝) – filial piety; devotion
- tei (悌) – brotherhood; brotherly affection.

While the prints show dynamic fight scenes, the story was an example of presenting and popularising virtues in an interesting way¹⁴). Maybe we can ask whether Jasiński intended such an idea for Polish society also?

There are many other prints in the Jasiński collection presenting “historical subjects”. A large group of them are as yet unidentified but I believe that identification is possible and may help in interpreting the collection’s character.

Warrior subjects were mostly popular in Japan in the second half of the 19th century because of censorship and restrictive laws governing what could be published. While prints of beautiful women were prohibited, interest in warrior topics increased¹⁵). This coincided with the popularity of woodblock-prints among European collectors who were buying either old masters or modern prints; therefore, many warrior prints were available in antique shops in Paris, London and other cities.

As is typical for the quality of historical prints in the Jasiński collection, they are not in good condition. There is physical damage such as holes, tears as well as spots or faded colours. This might tell us they were frequently touched while on display or, on the other hand, that Jasiński had bought them in such condition. The entire collection was donated directly from Jasiński to the City of Krakow; therefore, these prints could not have been damaged in the meantime. In either case, this means that he had a strong desire for these prints to be appreciated. Some of them (especially in the Chūshingura series) are duplicated – with one in better and one in worse condition. What was so interesting for him? Was it just that it was a typically “masculine” subject? Or was it maybe something more sophisticated? (Fig. 6, 1).

The turn of the 20th century was a stormy period in world history, especially that of Japan. After the fall of the feudal system in 1868, Japan transformed into a world power with an expanding overseas empire¹⁶). This might have surprised western people and prompted their interest in Japanese culture and the warrior stories in particular. Both the strong will of the Japanese who were able to transform their country in such a short time and their flexibility is still of considerable interest. We may ask if it is possible that Jasiński, fascinated by Japanese culture, believed that in the samurai soul there is something similar

¹⁴) Martini (2008:21).

¹⁵) King, Iwakiri (2007:25–27).

¹⁶) Tubielewicz (1984:344–384).

to the Polish one? Was he looking for some kind of solution which could be adopted by a Poland awaiting its freedom and preparing to create a new model of state?

One thing is for sure: Feliks Jasieński had an idea. He didn't operate at random. Therefore, we may be sure that collecting these objects was for a particular purpose and maybe someday Jasieński's pieces of art or his texts will reveal more.

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Fig. 1. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Kanadehon chūshingura*, act 5, MNK VI-1681, National Museum in Krakow



Fig. 2. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Kanadehon chūshingura*, act 6, MNK VI-1682, National Museum in Krakow



Fig. 3. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Ushiwaka zue. Sōjō-ga tani-ni bujutsu-no dokuren*, MNK VI-2739, National Museum in Krakow



Fig. 4. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Soga monogatari zue*, MNK VI-2908, National Museum in Krakow



Fig. 5. Utagawa Kunisada, *Inukai Genpachi on the roof at night*, MNK VI-3624, National Museum in Krakow



Fig. 6. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Kanadehon chūshingura*, act 5, MNK VI-1680, National Museum in Krakow