Physical and Cognitive Frames: What makes Hokusai Manga?

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Roberta and I were more resigned to the title of this panel, “Experiencing the Illustrated Book in East Asia,” than happy with it. It hadn’t been for lack of trying that we hadn’t come up with anything snappier. Yet, although I still wish that there were a better pairing of words than “illustrated book” (“picture book,” “art book” “graphic book” “design book”…), and although I still dislike the inevitable “East Asia” area designation, in the nine months since we submitted the proposal abstract I have found the methodological resonances of “experience” most apt and stimulating. Weary of the extremes of semiotic decodings on the one side and the glorification of thinginess on the other side, I like how experience indicates the human relationship with the artifact without dictating the tenor of that relationship. John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* may be tiresome to read in its entirety because of its old-fashioned notions of art as enlightenment, but there is a richness of assumptions about our relationship to objects now lost as we have become “posthuman.”¹

In this age dominated by new media, as librarians are forced to defend the books that “just sit on the shelf,” we have come to clearly recognize books as a medium.² Indeed, the shift to the pdf and the e-book has made us see how much we previously took the bound books in our libraries and studies for granted. Yet, as graspable as we find them, it is hard to get a hold on all books do. The defense of the role of books is not proving to be simple. Books are particularly difficult to deal with as artifacts because they are a multiple, often mass-produced, reprinted, and pirated. They are not unique works of art: They fall in between the utilitarian and aesthetic dimensions.³ Much has been done, but for me too many studies seem to traipse around the book, considering social institutions or chronicling publishing culture. Still scarce are methodologies that attempt to define the book’s readability and social impact that start from its physical

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² This accusation from someone in the sciences was repeated to me by an East Asian librarian, from a heated discussion at a meeting.
³ In Heidegger’s terms, they are in between equipment and works of art. This in-betweenness of the book was noted in Rothenberg and Clay, *A Book of the Book* (Granary Press, 2001).
structure, layout, and graphic design. As Johanna Drucker has put it: a book is more than an entity, it is an event. It strikes me that *experience* is the verb used in conjunction with event. Experience encompasses eventfulness on both the individual and social level. Moreover, it does not disregard temporality: it can seem to be fleeting, of the moment, but it carries within it a sense of the past.

II.

What best defines the experience of a book? Heuristically, I propose the metaphor of the frame. This was suggested to me by the subtitle to Erving Goffman’s 1972 *Frame Analysis*, “An Essay on the Organization of Experience.” Like any theorist whose work has lasted decades, Goffman’s theory of the frame has been variously appropriated in different fields. Allow me then—as idiosyncratically as others—to apply his theory to our subject at hand. Let me ask: how does the East Asian illustrated book organize experience? Not so much *what*, but *how* does it frame an event? Now let me proceed to strain and stretch the many meanings of the concept of frame—perhaps to the breakage point—employing it both as noun and verb. Let me propose that books are frames and that they frame contents both physically and cognitively.

Adopting Goffman’s theoretical metaphor of framing at the various levels of analysis is not a simple recognition of unchanging, regulatory boundaries. His theory of framing is relational, varying with context. His frames entail a certain understanding of a situation, a certain take on something, an atmosphere. Of the different types described, he likens one to a musical key or register; keying from one register to another is possible, as from play to work. Something can be in-frame, or ignored because it is out-of-frame for the situation. Goffman’s complex model for experience does not merely point to or identify a frame, but it queries the ways we recognize something or—to rephrase his subtitle—the ways experience is organized. These flexible conceptions can apply to any level of framing, it seems to me.

Goffman, as a sociologist, does not consider the physical frame, but a material analysis must begin with the object. It occurs to me that the concept of frame primarily describes the foliated book in two different ways: as a whole structure and as a series of many double-paged spreads. The immediate experience of a book is in how these combine.

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4 The exceptions are too many to recount here. See my forthcoming work.
6 I am most intrigued by his passing references to comic books.
As the word frame can refer to fundamental structure (the frame of a building, or a bicycle, for example), we can call the structure that holds a book together its frame. We can say that this frame, in supporting the contents, makes the book a finite whole. This is important because structural frame makes it an entity so that it can be experienced as an event. So what physically is the frame of a book? Although it encases the book, the cover alone does not make a book. The frame is neither exclusively external nor internal; it is a combination of the effect of the cover, binding, and its body of pages filled with notations. In most cases a book becomes a finite entity through its binding. Thus we can define the entity of the illustrated book as a structural frame comprised of a fastened sequence of pages within a cover. Of course, this is complicated by the manner a title organizes as one any number of volumes. Usually the volumes conform in scale and bibliographic conventions. Often the volumes are encased in a box, which becomes another external frame to the book.

Internally, because of the way that it is structured physically, books are experienced as a series of frames. In other words, the pages are separate frames, leafed through or looked at individually. Because of the binding, a book is opened to create a set sequence of two-page spreads. The edges of each page are the boundaries of the space that is viewed. When one side of the facing pair of pages is blank, this is an important part of the experience of the book. This leads into the issue of how the pictures become a virtual space, a space indicating another realm. This also brings in the important question of framing—field and figure and modes of perspective in the realm of art historical formal analysis. Most of the books that we are considering here utilize borders that serve as internal framing device for the contents of the page. These borders can frame pictures, designs, figures (sometimes labeled), pages of verbiage that guide the reading of the pictures, and, lest we forget, blank pages. Borders make for distinctive margins, an inside and out, which bears on what is framed proportionally.

It is how the pairs of pages are read within the volume, within the set of volumes that makes up the experience of a book. There is an immediate, tactile connection to the reader through the fingers’ turning of the pages. The structure of the volume defines beginning and end. Because of this bound structure, we can locate place within the book. Even when there is no obvious narrative, sequence defines the reading experience. The turning of the pages almost always entails some degree of suspense, because of the shifts in what is presented. Yet, as many

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7 David Summers has a nice working definition of virtual space in his *Real Spaces* (Phaidon Press, 2003).
9 Anne Burkus-Chasson has enlightened us on the turning of the page.
have pointed out, the reading of a book does not necessarily proceed from beginning to end.\textsuperscript{10} There are many types of discontinuous reading: skimming, purusing, referencing. However, I would argue, the beginning and end of a volume are heavy in significance. Readers note beginnings even without conscious attention. (And bibliographers inevitably check the back of the volume as well.) Titles and prefaces and postfaces guide the reader.\textsuperscript{11} Navigational devices such as tables of contents, headings, labels, and page numbers play an important semantic role in the experience of the book,\textsuperscript{12} just as these inherited conventions help the binders to collate the book.

Secondarily, yet just as important to the experience of the book, are the ways that the areas where books are situated are framed. What is the architecture and atmosphere of storage, marketing, circulation, and reading? This includes the furniture and spaces of the home or public institutions that entail a range of loose or tight protocols of behavior.

Stepping away from the physicality of the book or its spaces, framing is also a useful metaphor to explain how a book is a cognitive event, or rather how the reader’s cognizance recognizes the book. This is more what the reader brings to the book than what the book without external referents could possibly stir up within the mind. This might seem self-evident and much simpler than it is. (After all, phrases such as “frames of reference” or “frames of understanding” are so easily bantered about.) The complexities of one common framing—how our conception of the author frames our understanding—was raised in Foucault’s essay, “What is an Author?” We read a poem differently thinking that Chairman Mao or Bai jii wrote it. This conceptual frame is defined by the larger readership, is based on implicit knowledge of the basic ordering systems, iconography, contemporary politics, etc. It is also very much related to a socially determined “horizon of expectations.” Understanding cognitive framing as merely context makes it too amorphous. It is the frames of understanding brought to bear on the book, both in the production of it and the reception of it.

Despite this scaffold-like presentation of two modes of framing of the book, physical and cognitive, I hope it is clear that the eventfulness of a book does not lie in one or the other, but rather in how they are intrinsically related to each other. How these various frames nest, abut, or morph into each other is at the crux of the matter. The illustrated book physically is an event

\textsuperscript{10} For example, see Peter Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible” in Andersen and Sauer, eds, \textit{Books and Readers in Early Modern England} (UP Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{11} All of what Genette calls “paratext” or the thresholds of the book.
\textsuperscript{12} Drucker stresses this in “Entity to Event”
comprised of sequences of virtual frames (pages) taking place within a real space, but is experienced by socially determined frames of understanding.\textsuperscript{13}

III.

What is the commonality between our approaches to the “East Asian illustrated books” in this panel? Anne Burkus-Chasson has given us lingering questions arising from her long years of work on Liu Yuan’s \textit{Lingyan ge}, a book that—virtually, in the form of a book—reconstructs a portrait gallery consisting of twenty-four Tang government officials, adding to this three portraits each of Guan Yin and Guan Yu. JP Park has considered the impact of the classic late Ming art manuals such as \textit{Mustard Seed Garden Manual}, \textit{Master Gu’s Painting Manual}, \textit{The 12 Bamboo Studio} amongst the Choson elite. Jenny Preston has closely traced the history of a 1719 book originally designed by Nishikawa Sukenobu but much altered with the passage of time. Roberta Wue has analyzed a 1876 delicate woodcut album of landscapes, unusually put out by a living Shanghai artist in an age of lithography, as an embodiment of the artist in his social milieu.

As different as these books might be in format, page-length, or number of volumes, all share the same basic structural frame. They are foliated books, all designed to be folded, “thread-bound” (Ch: \textit{xian zhuang}) or “pouch-fixed” (Jpn: \textit{fukurotoji}) and placed between flexible, soft covers. In this way each title became an entity. The leaves were devised to be turned by the fingers of the hand, whether in sequence from beginning to end, or just leafed through. They were intended to be experienced as a series of framed illusions. Most of these titles employ internal borders. Their shared conventions of paratext: title slips, inner title pages, tables of contents, prefaces would be understood throughout the wider region regardless of state boundaries.

Moreover, to a surprising extent, their pictorial contents shared a common iconography. Through the wide dissemination of certain books such as the Mustard Seed Garden, the basic horizon of expectations for reading them was shared within East Asia. All of these books crossed geographical and temporal borders so that the Ming and Qing China, Chôson Korea, and Tokugawa, Meiji and Showa Japan bled into each other.

As we are all aware, the thread of the “thread-bound” book wears thin, and the books are easily unbound as they travel through time. Physical frames shift as books are rebound, excerpted, reprinted. A book printed from the original blocks can be reconstituted with new title pages, ads, even pages from other books. Cognitive frames differ as the books passed from hand

\textsuperscript{13} The distinction between virtual and read spaces was made by David Summers in his book \textit{Real Spaces}, but instilled in me from years of training with Onishi Hiroshi.
to hand and across lands. As Anne Burkus-Chasson has pointed out in previous work, the political ironies of the twenty-four officials got lost when it traveled to Japan as the leaves of the “thread-bound” book were unfolded, laid flat and mounted onto an album so that there was no longer any recto and verso to the pages.14 This is a radical example of how physical frames can shift according to differing readerly expectations. In J.P. Park’s account of the classic Ming art manuals that traveled to Chôson, even though the books might have been physically the same, a different readership meant a different cognitive frame. As JP explains in some detail in his longer paper, even as social changes of the eighteenth century encouraged an enthusiastic reception of these manuals, the Ming painting painting manuals were read differently because of a differing class structure. Jenny Preston’s case is equally about physical and cognitive shifts. She closely follows the afterlife of one book that changes physically to become a hodgepodge of the way it was originally conceived. She uses several later readers’ written traces within the book and observations recorded elsewhere as evidence of how the book was differently experienced at different times. From this, she speculates more generally on the shifting cognitive frames of the shunpon form. Roberta Wue argues that a book of landscapes was a statement of the social role of the artist who produced it, framed as it was by many prefaces by his compatriots. At the end of her paper, she notes how this cognitive framing became insignificant as later editions omit these prefaces entirely.

One common undercurrent to the research topics here involves the varying degrees of coherency these books retain as frames alter physically and cognitively through time and location.

IV.

I will end by making a few observations from my immediate experience of three varying editions of Hokusai Manga compiled from the late nineteenth-century to the early twentieth-first century. Hokusai Manga, fifteen volumes first printed from 1814 to 1878 and then reprinted numerous times, is inarguably a bible of Asian visuality. Few illustrated books have had and continue to have a more complicated and powerful afterlife. Hokusai Manga has been more recut, republished, anthologized, digested, and excerpted than any other title. Not only is the Hokusai Manga found in far-flung places of the world, but some of the copies have surprising histories. For example, an early twentieth century imprint of Hokusai Manga, certainly a recut but done in the tradition format, was found in the family archive of a Chinese woman artist who went to Paris

in the 1920s to study painting then emigrated to the US. This is a variant on the usual account of Manga’s impact on Manet or Degas.

What makes the Hokusai manga? How manga are the subsequent printings, whether facsimile, anthology, digest, or excerpted as a visual soundbite (or sightbite) within an essay or window on the web?

There is a tension encapsulated by the word manga. The word—translated as miscellaneous or spontaneous sketches—seems to deny coherence and order. What held it together and made it so inordinately popular in Japan, in Asia, and also the world? Certainly, the name of the author, Hokusai, undeniably gave it coherence. Yet how coherent could the fifteen volumes be, especially when three of these volumes were published after the death of Hokusai? Beyond its format and common “Hokusai” style, what has made the title a visual bible that continues to merit annotated facsimile editions? Certainly this is not just because of the confusion with present-day manga?

Hokusai Manga through to the early twentieth century was inordinately popular amongst all levels of society in Japan. It is commonly known as a manual for Hokusai’s followers as the preface to volume one; several other prefaces repeat this. One of the prefaces describes it as rivaling the 10 Bamboo Studio and the Mustard Seed Garden Manual. Yet most importantly perhaps, as also announced in the first preface and repeated thereafter, it was an encyclopedic presentation of Hokusai’s cosmology. (I like to translate the man of manga as “anything and everything.”) Perhaps most important to its inordinate popularity, abroad as well as in Japan, was the way the reader could relish it visually. As the preface to the sixth volume suggests, it should be devoured with a delight equaling the reader’s favorite food. But what is relished in the manga certainly differs according to the cognitive frames brought to it by the reader.

There is an order to the manga although it is not made explicit. It was, truly, Hokusai’s answer to the Mustard Seed Garden Manual and contained the same ambitions in scope as a household encyclopedia. Yet, by contrast to both of these forms, the order is neither obvious nor easily navigated. There are no tables of contents such as are found in most artistic manuals. Rather, the contents of the different volumes are hinted at by the designs to the title pages, sometimes pointed to by the prefaces. The beginnings and endings of the volumes are auspicious. As in household encyclopedias such as Kinmô zui and early artistic manuals, there is a hierarchy that starts with the revered and legendary and descends to the streets. There is a strong interplay

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15 See the forthcoming research of Francesca Dal Lago.
16 “Hokusai” here stand for a team of producers rather than just the one artist.
17 In the course of announcing this panel, I found out that a new annotated edition is presently underway.
between the images on the pages and there is a flow between the pages. Throughout, one subject segues into another. In turning the pages, suspense lies in the way a new theme arises from the last. The way the lingering afterimages from pages back contrast with what comes makes up the atmosphere of a volume. Related to Goffman’s way of thinking, there are constant shifts in registers, or keying. Yet although unannounced by chapter headings, the subjects generally fall within what household encyclopedias and art manuals had previously presented. The coherency in *Hokusai Manga* thus went beyond the Hokusai style; it comes from the manner that it implicitly plays off of the standard expectations of visual ordering.

Some images deviate from the standard more than others. The two-page spread of swimmers found towards the end of the fourth volume is inconceivable in any other illustrated book. The swimmers perform both imaginable and not quite imaginable feats. It reveals Hokusai’s formal experimentation with figure and ground within the double-framed surface pages. Is it a rolling perspective or are the figures almost superimposed as if they had their own spaces? This is a question arising from the way that many of Hokusai’s would-be teeming renderings somehow never seem to be overcrowded. It is impossible to find the surface of the water, yet because of the floats we know a few of the figures must be floating. It is easier for our mind not to try to ground them (after all they are in water); it’s better just to delight in the combination of figures that forms a rhythmical, lively relationship to each other within the border of the page.

In the past few months, I experienced this watery pair of pages when I flipped through a volume with a faded and splotched cover belonging to the Honolulu Academy of Art. I snapped its picture as the curator pinned it down with her fingers. Now housed in a box with 13 other volumes and stored on the shelves of the vaults of there, it used to be in the library of the museum. In trying to get through many volumes of many editions in just a few hours, I merely wanted a record of example pages. There was no time to hold it in my hands, immerse myself in the image, or turn the pages slowly between my thumb and forefinger.

I have been able to gain more extensive experience of this spread from examining it within two very differently framed modern codexes. First, in 1958 “The Hokusai Sketchbooks: Selections of the Manga by James A. Michener” published by Charles E Tuttle Company. My principal experience of this title is through a copy I acquired by ordering online; it is a second edition that had been deaccessioned from a mid-western museum library collection. It is a very odd hybrid of a format: within its solid covers, are inserted folded leaves in the manner of the traditional “pouch-fixed” format. Throughout, Michener as author strongly imposes himself as critic and guide. The paratext—the preface to the book, the introductions to the chapters, and
most of all the annotations in the upper margins—inform the reader’s take. In creating his anthology for an English-language readership Michener interjects his own idea of order on the manga. He creates eight different sections with excerpts of pages from the original: people, fauna, flora, landscape, the past, grotesqueries, technical, and architecture. The plates were reengraved in Tokyo for this edition. The original melodious flow of imagery between the pages of each volume is of course lost. This is not to imply that there is no progression within the Michener version of the Manga. The recognizable similarity of subject-matter does project a sense of order, in a manner similar to the Mustard Seed Garden Manual. The design does pay attention to coherency in terms of scale as well.

In this hardback book read in the Western back-to-front manner, the underwater scene in the Michener digest is towards the end in the 7th section entitled “technology.” Reading this section is like reading a running criticism of Japanese technological misunderstanding. In regards to this particular scene, Michener is ambivalent however. On the one hand, it is, “one of the most interesting and delightful pairs of pages in the Manga” yet he is not sure why he finds it so because, “Neither the design nor the drawing is exceptional, while the scientific content is slight.” Michener’s admits to the delight in “daydreaming about problems of men in water” especially the figure in the bell jar, “pure imagination in 1816… but of course today it is a reality.”18 Having read this for the first time a year or so ago, of the entire book, Michener’s cognitive take on this scene stood out most in my memory. Personally, from the beginning I found the colors to be abrasive, but the rhythmical power of the composition strong.

I have more often experienced and re-experienced the pages through my most convenient reference for the Hokusai Manga, the 2005 Shogakukan facsimile edition. This book is most useful for containing clearly reproduced first edition pages of the entire 15 volumes of Hokusai Manga, the best impressions culled from the more than 12,000 folios in the Uragami Mitsuru collection. I purchased my copy at Yaesu Book Center, one of my favorite bookstores in Tokyo, and have carried it around the world for reference since then. I freely mark it with my notes and insert post-its for my reference. Read in the Japanese order, the underwater scene is between page 242 and 243, as indicated by the numbers in the bottom margin.

Flipping through this complete edition, I realized how volume four was on the whole a conservative presentation of images in the mode of Mustard Seed Garden. But I also could note that it was in this volume that Hokusai first began to stretch in the way that he freely associated, in the ways that he grounded or consciously unbound the figures. In addition, he began to explore the possibilities of horizontal registers within the format. This page seems part of a consciously

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18 Michener, The Hokusai Sketchbooks, 224-225.
playful visual digression from the architecture in landscape scenes that precede it. The previous page depicts various ships and skiffs at work. Looking closely, though, we observe three tubs ridden by scantily clad figures frolicking on the sea. We can imagine that it was figures like these who have jumped into the water to lightheartedly explore what’s underneath the surface of the sea. Although we know that they are not the same characters, the one scene follows the other.

There are many issues that clearly arise from the contrast between the experience of these two modern versions of *Hokusai Manga*, one a digest and the other a facsimile, with *Hokusai Manga* done in the earlier, traditional format. There are obvious differences in color and the texture of the paper, the quality of the reingraving or the lack of depth with the photo-print technology. Yet the question that nags me the most has to do with the margins. In the traditional format of Hokusai, the frame extends to the outer edge where the paper is folded. The navigational devices (title, volume, and page number) are placed where in this “brain” of the page. The oddly hybrid Michener format has the wide upper margin proportions of the traditional. It’s easy with practice to ignore the strangeness of the English annotations in the header and in the page numbers and titles in the footer by considering them “out-of-frame.” Similarly, one realizes the leap of adjustment that the mind makes in jutting the image as it jumps the gutter (or, more elegantly, “throat” as it’s called in Japanese). In this respect, it’s the Shogakukan complete edition, by the way, that cuts out the traditional marginal proportions that creates a new modern experience of *Hokusai Manga*. With the “brain” of the book gone, the old joining is gone.

Reading an illustrated book in sequence is a matter of making connections, or making leaps of the imagination. This is done with the weight of the margins, with the varying whiteness of the page, and in the act of turning the page.19 Now that the digital age has apparently made format irrelevant, it’s time to really look at our books and consider the subtle shifts of shading as we turn their pages.

This panel has been dominated by art historians. Of course, there are many other types of illustrated books that we need to consider in order to make the generalizations we wish about the East Asian illustrated book. For example, we need to consider the world of household encyclopedias including books of maps and crests; we need to explore the world of entertainment in books of illustrated fiction and Kabuki-related synopses; we need to think about religious practice and analyze the books of the deities taken by pilgrims books of famous places. We also

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19 The whiteness of the page is again something that Drucker stresses. She offers the Gestalt paradigm in analyzing the reading process. For me, also connecting this with Wolfgang Iser’s reader reception theory seems important. The discussion of the “invisible art” in Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (Harper Perennial, 1994) is also relevant.
need to pursue comparative work with series or formats different from the foliated book the handsrolls, butterfly bound books, concertina albums, scrapbooks, fans, and playing cards. We have invited colleagues experienced in some of these different realms of the book to address everyone with questions that have puzzled them—from what we have presented in our papers for this panel to what they have come across in their own work.