

**BRIEF REPORT**

# Inspired by surimono: Integrating photography and poetry to bring plants into focus

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**Societal Impact Statement**

Plants are our sources of oxygen, food, medicines, clothing, building materials and fuels. They are part of our history, our trade and our imaginations. Here, we investigate the potential for integration of photographs and poetry to bring plants to life and let them tell their stories, inspired by the ancient Japanese woodprint artform, surimono. The resulting 'photo surimono' open up new opportunities to engage with the natural world at the juxtaposition of the written and the visual, to combat the cognitive bias of plant blindness and to introduce more connected ways of thinking about plants, people and sustainability into educational programmes.

**KEYWORDS**

education, engagement, photography, plant blindness, plants, poetry, surimono

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This Brief Report considers the disparate genres of surimono and photopoetry as a basis for a collaboration on plant photography and poetry and its wider implications for visualisation and interpretation of the world around us. The surimono and photopoetry art forms will first be introduced. The integration of these forms as 'photo surimono' will then be illustrated. This project originated with a series of photographs of flowers taken by one of us (Bob Coe) to which plant biologist Anne Osbourn responded through poetry. The outputs of this collaboration (photo surimono) are then evaluated and interpreted in the final Commentary section by social scientist co-author Nick Lee.

## 2 | SURIMONO

Surimono (literally 'printed thing') originally applied to Japanese woodblock printed material generally, but by the Edo period

(1615–1868), the term came to be used for 'limited edition, single-sheet woodblock prints that were distributed as private gifts rather than sold commercially' (Hanaoka & Pollard, 2018). They were often of the highest quality, both in terms of the materials used (paper, inks) and the expertise of the printer. Surimono became very popular in the late 18th to mid-19th century (Siffert, 1996). They were not commercial products but generally privately commissioned by poetry groups. Prints would consist of a poem, or several poems, together with an image; poets or poetry groups would commission an artist to produce an image that resonated with the poems (Kazuhiro, 2005). The poems were on occasion haiku (17 syllables in lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables) but in later works were usually in kyoka style, sometimes translated as 'mad' or 'crazy' poetry. Kyoka are five-line poems with the format of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables (Yamaguchi, n.d.). Hanaoka and Pollard (2018) state that kyoka poets aimed to challenge poetic traditions and subvert the classical poetry form, while demonstrating their own skills, wit and knowledge.

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Popular woodblock prints (ukiyo-e) often ran into several thousand copies, but surimono, being privately commissioned, were printed in much smaller numbers—sometimes just 50 or so. The artists commissioned to produce the image for the sheet were usually well-known professionals, including Katsushika Hokusai, who was ‘a brilliant innovator in *surimono*’ (Kazuhiro, 2005). Hanaoka and Pollard (2018) report that although surimono contained images, they were not intended for public display but rather for close examination in private. Both the images and the poetry rewarded careful study.

Poetry has always been an integral part of Japanese culture and consistently linked with other art forms. The combination of poetry with image is part of a long Japanese tradition combining literature and art (Hanaoka, 2019). The range of topics and images contained within surimono is very wide. Many surimono were commissioned to celebrate New Year, the artwork displaying activities associated with the marking of a new year. Other topics included Kabuki theatre scenes, courtesans, landscapes and still life. The still life category included birds and flower images (*kachō-ga*), although according to Brooks (2017), the majority of still life images are of manufactured objects. Nevertheless, there are many beautiful images of flowers incorporated within surimono prints, as shown in examples from the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Kubo Shunman (1757–1820) (Figure 1). He was ‘a celebrated painter, print-maker and author of the Edo period (1615–1868), as a print-maker, he specialised in *surimono*’ (Kubo Shunman, n.d.).

### 3 | PHOTPOETRY

Nott (2018) describes the origins of photopoetry as being from the mid-19th century. He considers that the most engaging works ‘combine the visuality of photography and the textuality of poetry to create multisensory sites reliant upon the independence and interdependence of text and image’. Nott also categorises

photopoetry into collaborative and retrospective: Collaborative is where a photographer and a poet work together on a project, whereas retrospective refers to instances where a photographer makes images to accompany an existing collection of poems (often some time after the poems were written and rarely the other way round with a poet writing verse to accompany an existing collection of photographs). Retrospective work was more common in the 19th and early 20th century, whereas collaborative endeavours became the most common type from the mid-20th century onwards.

Nicholls and Ling (n.d.) give an excellent overview of published photopoetic work, with examples from retrospective books such as *Leaves of Grass* (Weston & Whitman, 1942) in which the photographer Edward Weston’s 1941 photographs illustrate Walt Whitman’s poems from 1855. One of the better-known more recent examples of collaborative work is *Elmet* (Hughes & Godwin, 1994), a book published by the then Poet Laureate Ted Hughes and the well-known photographer Fay Godwin.

It is interesting to note that among the many examples of photopoetry shown by Nott (2018) and by Nicholls and Ling (n.d.), very few have the poem as intimately integrated with the image as is the case in surimono. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the poem is printed on a facing page or underneath/alongside the image. This is quite understandable when the poems are too long to incorporate alongside the photograph. However, even when the poems are short, such as in *Haiku-vision in poetry and photography* (Atwood, 1977), nearly all of the poems are on a white background next to the photograph (see the example shown in Figure 2).

### 4 | PHOTO SURIMONO

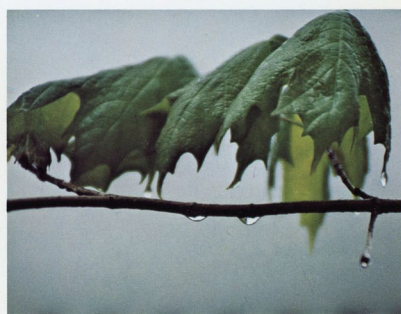
Inspired by surimono, we collaborated to create a form of the genre using photographs and poems integrated into a single image. The first photographs used were made as part of a series called *Flora In*



**FIGURE 1** Examples of surimono. Left, *Rose, Iris, Primrose and Daisy*; right, *Clematis, Bush Clover, Iris, Camellia, and Azalea*. These surimono are by Kubo Shunman (1815) and are woodblock prints, with ink and color on paper. Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art; H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929



The first drop of rain  
on the just-opened blossoms—  
how the branch trembles!



The day dark with rain.  
Young leaves struggling to open,  
you too have your tears.

**FIGURE 2** Examples of photopoetry. From *Haiku-vision in poetry and photography* (Atwood, 1977)

*Extremis*, part of the body of work submitted by one of us (Coe, 2021) for a Creative Arts degree. The series as a whole looks at some of the threats faced by plant life. The photographs in the surimono section were concerned with the forms of flowers that have yet to reach, or have passed, that stage of perfection usually associated with a perfect bloom, and were influenced by study of *Art Forms In Nature* by Karl Blossfeldt (Adam, 2017). Unlike surimono, the image came first, and the poet (plant scientist Anne Osbourn) responded to it. The dialogue between photographer and poet and the process per se allowed a response not just to the image itself and to other influences. *Queen of the Night*, for example, as well as being the name of the tulip, is also the title of a relief sculpture in the British Museum (Collon, 2005) depicting the Mesopotamian god Ereshkigal, and the poem references this. *Xochitl in cuicatl* alludes to the origins of the dahlia in South America, whereas *Jerusalem Sage* is a reference to the power of the image. The image and text are combined but do not follow the strict formatting discipline of *kyōka* poetry, instead forming an integrated image influenced by, but not adhering to the rules of,

surimono (Figure 3). Their intention is to be, like surimono, ‘pointed and clever ... carry a message’ (Sutro, n.d.).

## 5 | COMMENTARY AND FEEDBACK

In these pieces, the photographer and poet have responded to the surimono tradition to represent and explore plants. An interesting effect becomes available for the reader and viewer through these carefully composed combinations of image and text. Whether the image or the text leads and shapes one’s response to these pieces switches and oscillates as one gives them attention. At times, one can find oneself checking the descriptive aspects of the poems against the images. At other times, one finds that the poetry leads to emphasis on particular features of the image. Through this technique, it becomes possible—and tempting—for the reader/viewer to see the myths of past cultures (*Queen of the Night*) and histories of plant commerce and exploitation (*Xochitl in cuicatl*) as if within the plants themselves. This imaginative folding together of plants, societies and cultures also evokes contemporary framings of human and plant growth and life on our crowded planet (*Jerusalem Sage*).

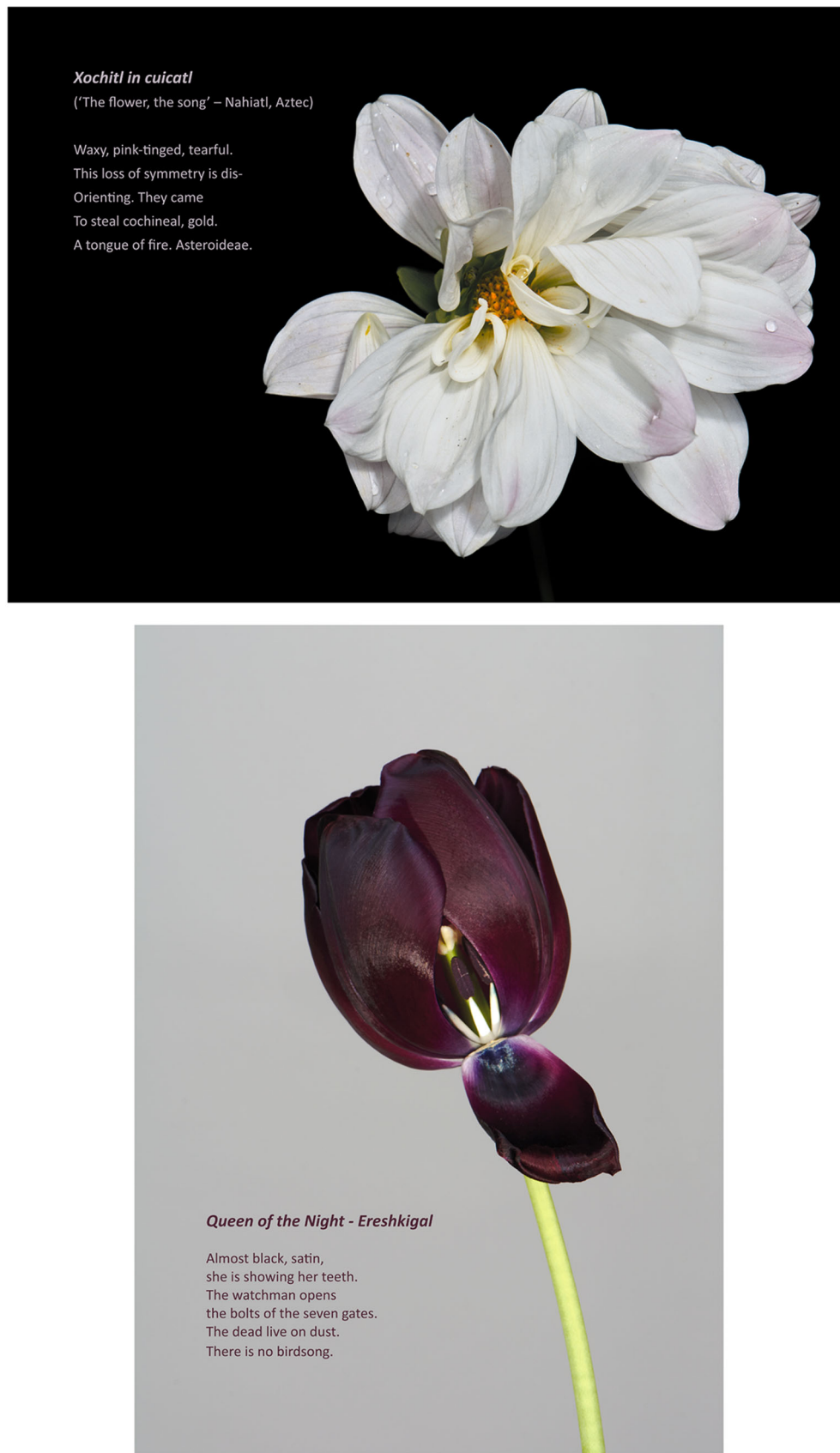
The photosurimono images have been displayed at an exhibition, produced as greetings cards and promoted on a website. The reaction of viewers has been overwhelmingly positive, particularly commending the quality of both image and poem, but it is the interrelationship of text and image that drew the most astute comments. One of the viewers was poet George Szirtes, who said:

Image and text are related of course but lead their separate lives. The poems are lovely both as poems and as texts arising out of quite specific views of certain flowers. The surimono tradition is itself culturally rooted so we are aware of adaptation. It is interesting to think how far - if at all - the surimono tradition can be visually related to Baroque still-life depictions of flowers. How do flowers appear when isolated against a very dark or very light background? How far do we consciously enter the realm of another culture and what does that entry involve? And, putting culture aside, how far does the text come to dominate, or determine, the visual reading of the image? These are huge questions of course, but fascinating ones.

Comments from other viewers included:

I like the fact that the text used in each image presents a different type of avenue for contemplation.

I find it [the surimono series] very effective. It has visual variety while being a cohesive body of work: each distinct and able to stand alone but related securely to the others.



**FIGURE 3** Examples of photo surimono. (Top) Xochitl in Cuicatl; (middle) Queen of the Night; (bottom) Jerusalem Sage. Photographs by Bob Coe; poems by Anne Osbourn



**FIGURE 3** (Continued)

The words make you think harder about the images. Flower images are ubiquitous, so the poems really make us look again.

They [the image and the poem] stand together excellently. The poem would have little meaning without the image and the words draw our attention to aspects of the image in unexpected ways. The flowers are anthropomorphised, creating empathy with them.

You spend more time looking at the image because of the poem and more time thinking about the words of the poem by relating the images created to the photograph.

I am not a reader of poems, but reading these and relating them to the photograph makes me think more about the words, the images they create and the sensations they evoke.

The photographs are great, but in our world of constant visual stimulation they probably wouldn't be viewed for long. In combination with the poems, you are forced to slow down and examine the images more closely in reconciling them with the images created by the poems.

A specific comment on 'Jerusalem Sage' was as follows:

The image is immediately to me like the planet earth in space and the 'crowded downy planet' reinforces this. When I look up teratogen, I find that it's an agent that causes an abnormality following fetal exposure during pregnancy, so my interpretation is that 'teratogenic embryo' is a kind of metaphor for what mankind has done to planet earth. 'Finding their way amongst the lipped, hooded keepers' is an exact description of what is happening, visually and biologically, but it becomes a poetic way of describing the difficulty of the journey of planet earth now it has become infected by mankind. Then there's the biblical imagery...

And from a recipient of the cards:

I received a box of Surimono cards (literally 'printed thing' in Japanese) as a gift – short poems by Anne Osbourn, photography of flowers by Bob Coe – and have been 'paying them forward' ever since. The cards are astonishingly beautiful; an imaginative blend of word and picture, finely packaged, boxed and produced by artists who clearly love what they do. I learn that since the 18th and 19th century the art of

surimono has been asleep, but Anne and Bob have roused it from its slumber to stunning effect!

## 6 | FUTURE POTENTIAL

The contemporary adaptation of the surimono form clearly has the potential for fostering and fuelling relationships between plants and people. The metaphor of ‘plant blindness’ has recently come into currency as a way of drawing attention to tendencies to overlook the variety, significance and even existence of plant species that are encountered in everyday lives (Wandersee & Schussler, 1999). Though the metaphor is of value in shaping attention, it has limitations that go beyond its potential to add to existing stigmatisation of unsighted and partially sighted people (McDonough MacKenzie et al., 2019). ‘Plant blindness’ is no simple sensory impairment. Within it, plants are seen but go unconsidered. Even where visual sense registers plant life, connections between the visual register and emotional and cognitive responses can be sharply attenuated into a distinction between ornamental or agricultural plants and weeds, edible plants and inedible plants. Plant blindness can thus be considered the obverse side of the intense emotional and cognitive investments made within foraging, gardening, horticulture and agriculture. The surimono approach described above has characteristics that have the potential to work against plant blindness. The surimono aesthetic presents selected plants as both attractive and interesting. It also presents circumstances in which, as suggested above, neither the pictures nor the poetry stably dominate the viewer's reception. This instability allows for the connection of visual, emotional and cognitive responses in ways that may help to combat the tendency of plant blindness to attenuate responses to plant life.

More broadly, the need to make learning more accessible to all is reflected in a global educational policy trend that could provide fertile ground for the application and development of the surimono-based practice described above. Since 2005, UNESCO has fostered the development of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a feature of primary, secondary and tertiary education and post educational training (UNESCO, 2021). This has had the goal of achieving more sustainable societies through educational practice, by weaving together learners' knowledge and appreciation of economic sustainability—including the sustainable use of plants and plant products; social sustainability—including issues of social justice associated with plants and plant products; and environmental sustainability—enabling plants and wider ecosystems to thrive. ESD is now an integral element of the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development; 11,500 educational institutions in 182 countries comprise a global network for developing and implementing ESD in ‘whole school’ approaches. Surimono-based practice, with its ability to link cognitive and emotional responses and to weave plants, people and places together has something to offer this interdisciplinary, international educational effort. ESD has a grand agenda and scale. Practical sites to develop

our approach, however, are relatively accessible and abundant, where universities are beginning to offer interdisciplinary degrees that address sustainability; for example, surimono may have a pedagogical role in introducing more ‘connected’ ways of thinking and feeling about plants, people and sustainability into curricula and, as artefacts, in making these connections more concrete and visible.

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### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

R.C. conceived the idea of generating photo surimono, performed the photography and drafted the manuscript; A.O. wrote the poetry and revised the manuscript; and N.M.L. contributed to the commentary on the ‘photo surimono’ outputs of the project and wrote the sections on plant blindness and educational practice.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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