Keisai Eisen (1790-1848)

Japan

Susanoō no Mikoto Preparing to Slay an Eight-Headed Dragon

1832, Edo period (1615-1868)

color woodcut (*surimono*)

20.7 X 17.4 cm

William Bridges Thayer Memorial

000.1624

Essay by Brian Hogarth

An energetic figure brandishing a sword stares at a coiled dragon emerging from a dark cloud. A wide band of water with curling waves at its edges descends diagonally across the image like a causeway on which the two figures confront each other. The central figure raises one foot on a set of barrels filled with liquid. On the left side, a rectangular area and several smaller cartouches are filled with writing. Who is the central figure and what does the image signify? How does this image relate to the theme of divine inspiration? What are some possible meanings associated with the juxtaposition of the figure and the dragon?

The figures are drawn from Japanese mythology. The principal figure is the Shinto god Susanoō and the dragon is an eight-headed serpent that was threatening a family in the area of Izumo, present day western Japan. The format of the print is called *surimono*. *Surimono* were woodblock prints produced for private consumption, and distributed among poetry groups on certain occasions during the Edo period (1615-1868). The combination of a mythological Shinto

story in the form of an early nineteenth century, privately produced *surimono* print presents a fascinating convergence of story, symbolism and meaning.

Stories concerning Susanoō appear in the earliest surviving histories of Japan, the *Kojiki* ("Record of Ancient Matters") and the *Nihon Shoki* ("Japanese chronicles"), both recorded in the eighth century. In one version of the story,[1] we learn that Susanoō was born from the nose of Izanagi, and was the brother of the most famous of the Shinto deities, Amaterasu, the Goddess of the Sun, and mythological ancestor of Japan's imperial Yamato dynasty. Susanoō was initially given the oceans to rule over. His unruly, wild behavior and frequent acts of defilement, however, drove Amaterasu into a cave, plunging the world into darkness. Amaterasu was coaxed out of the cave by a lively, ribald dance performance and after emerging from the cave she was captivated by her reflection in a mirror. The gods were displeased with Susanoō for his disruptive actions and banished him from the plains of Heaven (where the gods resided) to earth. He wandered to a place called Izumo, on the northwest coast of Honshu, the main island of the Japanese archipelago. At Izumo, he encountered a local king whose eight daughters were systematically being eaten by an eight-headed dragon named Yamata no Orichi, who resided in the local river. At the moment of Susanoō's arrival, there was only one daughter left alive, Princess Kushiinada. As if to rectify his previous misdeeds, Susanoō acted quickly and laid a trap consisting of eight tubs of *sake*, one for each of the dragon's heads. The dragon consumed the liquor and fell into a stupor, whereupon Susanoō cut off each of the heads. Within the serpent's tail he discovered a sword called Kusanagi ("grass feller") which Susanoō presented to his sister Amaterasu as an act of appeasement. Susanoō then married the princess and produced many offspring. Thereafter,

[1] For a version of the Susanoō Izumo myth, see the Chamberlain translation of the Izumo story in William Theodore de Bary, Donald Keene, George Tanabe and Paul Varley, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition,* vol. 1: *From Earliest Times to 1600,* second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 25-27.

Susanoō was celebrated on account of the many gifts that he bestowed on the earth, such as cedar, cypress and camphor trees. He continues to reside as a deity at such shrines as Kumano Taisha in Shimane prefecture and Yasaka Jinja in Kyoto. Susanoō's gifted sword, along with Amaterasu's mirror and the comma-shaped jewel, are the three sacred objects or regalia associated with Shinto and the Imperial Household.

Surimono prints were produced from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries during the Edo period (1615-1868). *Surimono* means "something printed (or rubbed)." *Surimono* typically include images and poetry, with subject matter ranging from figures and historical stories to still life objects. *Surimono* probably stemmed from calendar prints (*egoyomi*) and coincided with the rise in popularity of poetry called *kyōka*, "comic" verse written in thirty-one syllables over five lines. *Kyōka* were frequently presented and judged competitively at parties. *Surimono* prints were commissioned by these poetry groups—in this print the *kyōka* poetry is identified with the group known as the Sugawara circle—and then distributed to the members of the group. Artists were commissioned to design compositions that responded to the theme of the poems often in a playful manner or in the spirit of the occasion for which they were made. The designer of this print, Keisai Eisen (1790-1848) was a versatile artist of samurai birth. He not only created print images but also wrote plays, ran a brothel, and wrote popular fiction. His artistic output includes hand scroll paintings, commercial prints and *surimono*.

Surimono invite close inspection, indeed the beauty of the print is revealed through examination of the intimate details as well as appreciation of the overall image. Like extravagant greeting cards used today, *surimono* were made attractive by using thick *hosho* paper in a square format (*shikishi-ban*) and enlivened with embossed and carefully decorated surfaces. Here, for example, the artist has embellished the surface with decorative patterns behind Susanoō's feet,

and added bits of mica and copper filings to make the surface shimmer and reflect light. Unfortunately, the present image has faded and darkened slightly with the passage of time, so some of these original effects are diminished.

In the Edo period, *surimono* prints avoided the many regulations placed on commercial prints, allowing a greater freedom of expression. Furthermore, the use of pictures together with poetry allowed the designer to fashion a playful, light-hearted image that juxtaposes word and image in unusual ways. The poems on the print have been translated in the catalogue of *surimono* (# 2247) in the Chester Beatty Library collection in London. The first poem reads, "When the sutra-singing bird sings, the ice of the sword blade melts like a dragon in the spring fields" (*Kyō yomeru tori naku koro wa tsurugi ha no kōri mo tokeshi haru no oyamada*). The second poem reads, "Chasing after the snake, the brave man saves the frog and restores peace to the mountain fields in spring" (*Kuchinawa o oite kaeru o tasukekeri haru no yamada o kaesu masurao*).[2] The poems do not directly refer to the familiar characters in the myth. Rather, they are filled with references to change and transformation in nature, particularly spring. The images can therefore be read symbolically and not as a literal rendition of a story.

How might an urban gathering of poets in 1820s Japan have interpreted these words and images? The figure of Susanoō is portrayed with wild hair and dynamic pose, his robes projecting outward from his body. His sword is straight, in keeping with ancient Japanese bronze swords, before the advent of the curved (*tachi*) steel swords of samurai fame. Susanoō appears to be staring down the dragon, or summoning his attention, rather than actually killing him. This is

[2] Poems translated by Susumu Matsudaira in Roger S. Keyes, *The Art of Surimono: Privately Published Japanese Woodblock Prints and Books in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin*, Vol. 1 (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd., for Sotheby Publications, 1985): 240.

a dramatic pose like that of an actor on the stage, a dynamic position that helps to define his character. Similar confrontations of heroes and dragons appear in other *surimono,* such as the Spencer Museum of Art's *Liu Bang kills the White Serpent* by Totoya Hokkei (#1928.7849) where the heroic (in this case, Chinese) figure makes a dramatic stand against a dragon emerging from a dark cloudy background. Thus a contemporary viewer might recognize the figures in the Susanoō print as based on the specific myth, but also see them generally as embodying the representation of opposing forces.

The dragon in Japanese culture can be a rather ambivalent figure compared to its auspicious Chinese counterpart. A dragon paired with a tiger can represent the complementary forces of yin and yang, a representation of Daoist beliefs in which balance is maintained through opposing forces. However, many Japanese horror stories feature female vengeful spirits who transform into dragons (for example Kiyohime, spurned by the monk that she loves, in the *Dojōji* stories). Similarly, a puppet drama version of the Susanoō myth written by the famous playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), entitled *Nihon Furisode Hajime* was first performed in 1718, in Osaka. In it, a jealous woman transforms herself into the dragon that eventually eats the princess Kushiinada. The princess frees herself with the sword in the dragon's tail, and coming to her aid, Susanoō cuts her garment to create the long sleeved garment or *furisode* of the play's title.

The dramatic aspects of the Susanoō myth have long been celebrated within the context of Shinto sacred dances or *kagura*. *Kagura* were (and still are today) meant to entertain the Shinto deities. They also dramatize the rituals of purification that are at the heart of many Shinto ceremonies. The poems in the Spencer print suggest that Susanoō is acting out long-standing rituals of cleansing and restoring balance to nature. The frog is spared by chasing the dragon (the

words *yamada* in both poems sound like the name of the dragon in the myth, *Yamata no Orichi*), the ice melts and peace is restored in the fields.

Shinto itself is rooted in the indigenous worship of deities believed to reside in nature. One of Susanoō's roles is ruler of the oceans, and some woodblock prints by the nineteenth-century artists Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1862) and Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892) show him standing on a rocky precipice staring into turbulent ocean waves, where the dragon lurks. In this sort of depiction, the dragon could represent storms or flooding, with Susanoō as the deity who calms the waters through his actions. Often in such prints, the princess Kushiinada is seen to one side of Susanoō, clutching the rocks, waiting for him to eliminate the threatening dragon. The Chester Beatty catalogue states that the Keisai Eisen Susanoō print was once part of a diptych (sold at Christie's in 1981) with the other half showing the princess. Presumably, the other print contained additional poetry that would add further layers of meaning when seen together.

A further indication of the meaning of the Spencer print is the date of publication. 1832 was a year of the Dragon, which means the image has a connection to New Year's celebrations. It is known that many *surimono* were given as greeting cards on such occasions. Houses in Japan are typically cleaned the day before New Year's. On New Year's day, it is common to visit a Shinto shrine. Thus Susanoō's actions could refer to the desire to clear away obstacles at the start of the New Year. Susanoō's past actions and defilements (*tsumi*) are being put behind him through his beneficial actions at Izumo and by marrying the princess and settling down to a productive family life. Such an image would surely resonate among members of the poetry club, conveying good wishes to friends, encouraging them to start the New Year with a 'clean slate.'

The Tokugawa shogunate of the Edo period revered Confucianism as the official theology of the regime. By the nineteenth century, however, a revival of interest in Shinto and *kokugaku* (a direction called "National learning") was underway. There was a concurrent rise in the popularity of household Shinto altars. Scholars like Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) who translated the *Kojiki* into modern Japanese, advocated renewed attention to the reading of the *Kojiki*. Norinaga emphasized the appreciation of a balance between good and evil and avoiding the impurities and pollution that gave rise to evil and wrongdoing. All of this would have provided a suitable backdrop to the celebration of an image of Susanoō subduing the dragon in conjunction with New Year's celebrations. Being a private print for use among like-minded friends, a *surimono* print like this would have provoked animated discussion (accompanied no doubt by copious drinking) and playful analysis of both the writing and imagery as part of the welcoming in of the New Year.

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