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Authors: Amanda Burr
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American Institute for Conservation
727 15th Street NW, Suite 1101
Washington, DC 20005
info@culturalheritage.org www.culturalheritage.org

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AMANDA BURR

When Outreach Reaches Back: The Treatment and Retreatment of Katsukawa Shunshō's Abalone Fishergirl With an Octopus

CRediT Statement
Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing, Project administration: AB

BACKGROUND

A conservation treatment can, in many cases, be conceived of as a kind of durable but temporary vessel, constructed to shepherd an object another 20, 50, or 100 years into the future before deteriorating (without causing harm) and requiring replacement. Conservators with the fortune to have worked with the same collection for decades may monitor their earlier treatments to assess how they have aged, but it is relatively uncommon to have the occasion to modify one's own earlier treatment work. The following is an example of one of these unusual cases, in which a treatment was revisited not because of catastrophe or failure, but in response to feedback received as a result of public outreach.

THE INITIAL TREATMENT

In 2018, the author was working as a Mellon Fellow in paper conservation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) when an interesting Japanese woodblock print arrived in the laboratory for treatment. *Abalone Fishergirl With an Octopus* (ca. 1773–1774) by the ukiyo-e artist Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792) depicts an abalone fisherwoman climbing onto a rock, entangled somewhat provocatively in the tentacles of an octopus (note 1; fig. 1). Similar imagery would become a familiar subject and vehicle for erotic expression in the art of 18th and 19th century Edo, but this print is an early example that merely hints at the explicit sexuality that would be explored by later artists including Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), himself a student of Shunshō (Ambros et al. 2019, 10).

Abalone Fishergirl had previously been part of the famous Henri Vever collection, auctioned off by Sotheby's in four parts between 1974 and 1997. In 2003, it was donated to LACMA by computer pioneer and philanthropist Max Palevsky. The first 15 uneventful years of the print's life at LACMA had been spent in storage, but in 2018 it was selected for exhibition in *Every Living Thing: Animals in Japanese Art*, slated to run from September 22 to December 8, 2019,



Fig. 1. *Abalone Fishergirl*, recto, before treatment in 2018. Courtesy of Yosi Pozeilov.

Papers presented during the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC's 53rd Annual Meeting, May 27–31, 2025, Minneapolis, Minnesota

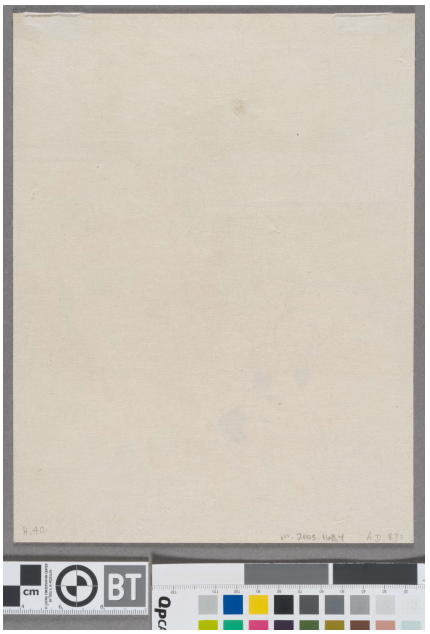


Fig. 2. *Abalone Fishergirl*, verso, before treatment, showing the overall lining with thick Japanese paper. Courtesy of Yosi Pozeilov.



Fig. 3. *Abalone Fishergirl*, before treatment, detail showing poorly repaired losses and tears. Courtesy of Yosi Pozeilov.

and co-organized by LACMA and the National Gallery of Art.

In preparation for this, treatment was needed to address significant aesthetic issues. The print had arrived at LACMA in the same condition in which it had left the Vever collection, as documented in the 1997 auction catalog (Sotheby's 1997, 55). At some point in its history, it had suffered tears and losses in the area of the octopus's head. These had been stabilized with the addition of an overall lining of thick Japanese paper that stiffened the print and increased its overall opacity (fig. 2). The lining formed fills for the losses, which had been repainted in a way that looked messy and did not correspond to the original design. The large loss at the octopus's mouth had been painted into a deranged smile, and there was overpaint in the form of crescent shapes above the octopus's eyes appearing like angry eyebrows (fig. 3). The treatment plan was to remove the lining and reduce the overpaint, to mend the tears and fill the losses with Japanese paper, and then to inpaint the new fills with watercolor. Considering that the work was a print by a well-known artist, it was assumed that it would be possible to find another, intact impression to guide the loss compensation, so treatment began in tandem with a search for another copy.

Unfortunately, *Abalone Fishergirl* proved to be much rarer than initially imagined. When online museum and library catalogs yielded nothing, Soko Furuhata, currently Senior Conservator and head of paper conservation at LACMA, contacted curators and art historians in the United States and Japan for guidance. Still, another impression of the print could not be located. This was a significant setback, but with the exhibition deadline looming, treatment needed to continue (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. From left to right: (1) the lining paper after it was removed from the print, (2) blotter washing the print, (3) after application of the new Japanese paper fills, and (4) inpainting the fills with watercolor.

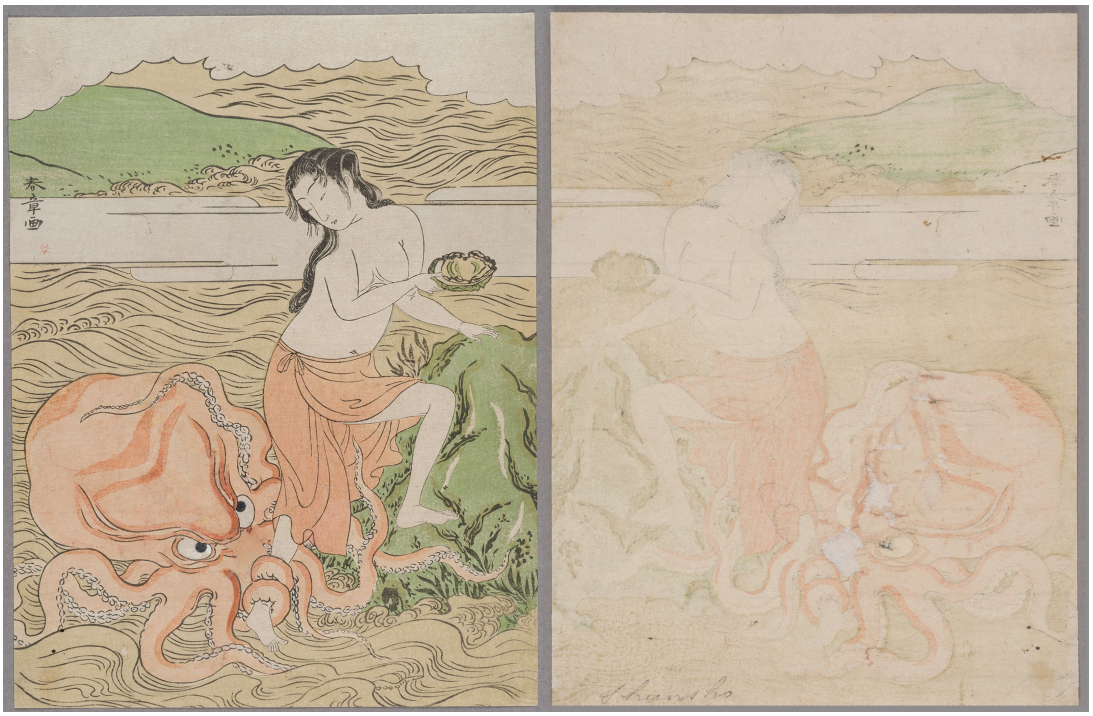


Fig. 5. *Abalone Fishergirl*, after treatment in 2018. Left: Recto. Right: Verso. Courtesy of Yosi Pozeilov.

Consultation with the curator led to a plan to inpaint the loss with intentional vagueness. The objective was to give the print an overall sense of completeness, but to allow the loss to be read as missing information without having it draw attention from the rest of the image. The result was a compromise that brought the print to an exhibitable state (fig. 5). Soon after, the treatment process was posted on LACMA's Unframed blog (Burr 2018). The post ended with an appeal to readers to contact LACMA's paper conservation laboratory with information about any other impressions of *Abalone Fishergirl* and a link to an e-mail address where leads could be sent. It was a shot in the dark, but also a kind of virtual open door through which a stranger could walk at any moment. The author left LACMA for a new position before the post was even published, imagining the *Abalone Fishergirl* project had reached its conclusion. The print went on view in the *Every Living Thing* exhibition at LACMA in 2019 as planned, and was subsequently unframed and returned to storage without incident.

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT

On September 15, 2022, nearly 4 years after the blog post had been published, a Japanese art dealer in Venice, Italy, named Gianni Morra sent an e-mail to the LACMA paper conservation laboratory. He explained that he had an intact impression of *Abalone Fishergirl*, and he generously included a snapshot in his e-mail. It was a stunning turn of events that raised the possibility of retreatment for LACMA's impression of the print.

REVISITING THE TREATMENT

In March 2024, the author was rehired by LACMA, which provided the perfect opportunity to revisit the treatment of *Abalone Fishergirl*. In consultation with the curator, a plan was made to retreat the print in light of the new information provided by Mr. Morra. The idea was to create a thin, sheer, digitally printed fill that could be layered over the previous repair and modified with additional inpainting as needed. Inspiration was found in earlier treatments that combined digitally printed fills with traditional inpainting techniques. This included Judith Walsh's innovative removable "puzzle" fill for a 15th century German engraving, printed at 60% gray on laid paper and finished by hand with pen and ink (Freeman, Karnes, and Stratis 2017). Another very different treatment performed by conservators at the National Museum of the American Indian involved the use of laser-printed fills to recreate lost areas of quillwork in a pair of Iroquois hide moccasins. The fills were printed onto Japanese paper, which was then wrapped around a Tyvek support that had been toned with acrylic paints. The color and finish of the fills were then refined with the addition of colored pencil and acrylic mediums (Passerotti et al. 2015). A hybrid approach allows conservators to produce beautifully customized fills printed using accessible office technologies while sidestepping the challenges of color matching digital files.

The author had some experience with digital fills as part of a treatment completed in 2017 during a third-year internship



Fig. 6. *Pen and Ink Sketches of Military Life in the Union Army*. Left: Before treatment, showing the loss in lower/back board. Right: After treatment, showing the repair to the lower/back board.

at the University of California, Los Angeles Library. The object in question was a small sketchbook made by a Union Army soldier named Frederick Ransom out of a repurposed receipt book from a plant nursery (note 2; fig. 6). The treatment was complex, but part of it involved filling a loss in the lower board with blotter paper. To cover the fill, the book's marbled paper layer was reproduced by scanning an intact portion and laser printing the scan onto Japanese paper, all using the laboratory's office copier. Scanning and printing onto Japanese paper was the suggestion of Consuela Metzger, Head of Conservation and Preservation. She demonstrated how to print onto Japanese paper by first taping it onto a sheet of copier paper, a method she had first encountered in the mid-1990s while working at the Huntington Library. At that time, she explained, the conservators would print sheets of tiny "binder's tickets" bearing the Huntington logo onto Japanese paper, and these would be dated, initialed, and attached to book pastedowns to mark completed treatments (pers. comm., September 6, 2024). This activity seems to have been quickly abandoned, but the anecdote is a reminder that conservators have been tinkering with ways to integrate electrostatic printing into conservation practice for a long time.

The laser-printed fill for *Abalone Fishergirl* would need to be as thin and sheer as possible. This would enable the new fill to be layered over the existing one that had been added in 2018, rather than subjecting the print to another invasive treatment to remove and replace it. To create the necessary thin fill, a piece of tengujo (7.3 gsm) was taped onto copier paper, the Venetian impression of *Abalone Fishergirl* was scaled to the size of LACMA's print, and the image was printed onto the prepared copier paper using the office laser printer (a Canon ImageRunner Advance DX C58401) (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Left: A small square of 7.3 gsm tengujo taped to a sheet of 11 × 8.5 inch copier paper. Right: The same sheet after printing using the Canon ImageRunner Advance DX C58401.



Fig. 8. Sample prints on 7.3 gsm tengujo. Left: Sample made using a laser printer (Canon ImageRunner Advance DX C58401). Right: Sample print made using an inkjet printer (Epson SureColor P800).

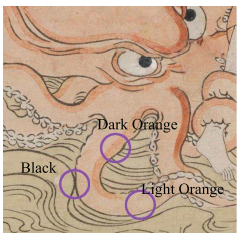
Several colleagues suggested that inkjet printing might be a better option than laser printing because the pigment-based inks would be more lightfast than the toner used in laser printing. To test this, inkjet- and laser-printed samples were created. LACMA's Managing Photographer and imaging specialist Yosi Pozeilov generously made several inkjet test prints using an Epson SureColor P800 and the Epson UltraChrome HD eight-color pigment ink set, which is advertised specifically for its high print permanence ratings. In general, inkjet printing onto tengujo was tricky, as the print heads would catch paper fibers as they moved across the surface, causing ink bleed and irregularities. Attaching the tengujo to matte photo paper yielded cleaner results than glossy paper, but the process remained finicky. The inkjet prints also had a very different character than the laser prints (fig. 8). This difference is most striking under the microscope. In the laser print, the lines of the design are relatively well defined with clean edges, but the surface also has an intensely mechanical appearance due to the toner being laid down in a regular pattern of diagonal lines. In contrast, the inkjet print appears more painterly, with the ink flowing along paper fibers to create diffuse, meandering lines (fig. 9).

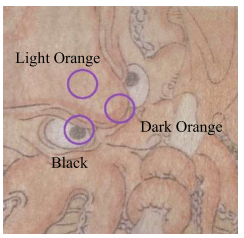
To address the question of relative light stability, LACMA's Assistant Conservation Scientist Kyna Biggs performed microfade testing (MFT) using a Whitmore MFT on samples of tengujo that had been both laser and inkjet printed. An additional sample of tengujo painted out with watercolor was also tested, as well as the original woodblock print. For each, the orange color and the black color were analyzed. The MFT curves obtained were then compared to those of the ISO Blue Wool standards (table 1). For the woodblock print, both the light and dark orange were found to be moderately light sensitive, fading between Blue Wool 2 and 3, whereas the black was somewhat light sensitive, fading at about the same rate as Blue Wool 3. For the watercolor sample, both the orange and black were found to be moderately light sensitive. Interestingly, for both the inkjet print and the laser print, all colors tested were found to be somewhat light sensitive,

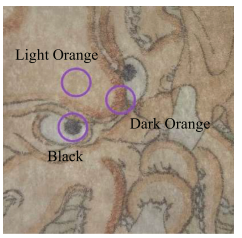


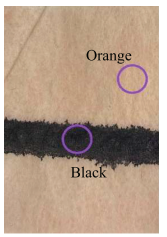
Fig. 9. Photomicrographs showing sample prints on 7.3 gsm tengujo. Left: Sample print made using a laser printer (Canon ImageRunner Advance DX C58401). Right: Sample print made using an inkjet printer (Epson SureColor P800).

Table 1. Results of MFT Produced by Kyna Biggs, Assistant Conservation Scientist, LACMA









Light Sensitivity	M.2003.168.4			Laser Print			Inkjet Print			Watercolor (Schmincke)	
	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Black	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Black	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Black	Orange (Naples yellow reddish + Venetian red)	Black (True ivory black)
Extremely light sensitive (fading rate without UV faster than BW1)											
Very light sensitive (fading rate without UV between BW1 and BW2)											
Moderately light sensitive (fading rate without UV between BW2 and BW3 – could show perceptible change in appearance after 100,000 ftc hours)	X	X								X	X
Somewhat light sensitive (fading rate without UV between BW3 and BW5 – could show perceptible change in appearance after 300,000 ftc hours)			X	X	X	X	X	X	X		



Fig. 10. Sample prints made using a laser printer (Canon ImageRunner Advance DX C58401). Left: The 7.3 gsm tengujo at 100% opacity (too dark/dense). Center: The 5 gsm tengujo at 100% opacity (too muddled). Right: The 7.3 gsm tengujo at 70% opacity (perfect).

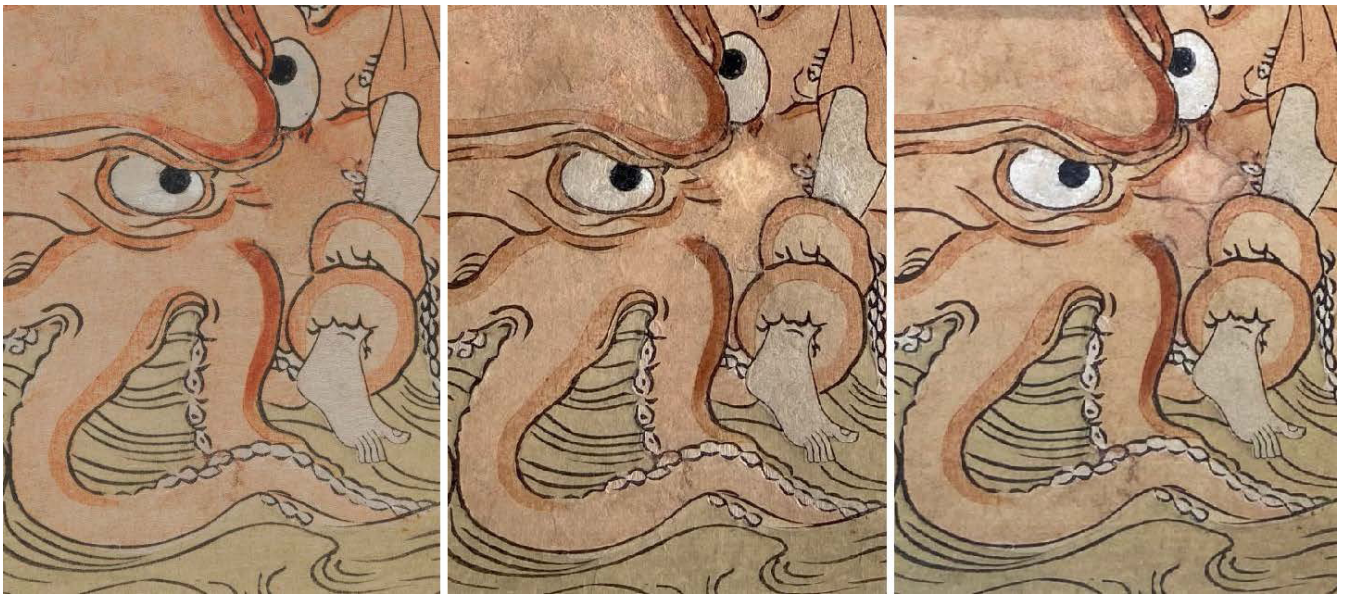


Fig. 11. Left: Detail of the fill prior to retreatment. Center: Detail of the fill after previous inpainting (watercolor) was partially lifted. Right: Detail of the retreated area after application of laser-printed fill (before additional inpainting).

fading below Blue Wool 3. It was expected that the pigment-based inkjet inks would outperform the laser printer toner when it came to light stability, but at least in this case, there was no significant difference.

With the MFT results in mind, the laser-printed fill was determined to be the best option, as it would provide better image clarity. The fills had been printed onto 7.3 gsm tengujo; however, these fills were too dark to allow for layering. To achieve a more sheer image, 5 gsm tengujo was tested, but it was found that paper this thin has large voids between fibers that cause the image to lose legibility. A better solution was to return to printing on the 7.3 g tengujo, and instead reduce the opacity of the image to 70% (the 70% opacity was chosen with the thinking that 5g tengujo has about 70% of the fiber density of 7.3 g tengujo). The result was sheer enough to layer while maintaining intelligibility of the linear design (fig. 10). The fill was shaped to the area of the loss in the woodblock print. Using a micro swab dampened with water, some of the watercolor from the earlier fill was lifted. Then the new printed fill was pasted in place over the earlier one (fig. 11). The final step was to augment the printed fill with additional watercolor. This hybrid approach combining printing and hand-applied color was an efficient way to harmoniously integrate the digitally reproduced missing elements. The watercolor not only adjusted the color of the printed fill but also softened its mechanical character. Under the microscope, the diagonal line pattern of the toner is still visible (fig. 12), but the watercolor has obscured it enough that under normal viewing conditions, the fill blends in seamlessly (fig. 13).

The odyssey of this print highlights the role that the Internet played in its iterative transformation. Conservators are increasingly expected to present their work in digestible bites on social media. This can be a challenge, as the kind of communication incentivized by platforms like TikTok and Instagram emphasize brevity, simplicity, and entertainment, characteristics almost antithetical to conservation work, which tends to be slow, subtle, and rife with imperfect solutions that can be hard to explain.

The outcome of this project is a reminder that it may be possible for conservators to use the tools of online outreach in ways that truly benefit their work. Much as office printing technologies have been adapted in ways that could not have been imagined by their inventors, conservators have the opportunity to find uses for social media that not only broadcast their



Fig. 12. Photomicrograph detail of the retreated area after treatment, showing the fill adjusted with additional watercolor.



Fig. 13. *Abalone Fishergirl*, after treatment in 2025. Courtesy of Yosi Pozeilov.

achievements and inform the public but also elevate a conservator's values of information exchange and collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Soko Furuhata, Janice Schopfer, Erin Jue, Hollis Goodall, Rika Hiro, Yosi Pozeilov, Kyna Biggs, Laura Maccarelli, Chi-Young Kim, and Elsa Thyss; Lella and Gianni Morra; University of California, Los Angeles Library: Consuela Metzger, Octavio Olvera, and Genie Guerard; Kyoto University: Kenkō Suzuki.

NOTES

1. *Abalone Fishergirl With an Octopus* (M.2003.168.4), Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792), Japan, ca. 1773–1774, color woodblock print, 25.0 × 18.9 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

2. *Pen and Ink Sketches of Military Life in the Union Army*, bound manuscripts collection (Collection 170/645). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

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SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Tengujo 5 g: Tengucho/Tengujo 5 g (MMN-1), 100% Thai Kozo machine made in Kochi, Japan. Hiromi, https://hiromi-paper.com.

Tengujo 7.3 g: Haini Hidaka Tengucho ROLL 7.3 g (HID-4), 100% Japanese Kozo cooked in ash, machine made by Hidaka Washi in Kochi, Japan. Hiromi, https://hiromipaper.com.

Watercolor: Schmincke Horadam watercolor, H. Schmincke & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, https://www.schmincke.de/en.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

AMANDA BURR
Paper Conservator
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Los Angeles, CA
aburr@lacma.org