A Short Visual History of Abstraction in Early Modern Japanese Karuta: Simplification, Reinterpretation, and Localization

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Introduction

WHEN producing and interpreting images, creators, viewers, and critics apply the arbitrary nature of signs to connect, explain, and rebuild the relationship between forms and meanings. The ways in which images may be interpreted provide a tool for inquiring about what, why, and how the images come into being, and in whose reality they function as pictorial signs. Semiotic analyses can help to interpret many types of imagery, including those that seem to have evident meanings but in fact call for special attention. The Japanese playing cards called *karuta* (Jp. 骨牌, カルタ; Por. *carta*) are one such compelling case.[1] Although designs in games like playing cards have

tended toward simplification to better serve players through clarity for quick recognition and to result in an economical mode of production, the Latin/Italo-Portuguese-patterned *karuta* from the Edo 江戸 period (1603–1868) and their later nineteenth- and twentieth-century variations present a series of expressive and abstract designs that appear simple but in fact complicate interpretation (see figures 1, 2, and 3). Rhythmic and dynamic calligraphic lines and color blocks form a sharp contrast between red and black. Each card resembles an abstract painting in its own right. Compared to their more illustrative prototype from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as in the dragon-ace cards shown in figure 2, a trend toward simplification is visible but few connections can be discerned between the abstract figures and their predecessors other than the vaguely similar compositions and movements.

A deck of these *karuta* has forty-eight cards, usually accompanied with one or two extra blank cards as a backup for missing cards and, depending on variations played in different areas, occasionally a modern deck has one or two joker cards. A typical Portuguese-

1   The word *karuta*, from *carta* in Portuguese, has different written forms in Japanese *katakana*, *hiragana*, and characters (*kanji*). Ebashi Takashi assigns the *hiragana karuta* かるた to the *awase-karuta* 合せかるた type of traditional Japanese matching/

comparing games, while he discusses the *katakana karuta* カルタ in the context of the four-suited Portuguese type of *karuta*. See Ebashi, *Karuta*, p. 1.

Figure 1. Varied patterns of *karuta* court cards. Dates vary, 16th–20th c. Portuguese-patterned, four-suited *karuta* playing cards. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission. Images edited by the author.

Figure 2. Patterns of *karuta* dragon-ace cards. Dates vary, 16th–21st c. Portuguese-patterned, four-suited *karuta* playing cards. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission. Images edited by the author.

Figure 3. Modern *Kurofuda* deck, a regional bold-patterned variation of ca. 1970s. Forty-eight-card deck with one joker card and one blank card, Latin/Italo-Portuguese suit-mark, woodblock printed on paper. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission.

patterned *karuta* set is comprised of four suits, twelve cards each, marked with batons, swords, coins, or cups. Twelve cards constitute a suit, with illustrations of dragons on ace cards, and pip cards of suit-marks from two to nine. Illustrations of maids, knights, and kings are represented in the court cards standing for the numbers ten to twelve. The dragon-ace cards, suit-marks, and court figures have almost become distorted and unrecognizable in later variations compared to the earlier Latin/Italo-Portuguese playing cards, but their enigmatic images continue to fascinate collectors both in Japan and overseas.[2]

This study focuses on the European suit-marked playing cards, which the word *karuta* came from and which provided the material basis of other card games in Japan, instead of the matching/comparing card games commonly known as *karuta* today (e.g. the poem-matching game, *Uta-awase karuta* 歌合せかるた or *Uta karuta* 歌かるた, and the syllabary proverb-matching game, *Iroha karuta* いろはかるた). *Karuta* first came to Japan in the late sixteenth century, brought by merchants and Jesuits through their trade routes between Europe and East Asia. The earliest evidence of the European suit-marked *karuta* remains on

a few wooden key blocks that were used for printing outlines of playing cards from around the Tenshō 天正 period (1573–1593), so they are also known as the *Tenshō karuta* 天正カルタ.

This paper also uses *Tenshō karuta* to refer to the European suit-marked playing cards in Japan in order to differentiate them from other *karuta* games. The paper-based material from European card games influenced traditional Japanese *mono awase* 物合せ matching/comparing games like the traditional shell-matching game *Kai-awase* 貝合わせ (also referred to as *Kai-ōi* 貝覆い) and other games that had been played in the imperial court since the Heian 平安 period (794–1185).[3] The application of more economical materials in the construction of these traditional games led to the development of new forms of educational matching/comparing card games in the Edo period, such as the aforementioned *Uta karuta* and *Iroha karuta*, both of which featured refined illustrations.[4]

The *Tenshō karuta*-type of playing cards went through a series of curious changes in their designs and social status over the course of the Edo period. They were first depicted in elaborate forms in early Edo-period paintings and on art objects made for wealthy members of Edo society, such as those in the warrior or aristocratic classes, to relish the exoticism of the *Nanban* 南蛮 (lit. "Southern barbarians") aesthetic.[5] The *Tenshō karuta* deck developed new ornate patterns around the Genroku 元禄 era (1688–1704). For example, *Unsun karuta* うんすんカルタ localized the formerly exotic material culture of *karuta* by adding domestic designs, another suit, and extra court cards featuring Japanese deities and Chinese imperial elites.[6] Similarly,

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2   The Latin/Italo-Portuguese pattern is so named because of its similarity to the early patterns of playing cards found in Spain, Italy, and Portugal, and because European-patterned *karuta* in Japan mostly resembled sixteenth-century playing cards from Portugal. This pattern can also be found in Portuguese colonies in South Asia and South America. See Mann and Wayland, *The Dragons of Portugal*.

3   The *mono awase* matching/comparing game involved two sides competing with their chosen objects, and the winner was announced by a judge who would then give the reasons for their decision. Objects of the game could include anything from flowers in nature to exuberant fans and paintings. See Sakomura, "Japanese Games of Memory, Matching, and Identification," p. 253.

4   Ebashi, *Karuta*, pp. 123–25.

5   The commercial and cultural exchange between Japan and Portugal in the late sixteenth century created the extravagant, exotic art style called *Nanban* exoticism. *Nanban* in the Azuchi-Momoyama 安土桃山 period (1573–1603) specifically referred to the Spanish and the Portuguese, and it broadly meant anything foreign. See Miyamoto, *Nihon no dentōbi to Yōroppa*, p. 63; Narusawa, "Nanban byōbu no tenkai," p. 77.

6   *Unsun karuta* was likely named after the Portuguese *um* (one) and *summon* (supreme); Sakomura, "Japanese Games of Memory, Matching, and Identification," p. 267. With seventy-five

Sunkun karuta すんくんカルタ added an extra suit and a few more court cards based on *Unsun karuta*.[7]

In the late seventeenth century, simplified designs of these *Tenshō karuta* began to appear in illustrations of popular literature. In addition to these artistic depictions, examples of eighteenth-century *karuta* decks also reflect the simplified and abstract images, and these designs have remained in use in modern regional-patterned *karuta* distributed and played in different areas of Japan (figures 1, 2, and 3).[8] These *karuta* designs bear almost no resemblance to earlier examples of illustrative *Tenshō karuta* that feature elaborate depictions of court-card figures, the dragon-ace, and suit-marks (figure 4).

What the strange designs in *karuta* and their prototype of European playing cards share in common is a particular mode of interpretation, and this mode is assigned by viewers who approach the mediums from a certain cultural context. This paper aims not to simply point out the apparent simplification and abstraction in *Tenshō karuta* but to explain the complicated process behind this discernible change in design.[9] Although *karuta* designs were not produced solely for aesthetic appreciation, they were created first and foremost as a means of visual communication in games. In turn, they were depicted in works of fine art and illustrations from popular literature with new interpretations throughout the course of their history. Artistic depictions of *karuta* appeared most frequently in popular literature produced in the Kyoto and Edo regions between the 1680s and 1790, before the strict regulation of *karuta* was implemented with the Kansei 寛政 Reforms of the 1790s.[10] With analyses of these visual materials, this paper takes a semiotic approach to explain the gradual process of abstraction in the images displayed in Portuguese-patterned *karuta* designs that took place between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

By examining mid-Edo-period artistic depictions and productions of the *Tenshō karuta*-type of playing cards, I will demonstrate how *karuta* designs evolved into a more concise pictorial sign for efficient visual communication to serve audiences at the time. Edo-period players and viewers attached localized meanings to shapes and figures in *karuta*. *Karuta*'s simplification and abstraction happened via these new cultural interpretations, and in so doing, users and makers of *karuta* detached the cards from their European origin. New designs and connotations were thus developed in *karuta*-related literature and arts at the time. Moreover, simplification and abstraction were further solidified and localized with the more economical means of production after the eighteenth century, and this continued into the modern period.

The artistic depictions and evolving designs of *karuta* demonstrate a phenomenon in which creators and viewers assign images from a different cultural origin with arbitrary meanings independent of their original context. Interpreted freely and without iconographical significance, the original meaning of these images does not matter to their new authors and audiences. In this way, the unintentional reinterpretation and adaptation of images take place, shaping and locating the meaning of signs within a different cultural context. Following this principle, designs of *Tenshō karuta* evolved with fluidity, generated new meanings in localized artistic and literary creations, and nurtured new forms of games in the large family of *karuta* playing cards.

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cards in a deck, *Unsun karuta* features five suits of clubs, swords, cups, coins, and *tomoe-mon* 巴紋 signs, with the ace cards (with images of the snake-like dragon rather than the bat-winged dragon) separated from the nine pip/number cards, plus two more court cards in each suit. See Suntory Museum of Art, *Asobi no ryūgi*, pp. 222–23.

7 The etymology of *Sunkun* in *Sunkun karuta* remains unclear, but the game was developed from *Unsun karuta*. *Sunkun karuta* consists of ninety-seven cards a deck. Based on *Unsun karuta*, a set of *Sunkun karuta* adds one more suit of arrows, one more type of court cards of emperor figures, and one additional card. However, unlike *Unsun karuta* that left actual evidence or depictions used in art objects, evidence of *Sunkun karuta* is limited to Genroku-era wood-blocks, and illustrations and replicated cards of the Meiji 明治 period (1868–1912). See Yamaguchi, *Unsun karuta*, pp. 38–40; Ebashi, "'Sunkun karuta' no hakken."

8 Regional-patterned *karuta*, or *Chihōfuda* 地方札, refers to playing cards that are used only in certain areas applying different rules of games, and can be seen after the Edo period with evidence from records of playing-card makers that indicate the production and distribution of playing cards. A wider definition of *Chihōfuda* includes a few regional variations of *Hanafuda* 花札 ("flower cards"), but the scope of this paper is restricted to the Latin/Italo-Portuguese suit-marked playing cards. See Ōsaka Shōgyō Daigaku Amyūzumento Sangyō Kenkyūjo, p. 78.

9 One of the reviewers kindly pointed out that art historian Rudolf Wittkower had an essay on simplifications in Roman coins that could help illuminate the method in my project. I would like to thank the reviewer, but, given the time frame, I was not able to locate the mentioned essay in the book recommended by the reviewer. I will note the source here for further reference: Rudolf

Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).

10 The Kansei Reforms strictly regulated gambling and *karuta* production as part of the measurements to forbid sumptuous events and publications. See Ebashi, *Karuta*, pp. 201–3.

This paper is divided into three sections. First, "Simplification and Abstraction" outlines the change in *Tenshō karuta* designs with visual analyses of *karuta* patterns, their artistic depictions in the mid-Edo period, and designs in modern decks in comparison to early examples of illustrative *Tenshō karuta*. Here, I argue that the simplification and abstraction of these images was not a purposeful aesthetic choice but rather an outcome of the desire to create efficiency in visual communication as *karuta*. The second section, "Arbitrary Meanings and Reinterpretations," delineates the change in cultural interpretations of *karuta*, mainly through renaming and localizing their depictions in early Edo-period artworks and their later appearance in mid-Edo-period literature. By analyzing a plethora of depictions and reinterpretations of *karuta*, I demonstrate that *karuta* designs and their cultural connotations were first localized and solidified within a mid-Edo-period interpretational framework and then became a part of the shared knowledge of the period's popular culture. The last section, "Efficient Production, Localization, and Continuation of *Karuta*," further articulates the localization of *karuta* and synthesizes the visual and conceptual aspects of *karuta* through their production and the conventional designs that continued into the modern era.

The scarcity of extant examples of playing cards from the Edo period presents a challenge to the study of *karuta*'s visual history. Because of the ephemeral nature of paper-based playing cards, few examples remain from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Thus, the scope of evidence examined in this paper has to include materials other than playing cards, such as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Portuguese-patterned *karuta*-inspired art objects and artistic depictions in printed books. In addition, I will examine playing cards from the Meiji period onward to demonstrate the trend of simplified designs that gradually became entrenched after the nineteenth century. As there has been little recent English-language scholarship on European-patterned *karuta* playing cards and their depictions and developments within the milieu of Japanese visual culture, one of the main sources that this paper depends on is the Japanese-language scholarship of Ebashi Takashi. This paper builds a visual history of *karuta* upon the rich research of *karuta* contributed by Ebashi and other Japanese scholars. It is my hope that this paper will serve as an initial study to call attention to the *karuta* family and its potential as a subject of the interdisciplinary studies of design and games in history.

Simplification and Abstraction

This paper assumes that the progressive simplification and abstraction in *Tenshō karuta* were not purposeful aesthetic choices but rather products of the need for efficiency in visual communication among players and viewers in Edo-period Japan. Both the physical *karuta* card designs and their illustrations in popular literature suggest that creating a vaguely recognizable shape with efficiency to accommodate new meanings was more important than exactly reproducing the detailed figures of early European playing card designs. That is, the simplified and abstract forms helped viewers and players understand the function of a specific card in games or artistic depictions.

This drastic shift toward the simplification and abstraction of *karuta* designs is apparent when we compare the court cards and dragon-ace designs displayed in the diverse variations of *Tenshō karuta* and their descendants (figures 1 and 2). This collection includes examples from early handmade, gold-leafed illustrative *karuta* of the late sixteenth century to woodblock-printed or stencil-colored modern regional-patterned decks of the 1950s by Nintendo who produced and distributed regional-patterned playing cards. Instances from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are extremely limited due to their disposable paper-based material. Yet abundant cases from the late nineteenth century demonstrate two major *karuta* designs of bold and thin patterns that gradually settled as generally accepted designs and continued through the twentieth century. Within these two patterns, the major differences between the regional-patterned card decks are their names and slightly different details in images depending on who made them and the regions where these cards were produced, sold, and played.[11]

Comparing the much later regional-patterned *karuta* to the illustrative *Tenshō karuta* produced in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is very little similarity between the two designs. Nonetheless, a rough outline of court-card figures in the former remains to hint at the lineage of *Tenshō karuta*. Early *Ten-*
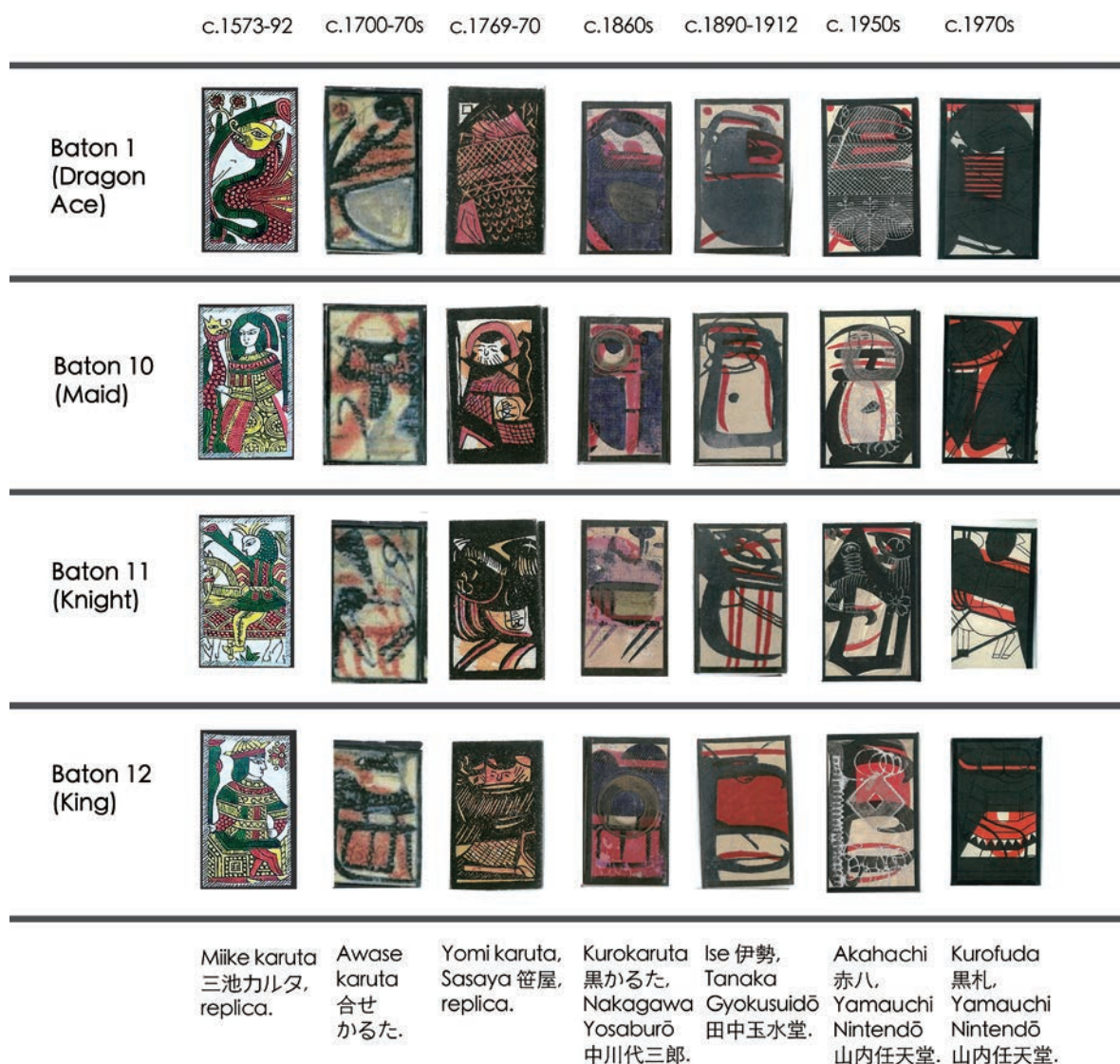
11 Ebashi, *Karuta*, pp. 311–14.

	c.1573-92	c.1700-70s	c.1769-70	c.1860s	c.1890-1912	c. 1950s	c.1970s
Baton 1 (Dragon Ace)							
Baton 10 (Maid)							
Baton 11 (Knight)							
Baton 12 (King)							
	Miike karuta 三池カルタ, replica.	Awase karuta 合せ かるた.	Yomi karuta, Sasaya 笹屋, replica.	Kurokaruta 黒かるた, Nakagawa Yosaburō 中川代三郎.	Ise 伊勢, Tanaka Gyokusuidō 田中玉水堂.	Akahachi 赤八, Yamauchi Nintendō 山内任天堂.	Kurofuda 黒札, Yamauchi Nintendō 山内任天堂.

Figure 4. Comparisons of the ace and court card figures of the baton suit. Dates vary, 16th-20th c. Portuguese-patterned, four-suited *karuta* playing cards. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission. Images edited by the author.

shō karuta decks contain delicate linework depicting figures exotic to Japan, such as a maid in a long gown holding a goblet, a knight wearing non-Japanese armor and carrying a sword, and a king crowned and seated on a decorated throne. In another set of *Tenshō karuta* produced in the seventeenth century, the figures are depicted wearing Chinese costumes and are still represented as distant and exotic entities to Japanese viewers and players (figure 1, early *Tenshō karuta* group, top

right). Likewise, the illustrations on early dragon-ace cards depict bat-winged European dragons (figure 2, early *Tenshō karuta* group, top right). Furthermore, the compositions of these designs are similar in the way they present suit-marks. For instance, the dragon of swords carries the sword against its body, forming a diagonal composition, and the dragon of cups has the cup above its head, creating an hourglass shape (figure 2). These general compositions remained identical in
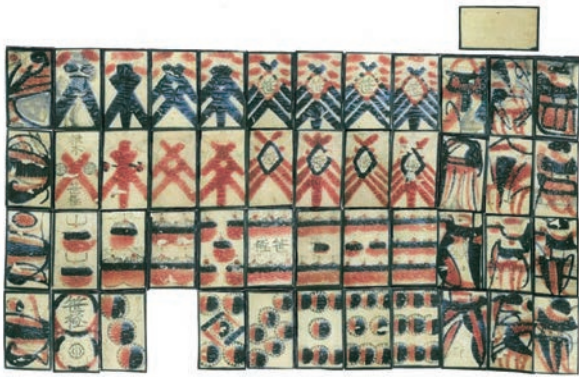
Figure 5. Thin-patterned *karuta* in Carl Peter Thunberg's 1775–1776 collection. 18th c., Edo period. Originally a forty-eight-card deck with one blank card, now with the four-of-coins card missing, Latin/Italo-Portuguese suit-mark, woodblock and stencil-colored print. The Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm, Sweden, used with permission. Image edited by Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission.

Figure 6. Thin-patterned *Yomi karuta* based on partial depictions in Tairaku, *Uchū tsurezuregusa*, ca. 1769–1770. Pattern recreated by Nihon Karuta-kan. From Nihon Karuta-kan, *Edo mekuri karuta shiryō-shū*, appendix. Image edited by the author.

later regional *karuta* variations, even though the figures depicted were significantly simplified.

Graphic design theory and Gestalt psychology offer further insight into the compositional changes of these cards. The pattern of simplification and abstraction of *karuta* designs follows several principles of perceptual organization, namely (1) proximity, as close-together features have a stronger association; (2) similarity, as similar figures have a stronger association; and (3) the overarching principle of *Prägnanz*, that "the simplest and most stable interpretations are favored" is applied when recognizing unfamiliar images.[12] These principles are evidenced in figure 3, which shows a sequence of simplification and abstraction when comparing the designs of the dragon-ace, the maid, the knight, and the king of batons from different periods. Viewed on their own, these regional-patterned court cards and dragon cards might appear as nothing but strange forms with dynamic lines, each one akin to a small piece of abstract art. But a pattern becomes discernible when the regional-patterned cards are compared alongside their elaborate predecessors. Detailed linework is generalized and replaced by calligraphic brushstrokes that feature a stark contrast between black and red color blocks. Distorted figures connect to their prototypes through rough compositional clues, such as the maid's gown which remains as an inked trapezoid, the knight's horse's legs that turn into four simple red sticks, and
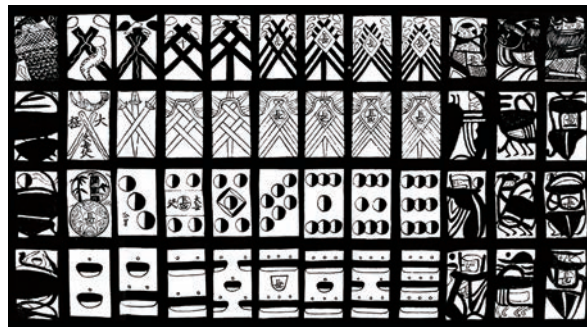
the king that becomes a few bold, horizontal stripes in black contrasting the red color block (figure 4).

These simplifications and abstractions became widely recognized by players and spectators in the eighteenth century, as evidenced by playing card sets and artistic renderings in illustrated books that were produced during this period. Following his visit to Edo Japan between 1775 and 1776, Swedish naturalist Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828) brought back a deck of *karuta* when he returned to Europe (figure 5).[13] The bleeding of colors on the cards suggests the use of stencil coloring, which conveniently accelerated the printing process and resulted in bolder lines and colors. As with later variations, the design looks dramatically different from the illustrated *Tenshō karuta* prototypes, bearing little visual resemblance to earlier images of dragons, maids, knights, or kings.

Thunberg's *karuta* deck from the 1770s implies that players in Japan used similar designs at the time, which were recognized as conventional icons representing the *Tenshō karuta*-type. Similar artistic depictions frequently appeared in works related to *karuta*, such as

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12 Chandler, *Semiotics*, pp. 151–52.

13 This deck is in the collection of the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, Sweden. I am indebted to game designer Marcus Richert and scholar Ebashi Takashi for sharing this information with me. Before this deck, there was little evidence about actual playing cards from the eighteenth century and it was thought only *karuta* sets from the early nineteenth century remained extant, such as those in the collection of the Dutch trading director Jan Cock Blomhoff. See Ebashi, "Caroli Petri Thvnberg." Thvnberg, usually transliterated as "Carl Peter Thunberg," was a Swedish botanist. He traveled to Japan as a young physician to attend to the Dutch in 1775 while using his knowledge of botany to collect plants in Japan for Hollanders. See Rudolph, "Thunberg in Japan and His Flora Japonica in Japanese."

Figure 7. Ihara Saikaku. Illustration (detail). 1686. Monochrome woodblock-printed book. From *Honchō nijū fukō* 3. Reprinted in *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 76 (Iwanami Shoten, 1991), p. 445.

Figure 8. Kyūjiken Rinchō. Illustration (detail). 1718. Monochrome woodblock-printed book. From *Shoke gunbaiki* 2, 18r.

Figure 9. Torii Kiyonaga. Illustration (detail). 1780. Monochrome woodblock-printed book. From Ichiba Tsūshō, *Chikagoro shima meguri* 3, 12v.

Tairaku's 太楽 (d.u.) *Uchū tsurezuregusa* 雨中徒然草 (Essays in Idleness on a Rainy Day, 1769–1770). Tairaku recreated *karuta* patterns with a somewhat comical touch in his casual booklet and listed several high-scoring combinations of cards as a guidebook for players. The lack of any publisher or censor's seal indicates that Tairaku did not receive permission for publication and therefore distributed the book privately, perhaps circulating it among his friends.[14] Though Tairaku provided only a few monochrome illustrations of *karuta*, a group of *karuta* collectors and Edo historians in the 1970s called the Nihon Karuta-kan produced the full design of Tairaku's *karuta* based on his illustrations (figure 6). Despite being an approximate uncolored replica of Tairaku's illustrations in one single sheet, and despite the figure's comical facial expressions in the court cards, the recreation by Nihon Karuta-kan is similar to Thunberg's *karuta* deck in terms of suit-mark designs and the composition of figures on the court and the dragon-ace cards. Since Tairaku's book came out in 1770, his perception of a typical *karuta* design would have been similar to the perception evidenced in Thunberg's *karuta* deck, which was likely produced around the same time or earlier. Thus, the production date of decks like Thunberg's *karuta* may be narrowed down to around the 1770s, rather than the earlier defined time range of the 1700s.[15]

Evidence from extant *karuta* sets and artistic renderings suggests that players and viewers by the mid-Edo period had accepted simplified and abstract *karuta* designs and were able to use them in actual games. In addition, references to *karuta* in Edo-period popular culture also indicate that abstract *karuta* designs were recognized by common readers at the time. Prior to the eighteenth century, depictions of simplified *karuta* designs had appeared in illustrated books, such as the popular author Ihara Saikaku's 井原西鶴 (1642–1693) *Honchō nijū fukō* 本朝二十不孝 (Twenty Unfilial Children in Japan, 1686), which includes a story about the downfall of a prodigal son addicted to gambling on *karuta* games (figure 7). The *karuta* cards in the accompanying illustration are depicted in a simple manner.

14 Ebashi, "*Uchū tsurezuregusa* wa yomikaruta-zuki no kaita shumibon."

15 As listed on the website of the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm. Etnografiska Museet, "1874.01.0049. Carlotta: Databasen för museiamlingar." Accessed 1 September 2021. https://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web/object/1000639.

They are recognizable by the black paper affixed to the back of the cards and the crossing sticks and aligning circles that adorn the front, representing the pip cards of the coin, sword, and baton suits. The cards are portrayed simplistically, as is the *fusuma* sliding-door painting in the background with its rough lines and shapes. In this story, *karuta* playing cards function as props, just like the *fusuma* painting and a standing candle, to suggest the surrounding environment—a teahouse where gamblers gather to play *karuta* at night. Many other illustrated books imply the prevalence of *karuta* games, like the 1718 novel *Shoke gunbaiki* 諸家軍配記 (A Manual of Military Tactics) by Kyūjiken Rinchō 九思軒鱗長/九二軒鱗長 (d.u.) and a much later work from 1780, *Chikagoro shima meguri* 近頃嶋めぐり (A Recent Tour of the Islands) by Ichiba Tsūshō 市場通笑 (1739?–1812) and illustrated by Torii Kiyonaga 鳥居清長 (1752–1815).[16] Illustrations in these publications present scenes of people playing with *Tenshō karuta*-type playing cards that feature simplified depictions of the baton, sword, and coin suit-marks (figures 8 and 9).

The simplified and abstract appearances of *karuta* designs in extant examples and artistic renderings from the mid-Edo period imply the shared knowledge and immense popularity of *karuta* as an accessible leisure pastime. The simplification and abstraction in the design was not the result of any intentional aesthetic movement but instead intended to facilitate a more accessible form of visual communication. As a result, *karuta* designs developed into well-perceived "iconic signifier[s]."[17] In other words, simplified *karuta* designs became a perceptual code for viewers to better process pictorial information with simple lines and shapes that formed the "iconic convention" of *karuta*.[18] This flexible iconic interpretation of *karuta* inspired artists, writers, players, and readers in the mid-Edo period, giving the European *karuta* new cultural connotations.
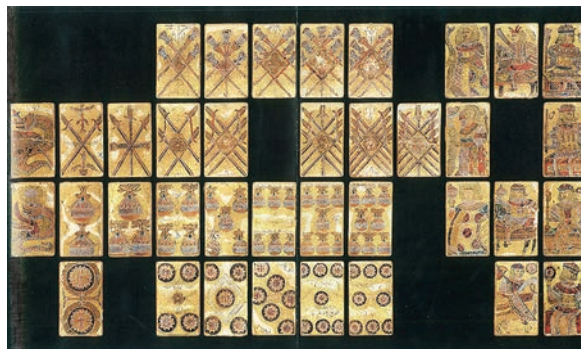

Figure 10. Early *Tenshō Karuta*. 17th c., Genroku period. Forty-eight-card deck, Latin/Italo-Portuguese suit-mark, ink and colors on paper. From Suntory Museum of Art, *Asobi no ryūgi*, p. 136.
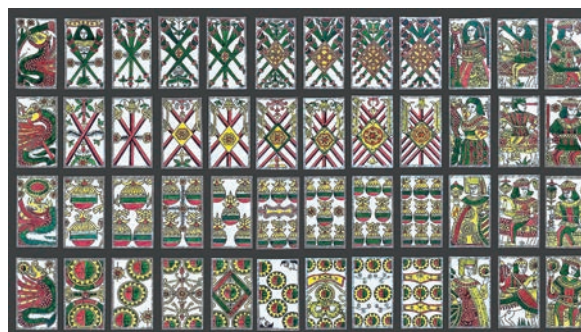

Figure 11. Replica of *Miike Karuta, Tenshō karuta*-type playing cards. Late 16th c., Tenshō period. Forty-eight-card deck, Latin/Italo-Portuguese suit-mark, woodblock print on paper. Ōmuta Miike Playing Cards and History Material Museum, used with permission. Photograph by the author.

Arbitrary Meanings and Reinterpretations

The cultural connotations of *karuta* changed over the course of the Edo period as different social classes adapted and reinterpreted them through media such as the fine arts and popular illustrated literature. Before variations of *Tenshō karuta* started to develop in the mid-Edo period, illustrative *Tenshō karuta* frequently appeared in refined paintings and art objects as a reflection of values and trends of the powerful and the wealthy, especially during the early Edo period when *Nanban* exoticism was an influential aesthetic.[19] Early handmade *Tenshō karuta* displayed ornate designs of suit-marks and figures with intricate linework to rec-

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16 The word *meguri* めぐり in the title here is also an allusion to the *Mekuri karuta* game popular in Edo at the time.

17 Chandler, *Semiotics*, p. 61.

18 "At a certain point the iconic representation, however stylized it may be, appears to be truer than the real experience, and people begin to look at things through the glasses of iconic convention." Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 204–5, cited in Chandler, *Semiotics*, pp. 61–62.

19 See Miyamoto, *Nihon no dentōbi to Yōroppa*, p. 63; Narusawa, "Nanban byōbu no tenkai," p. 77.
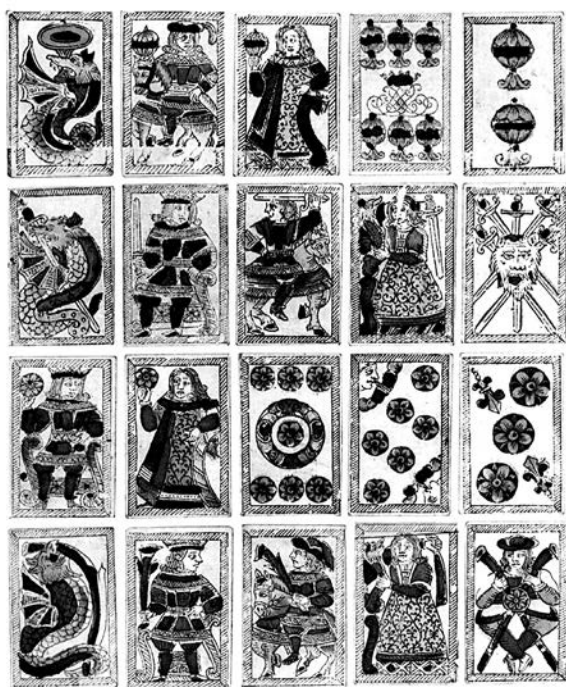
Figure 12. Early Portuguese pattern playing cards. Mid-17th c. Forty-eight-card deck, woodcut and stencil-coloring. W 4.9 cm, H 8.3 cm each. Real Fabrica de Lisiboa, Lisbon, Portugal. Deutsches Spielkarten-museum Leinfelden-Echterdingen. From Sylvia Mann, *All Cards on the Table*, used with permission.

Figure 14. Detail. *Women Playing a Card Game*. 17th c., Edo period. Ink, colors, gold, and silver on paper. Panel Painting. W 64.1 cm, H 91.3 cm. From Suntory Museum of Art, *Asobi no ryūgi*, p. 134, fig. 67.

Figure 13. Lacquered drum body with *karuta* patterns. Undated. W 11.7 cm, H 28.5 cm. From Asahi Shinbunsha, *Ōchō no asobi inishie no miyabina sekai*, p. 38, fig. 35.

reate European designs as closely as possible (which can be seen in figures 10 and 11, and designs from Portuguese playing cards of the mid-seventeenth century presented in figure 12). Because these occidental designs were uncommon to Japanese viewers at the time, some features were altered in the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century. For instance, compared to figure 12, the cup suit-marks of the *Tenshō karuta* shown in figures 10 and 11 were depicted upside down. The cup icon was probably misinterpreted as a *kinchaku* 巾着 pouch instead of a goblet. Nevertheless, the exotic and geometric shapes and suit-marks of the batons, swords, cups, and coins in *karuta* from Europe were favored by designers and patrons seeking to capitalize on the popularity of exotic tastes, such as in a lacquered drum decorated with *karuta* patterns in gold (figure 13). Images of stylized card designs of batons, coins, and cups that embellish the drum serve to add a sense of exoticism, for these items and their designs were not commonly seen in Japan.

Karuta playing cards appeared in paintings as symbols of *Nanban* exoticism and wealth, such as in *Yūraku zu* 遊楽図 ("pictures of amusements") paintings,

which illustrate scenes of courtesans and military-class men at play. *Karuta bijin zu* カルタ美人図 (Beauties Playing Cards) depicts such a *karuta*-playing scene in the foreground, while a gold and lacquered pedestal, bearing a paulownia crest design and topped with a Western clock, is visible in the background (figure 14). The woman on the left wears a gold *kakemamori* 懸守 amulet that may allude to the rosary necklace fashionable at the time, as seen in another contemporaneous painting, the *Matsura Byōbu*.[20] Such exotic and fashionable items appeared in paintings and crafts during the early seventeenth century as Christianity proliferated before being banned in 1613. The presence of the crest suggests the patron of the painting was a member of the warrior and aristocratic classes who would have had access to imported goods with relative ease. During this period, these social classes perceived *karuta* playing cards and their designs as iconic within the realm of art, which symbolized a prosperous and lavish lifestyle.

In the eighteenth century, *karuta* sets became signifiers of popular culture and everyday entertainment due to the increasing prevalence of card games. As the popularity of playing cards grew in both elevated and mundane social circles, stores in the Kyoto and Edo regions became the go-to places for affordable playing cards.[21] And as the publishing business developed, playing cards with more simplified designs began to appear.

Simplification and abstraction in *karuta* designs took place alongside changes in the reading and meaning-making of these images. Eighteenth-century literature elevated *karuta* from a simple story-telling prop in the background to a foregrounded storyteller in and of itself. That is, *karuta* started to function as a narrative method in both artworks and literature and as an educational tool to inform and convey moral values. The short illustrated fiction *Sakiwake ron* 咲分論 (Theories on Variegated Flowering, ca. 1778–1780) by Chikusō 竹窓 (d.u.) transforms *karuta* figures into active nar-

Figure 15. Chikusō. Illustrations, ca. 1778–1780. Hand-colored woodblock-print. From *Sakiwake ron*, 3r and 3v.

Figure 16. Design of the knight of cups (or eleven of cups) from a *Kurofuda* key block print. 19th c., early Meiji period. Hanamaki, Iwate. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission.

rators in the story. The card of the knight, appearing just as he does in early Tenshō cards but equipped with Japanese armor, takes shape as a spirit rising from a smoking stove after a geisha has burned playing cards for her jealousy of *karuta*'s popularity that took her patrons away (figure 15). The knight's posture seems to have become a convention in *karuta* design. A similar posture can be seen in later cards such as an early Meiji-period card of the knight of cups, on which the knight is mounted on a horse, facing left, and delineated with simple outlines (figure 16). In Chikusō's story, the *karuta* spirit lectures the geisha about the "righteousness of playing cards" after the geisha mutters about the popularity of *karuta* games taking her business away. Furthermore, as indicated in the title *sakiwake* ("variegated flowering"), the spirit persuades

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20 Naruse, "Kokuhō *Matsura Byōbu*," pp. 16–17 and Oda, "*Matsura Byōbu* no ishō zugara," pp. 23–24. Two women in the *Matsura Byōbu* are identically positioned to those in figure 14 while a standing figure, left screen, wore a necklace that appears to be a rosary necklace that was later "erased" (Naruse). Both authors note that motifs like rosary necklaces and *karuta* reflect a fashionable early-Edo-period trend.

21 The public presence of playing cards is elucidated by works such as the 1678 guidebook *Kyō-suzume ato-oi* 京雀跡追, which provides street and store information for Kyoto, including playing card shops. Ebashi, *Karuta*, p. 102.

Figure 17. Kitao Masanobu [Santō Kyōden]. Illustration. 1778. Monochrome woodblock-printed book. From *Kaichō riyaku no mekuriai*, in Santō Kyōden Zenshū Henshū Iinkai, *Santō Kyōden zenshū* 1, p. 18.

Figure 18. Tairaku. Maid of batons from a colored replica of *karuta*, ca. 1769–1770. From *Uchū tsurezuregusa*. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission.

the geisha that *karuta* shall coexist and flourish with her business, offering this lesson in a homily full of humor and wit. Here, the *karuta* figure is personified not as a European knight but as a "general in armor riding on a blue horse" and described in a manner comprehensible to Japanese readers.[22] This description suggests that, by the mid-Edo period, figures in *Tenshō karuta* patterns were no longer perceived as exotic European figures but as localized icons associated with subjects that were much more familiar to Japanese writers, readers, and *karuta* players.

Images of *karuta* were thus reassigned meanings that reflected a new cultural context and were consumed by a new group of readers and players who were not interested in or did not have knowledge of the exotic European *karuta* owned by members of the prominent classes in the early Edo period. Based on these reinterpretations, popular writers and artists assigned new meanings to *karuta* images and created works out of this new gaming context, examples of which include the aforementioned *Sakiwake ron* and many works by the *karuta* enthusiast Santō Kyōden 山東京伝 (1761–1816), as we shall see below. A prolific writer and artist, Kyōden especially enjoyed playing *karuta* and published several short stories on *karuta* and the

mekuri karuta game popular in Edo.[23] He employed modes of visual depiction and story-telling comparable to those used in *Sakiwake ron* in an early work, a short, illustrated novel titled *Ohana Hanshichi Kaichō riyaku no mekuriai* お花半七開帳利益札遊合 (Ohana and Hanshichi's Mekuri Games with Public Opening and Blessings) published in 1778 and pictured in figure 17. Kyōden's illustration features a composition similar to *Sakiwake ron*'s in order to depict the illusion created from the burning playing cards, and "the spirit of *karuta*" gives a similar speech on the "righteousness of playing cards," alluding to specific slang expressions used in the *mekuri karuta* game.[24]

Karuta figures in Kyōden's stories are detached from their original context and any actual pictorial association with European figures; instead, they are localized via the application of recognizable imagery, and transformed into comparable icons more familiar to mid-Edo period readers. This is clear from another *karuta*-themed work by Kyōden, *Muda karuta* 寓骨牌 (1787), "A Futile Allegory of *Karuta*," or literally, "Useless *Karuta*," which tells the story of personified *karuta* and their family struggles and alludes to *karuta* slang

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22 *Kacchū o taishi aoki uma ni uchinori tari taishō* 甲冑を帯し青き馬に打乗たり大将; Chikusō, *Sakiwake ron*, 8r. Image from the National Diet Library, http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/8929431; publication date from Mizuno, *Sharebon taisei* 10, p. 385. A reviewer kindly points out that the word *ao*, "blue" or "green" in Japanese, also refers to the color of grey in horses.

23 Ebashi, "Santō Kyōden wa 'mekuri karuta' zuki." *Mekuri karuta* was a type of trick-taking *karuta* game that used the Portuguese suit-marked *karuta*, popular in Edo in the eighteenth century. As demonstrated in Kyōden's works in this paper, the word *mekuri* めくり became a metonym of the *Tenshō karuta*-type of playing cards in Edo in the mid- to late-eighteenth century.

24 This work might have been an appropriation based on *Sakiwake ron*, as pointed out by Mizuno Minoru, cited in "Ohana Hanshichi Kaichō riyaku mekuriai," in Santō Kyōden Zenshū Henshū Iinkai, *Santō Kyōden zenshū* 1, pp. 512–13.

Figure 19. Mid-Edo period maid court card *karuta* pattern based on partial depictions in Tairaku, *Uchū tsurezuregusa*, ca. 1769–1770. Woodblock print on paper, uncut sheet. Recreated by Nihon Karuta-kan, *Edo mekuri karuta shiryō-shū*, 1975. Image edited by the author.

terms and Kabuki actors who were popular at the time.[25] In Kyōden's time, names were assigned to cards based on arbitrary visual associations, instead of calling each *karuta* figure or suit-mark by their original Portuguese names or any corresponding names in Japanese.[26] For instance, the so-called maid of batons (ten of batons) was called the "Shakyamuni of ten" (*shaka-jū* 釈迦十), perhaps because of the halo-like design surrounding the figure's head and its high-scoring function in a game (figure 18). The maid cards in general were understood as "monk" (*bōzu* 坊主 or *sōgyō* 僧形) figures by players due to their seemingly bald heads and long robes (figure 19).[27] In *Muda karuta*, the *sudare-jū* すだれ十, the maid of swords, turns into a monk dressed in a robe with a crest of ⊕, a circled *kanji* ten, while at the same time this personification very much resembles the maid of batons in terms of its "hairstyle" (figures 18 and 20).[28] Kyōden's personification of the maid figure completely erases its original signified; instead, he renders the figure as a monk, the closest representation that a mid-Edo-period Japanese player perhaps could have thought of in association with the maid image in *karuta*.

Figure 20. Santō Kyōden. The votive plate behind the "monk" resembles coins of two in a *mekuri karuta* deck. 1787. Monochrome woodblock-printed book. From Santō Kyōden, *Muda karuta* 3, 3v.

Likewise, Kyōden further utilized *karuta* and their visually appealing abstract designs in his later works. Perceiving *karuta* images outside their original context, Kyōden situated them into his own cultural context and borrowed popular terms from his fellow *karuta* players to assign new meanings to their abstract images. Kyōden's 1789 *Seirō wadan shinzō zui* 青楼和談新造図彙 (New Interpretations on Pleasure Quarter Vocabularies) is a parody of contemporary encyclopedias and educational books, dividing terms and expressions into several categories. The book features many idioms used in the pleasure quarters, accompanied by Kyōden's whimsical illustrations of everyday objects as visual puns, rendered in the *mitate* 見立 (parody) style to resemble other objects.

In *Seirō wadan shinzō zui*, Kyōden includes two examples of *mekuri karuta*, a popular *karuta* game in Edo in his time, most notably the king of batons and the two of swords which were considered to be the high-scoring cards in a game (figures 21 and 22).[29] He assigns the two cards new names and depicts them with highly abstract designs that by no means resemble the figurative images of their early *Tenshō karuta* prototypes. Instead, these abstract images are quite reminiscent of the artistic depictions found in the aforementioned *Uchū tsure-*

25 Satō, *Edo mekuri karuta*, p. 92. The full title of this work, *Hyakumon nishu muda karuta* 百文二朱寓骨牌, is a pun on *Hyakunin-isshu uta karuta* 百人一首歌かるた. The *hashiradai* 柱題 (the centered title between each page, just above the page number) reads *agurayama* あぐら山, in which *agura* refers to cross-legged sitting when one plays *mekuri karuta*, and *agurayama* is another pun on *Ogurayama* 小倉山 of the *Ogurayama Hyakunin-isshu* 小倉山百人一首. The personification of *karuta* was adopted in popular literature prior to Kyōden's work, in a 1783 illustrated short story, *Heta no kuse naga monogatari* 下手癖永物語 (A Clumsy-ish Long Tale), written by an author with a witty pseudonym, Ikuji Monai 井久治茂内, which is a pun on the phrase *ikuji mo nai* 意気地もない, or "coward."

26 A list of these *karuta*-related terms can be found in Satō, *Edo mekuri karuta,* pp. 13–18.

27 Ibid., p. 15.

28 The maid of swords is called *sudare-jū* in Tairaku's guidebook, *Uchū tsurezuregusa* (1769–1770); see also Satō, *Edo mekuri karuta,* p. 17.

29 A few games were played using the Portuguese-patterned *karuta* at the time, including *mekuri karuta* and *yomi karuta* games. Satō's *Edo mekuri karuta* is an early attempt to comprehensively categorize the many different games. However, because this article focuses on the change in designs and people's perceptions of *karuta*, I will avoid differentiating the type of games that involve specific rules and terms. For more on categorization of eighteenth-century *karuta* games that used *Tenshō karuta*-type playing cards, see Satō, *Edo mekuri karuta,* pp. 18–39, and Ebashi, *Karuta*, pp. 180–93.

Figure 21. Santō Kyōden. A simplified depiction of the card of the two of swords. 1789. Monochrome woodblock-printed book. From *Seirō wadan shinzō zui*, 21r.

Figure 22. Santō Kyōden. A simplified depiction of the card of the king (or twelve) of batons. 1789. Monochrome woodblock-printed book. From *Seirō wadan shinzō zui*, 23v.

Figure 23. Tairaku. Artistic depictions of two of swords (left) and the king of batons (right) in *mekuri karuta*, ca. 1769-1770. Uncut sheet. From *Uchū tsurezuregusa*, in Nihon Karuta-kan, *Edo mekuri karuta shiryō-shū*, appendix. Image edited by the author.

zuregusa and the designs in Thunberg's *karuta* deck (see figure 5 compared to figure 23). In these examples, designs are simplified into thin and straight lines for the two of swords and calligraphic strokes with inked geometric forms for the king of batons. The king of batons is named *aogiri* 青桐, literally "blue paulownia" or "Chinese parasol tree," while the two of swords is called *ebi* 海老, "shrimp," a name taken from the abstract figure located above the crossing swords (figures 21 and 23). Moreover, the two cards are not situated in the context of playing cards but rather taxonomized as if they are what the new names "Chinese parasol tree" and "shrimp" indicate: the *aogiri* explanation appears in the category of *Sōmoku* 草木 ("grass and trees"), whereas the *ebi* explanation is found in the *Gyochū* 魚虫 ("fish and insects") section, along with many other visual puns in association with figures and objects from the context of the pleasure quarters. While designs in *karuta* became simpler and more abstract, the names of these playing cards became more opaque and less related to their initial forms.

The curious names of these two cards would have made little sense if compared to the earlier illustrative *Tenshō karuta*, for they have nothing to do with suit-marks or figures. These new terms were the product of out-of-context reinterpretations by players based on simplified *karuta* forms. Understanding the new *karuta* names and their intended puns requires knowledge of Kabuki trends and terms used in *mekuri karuta* popular at the time. The two of swords, now renamed *ebi*,

is adorned with a shrimp-like figure above the highly simplified crossing swords (figure 21). But in addition to this apparent visual clue, this new name also contains a pun rooted in its contemporary Kabuki culture and high-scoring card combinations in the *mekuri karuta* game. Above the image, Kyōden explains the term *ebi* while referring to other cards with their localized names: "Now you have the *aza-pin* あざぴん ('the bruised ace') of batons, [and with this *ebi* 'shrimp' two of swords,] plus an *ao-no-jū* 青の十 ('the blue ten') of batons (maid of batons), you've got to get a secret strategic move."[30] This quote alludes to a high-scoring combination called *ebizō* 海老蔵 consisting of the ace of batons, two of swords, and ten of batons, referring to the Kabuki stage name Ichikawa Ebizō 市川海老蔵 and alluding to the abstract shrimp-like figure in the two of swords.[31]

Consequently, the names of *karuta* slang expressions do not refer to suit-marks, but rather a visual resemblance and localized puns associated with card games familiar to their contemporary players. The ace of batons, or the dragon of batons, is called *aza-pin* ("bruised ace") for its peculiar appearance that looks more like a blotch of ink than a dragon carrying a baton (e.g., the first card on the top left in the illustrated *yomi*

30　*Pin wa agatteiru shi kore kara jū o mekurō to iu muhonda* ぴんは上ツているし是から十をめくらうといふむほんだ (ピンは上がっているし、これから十をめくろうという謀反だ); Kyōden, *Seirō wadan shinzō zui*, 21r.
31　Satō, *Edo mekuri karuta*, pp. 30, 64; Ebashi, "Santō Kyōden wa 'mekuri karuta' zuki."

karuta deck, figure 6).[32] As for *ao-no-jū* ("the blue ten"), or ten of batons or maid of batons, the card is so named for its color: the baton suits were stencil-colored or printed in blue/indigo (*ao* 青) rather than in the red (*aka* 赤) used for the sword suit, which can be seen in the *karuta* deck shown in figure 3. As for the other recontextualized *aogiri* ("Chinese parasol tree") card, or the king or twelve of batons, this card was initially called *kiri*, allegedly based on the Portuguese word *cruz*, "cross," which also referred to "the last card," but the pronunciation of *kiri* can also mean "paulownia."[33] Above the illustration of a highly abstract card of the king of batons, Kyōden explains regarding *aogiri* that "with this 'paulownia,' you get a quick, wild win," because the king of batons is said to be the highest-scoring card in a few different *karuta* games.[34] Furthermore, since the baton suits were colored in blue, the king of batons card was named *aogiri*, literally "blue *kiri*," "the blue paulownia," or Chinese parasol tree. In general, the *ebi* and *aogiri* cards quoted in Kyōden's *Seirō wadan shinzō zui* lack a direct reference to their suit-marks of swords or batons or any direct association with their *Tenshō karuta* prototype; instead, these cards are renamed after their simplified appearances and colors, localized with new rules and functions of cards in their contemporary *karuta* games.

By making connections between the illustrations and terms that appear in different publications, we see a coherent usage of *karuta* images as shared knowledge in the popular cultural references utilized by *karuta*-loving writers like Kyōden in the mid-Edo period. The original meanings and cultural significance of these once-exotic *karuta* images did not matter to Kyōden or his contemporaries. Rather, the simplification and abstraction of *karuta* designs gave viewers and players new ways of interpreting images with meanings that were more comprehensible to their cultural context in the eighteenth century.

This shared knowledge and socially agreed-upon interpretation of *karuta* images led to the further symbolization of *karuta* as a recognized icon reflective of
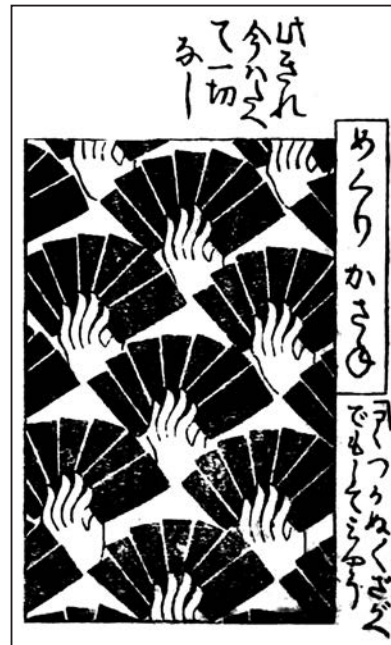

Figure 24. Santō Kyōden. 1790. Patterns of hands holding *mekuri karuta* playing cards. From *Komon gawa*, 3v.

social phenomena. Kyōden's readers could understand his sense of humor and sarcasm towards their society via his artistic renderings of *karuta*. A prime example can be found in Kyōden's 1790 *Komon gawa* 小紋雅話 (Elegant Chats on Fabric Designs). The work is a compilation of his parodied pattern designs. Kyōden again uses the *mitate* method to evoke a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor in his readers with regard to popular cultural phenomena and social issues. In *Komon gawa*, the fanning pattern called *mekuri kasane* めくりかさね ("layered *mekuri* playing cards") presents a repetitive pattern of a hand holding seven black cards (figure 24). The title and the black cards would immediately remind readers of *karuta* games, as these cards are backed with black wrapping paper. The inscription next to the illustration contextualizes the pattern within a gambling scene: "Ah, I'm not feeling it. I shall switch my seat [to get better luck]!"[35] At the same time, Kyōden had to distance himself from any hint of gambling or *karuta*-related messages. By the time this work was produced, the ongoing Kansei Reforms of the late eighteenth cen-

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32 *Pin* allegedly comes from the Portuguese word *pinta*, meaning "dot." NHK, *Bi no tsubo*, p. 43; Satō, *Edo mekuri karuta*, p. 15.

33 NHK, *Bi no tsubo*, p. 43. According to Satō, *kiri* also refers to the Kabuki term *kiri no maku* 切りの幕 (or *kirimaku* 切り幕), "the final scene." Satō, *Edo mekuri karuta*, p. 16.

34 *Kono kiri icchō aru toki wa mizuten o kakete basara o utsu nari* 此桐一つてふある時ハ水てんをかけてばさらをうつ也 (この桐、一丁ある時は不見転をかけて、ばさらを打つなり); Kyōden, *Seirō wadan shinzō zui*, 23v. Ebashi, "Santō Kyōden wa 'mekuri karuta' zuki"; and Ebashi, *Karuta*, p. 197.

35 *Aa tsukanu tsukanu zagae demo shite miyō* あ〳〵つかぬ＼／ざがへでもしてみやう (ああ、つかぬ、つかぬ、座替えでもしてみよう); Kyōden, *Komon gawa*, 3v.

tury had strengthened gambling regulations.[36] In order to dissociate himself from any suspicious content related to *karuta* gambling, Kyōden adds another inscription above the illustration: "Now this sort of thing has completely ceased to exist."[37] Such a deliberate act of dissociation would likely have inspired bitter laughter from his readers and fellow players, whose favorite pastime had been taken away by the government, and who now had to conduct their gambling and card games surreptitiously.

Authors like Kyōden and their popular works indicate that *karuta* had become shared knowledge among creators, readers, and players by the late eighteenth century in Edo. In *Komon gawa*, even the simplified designs of *karuta* are not presented. Instead, the cards are alluded to through the visual hints of black cards and a hand holding them. This simple visual association was made and understood by his readers, who were probably also *karuta* players just like Kyōden. In this way, the whimsical *karuta* design suggests the popularity of the *mekuri karuta* game at the time, as well as the altered meaning of *karuta*, assigned by the everyday people of the mid-Edo period.

Against a backdrop of advanced printing technology and flourishing publishing industries in the Kyoto and Edo regions, *karuta* transformed from an exotic good to a common pastime in the mid-Edo period, frequently appearing as a subject of popular literature in Edo. *Karuta* was thus both an actual game that reflected mid-Edo-period leisure activities and a popular cultural icon rendered through works of literature that served to reveal the trends and tastes of the populace. *Tenshō karuta* as a whole was standardized and reinterpreted in the mid-Edo period. It became a part of the "library of public information," legitimating contemporary experiences and transforming into cultural signifiers understood by Edo audiences who were knowledgeable about the *karuta* games at the time.[38]

Figure 25. Tachibana Minkō. Illustrations. 1784. Polychrome woodblock-printed book. From *Iroe shokunin burui* 2, 8v and 9r.

Efficient Production, Localization, and Continuation of *Karuta*

Although reinterpretations of *karuta* playing cards, including new names and meanings, might only have been comprehensible to their contemporary creators and audiences, the localized images continued to proliferate as the production was more efficient and economical with less elaborate designs in playing cards. The designs remained similar after the Edo period. New games carried on these designs and developed in regional areas, as seen in a variation of modern playing cards of the *Tenshō karuta*-type produced as late as the 1950s by companies like Ōishi Tengudō 大石天狗堂 and Yamauchi Nintendō 山内任天堂 (figures 1 and 2). In these designs, the expressive calligraphic lines and highly contrastive red and black color blocks became even more prominent, omitting any visible resemblance to early European designs.

From the perspective of meaning-making in signs, the illustrative quality of Portuguese-patterned *karuta* was lost. The meaning behind the illustrative images did not signify much for Japanese designers and players who operated within a cultural context without connection to the cards' European origin. And yet, from the perspective of economic production, this process of simplification benefited *karuta* makers as they could omit the complicated illustrations that mattered little to their users. Like the reinterpretations of *karuta* seen in

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36 The Kansei Reforms regulated excessive consumption in many aspects of Japanese life such as woodblock prints and gambling games. See Ebashi, "Santō Kyōden wa 'mekuri karuta' zuki."

37 *Kono kire ima wa taete issai nashi* 此のきれ今ハたへて一切なし (このきれ、今は絶えて一切なし); Kyōden, *Komon gawa*, 3v.

38 Mary Elizabeth Berry uses the term "library of public information" in a chapter examining materials from the seventeenth century. I believe this concept can also be applied to the even more diverse literature and the many cross-referencing subjects of mid- to late-eighteenth-century Japan. Berry, *Japan in Print*, pp. 13–53. A reviewer kindly suggests that printed guides on rules of *karuta* games from the time might help better demonstrate the circulation of *karuta*-related knowledge in the eighteenth

century. However, the only evidence that I am aware of is the aforementioned *Uchū tsurezuregusa*, but as a private publication, its distribution and circulation were not clearly documented.
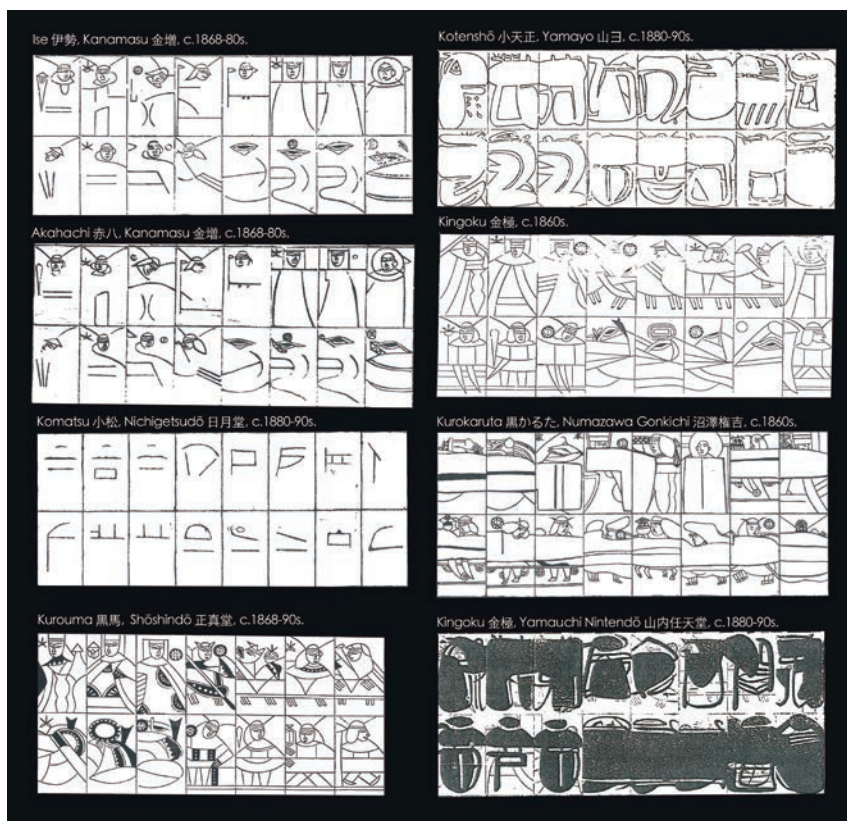
Figure 26. Comparisons between the Portuguese-patterned, four-suited *karuta* dragon-ace and court-card linework designs in Meiji-period key block prints. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission. Image edited by the author.

mid-Edo-period illustrated literature, the production of *karuta* images was conventionalized according to Japanese woodblock-printing procedures. *Karuta* makers imitated the compositions of earlier *Tenshō karuta* to create a vaguely similar visual effect. Simplification and abstraction helped to accelerate the carving, coloring, and printing process so that the manufacturers could produce and circulate as many playing cards as possible. A 1784 encyclopedia, *Iroe shokunin burui* 彩画職人部類 (Colored Illustrations of Various Artisans), presents an artistic rendering of a pair of *karuta* makers at work (figure 25). The illustration shows an older maker casually hand-coloring an uncut key-block printed sheet of *karuta*, looking perhaps a bit bored with his work. The *karuta* designs under his brush seem rather sketchy. It is fairly clear that the illustrator aimed not to present an exact representation of *karuta* but to use red and black crossings and swirling lines to suggest abstract *karuta* images.

The inscription above the illustration is based on texts in the *Wakan sansai zue* 和漢三才図会 (Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopedia) of 1713,[39] but it provides vague and inaccurate contextual information, suggesting the writer's unfamiliarity with the origin of the Portuguese-patterned *karuta*.[40] At the same time, the inscription suggests how Japanese people in the mid-Edo period interpreted European *karuta* playing cards: according to localized conceptual frameworks. For instance, it notes that *karuta* came from the Dutch but not that the suit-mark names are homophones for Portuguese words using Japanese characters.[41] The inscription assigns the dragon-ace and court cards with

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39 Terajima, *Wakan sansai zue.*

40 Ebashi, *Karuta*, pp. 178–79.

41 Homophone characters for Portugese suit-mark names are approximate and include: batons/sticks, *pau* in Portuguese, *pau/hau* 巴宇 in the inscription; swords are *espada*, homonymized as *isu* 伊須; coins are *ouro*, in Japanese, *oru* 於留; and cups are

Figure 27. Multitiered lacquer box made of *Tenshō karuta* woodblocks. Woodblocks from Azuchi-Momoyama period (1573–1603), box from late 16th–17th c., wood and lacquer. W 14.3 cm, L 14.3 cm, H 20.5 cm. Collection of Kobe City Museum, used with permission.

localized terms: the dragon becomes the "insect/worm" (*mushi* 虫), the maid becomes the "monk" (*sōgyō*), and the king becomes the "warrior" (*bushō* 武将). These are references that also appeared in the works of popular literature like *Sakiwake ron* and *Muda karuta* discussed in the previous section. This misinformation is noteworthy. It suggests that although *karuta* games were popular among the public and became a kind of shared knowledge, the origins of *Tenshō karuta*-type playing cards became less accessible to makers, writers, readers, and players. Instead, Japanese producers and consumers localized the once exotic import by assigning new names and interpretations to *karuta* designs.

As seen in the illustrations for *Uchū tsurezuregusa* and Thunberg's *karuta* deck, the *Tenshō karuta*-type of design and mode of production was established by at least the mid-eighteenth century (figures 5 and 6). Graphic abstraction continued into the production of modern *karuta* decks, evidenced by the radically simplified linework found in key-block (black line) printed sheets from the Meiji 明治 period (1868–1912) (figure 26). *Karuta* figures became extremely simplified, omitting even the slightest detail and only maintaining a rough composition to differentiate one from

Figure 28. *Tenshō karuta* key block prints of court-card and dragon-ace linework designs. Undated, ink on paper. Dimension unknown. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum, used with permission. Image edited by the author.

another. This degree of simplification is striking when compared to the more elaborate figures in *Tenshō karuta* woodblocks from the Azuchi-Momoyama period. A fascinating example of the latter is seen in figure 27: a multitiered lacquer box constructed during the Edo period of finely carved *Tenshō karuta* key blocks from the Azuchi-Momoyama period. The intricate patterns of the *Tenshō karuta* carved on the top tier of the box contrast strongly with those of the later Meiji period prints, as shown in a later key-block print produced with the wooden key blocks (figure 28). We note, however, that the figuration of images may not have been a significant

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copo, roughly transliterated as *koppu* 骨扶. See Ebashi, *Karuta*, p. 10.

factor in the actual production of games, as makers and players did not necessarily need to understand the figures to produce and play with *karuta*.

Simplified designs not only increased the efficiency of visual communication but also the pace at which manufacturers could produce cards. That is, simplified and abstract designs enabled easier carving and faster coloring by woodblock printing or stenciling. The increasing demand for *karuta* and the disconnection with the images' original Western context eventually motivated producers to continue the trend toward simplification and abstraction in the designs. In this way, the lack of concern for the playing cards' original context and the recognition of the visual and economic efficiency of simplified designs encouraged the reassignment and localization of meanings. The domestication of the once-exotic *Tenshō karuta* contributed to the flourishing of *karuta*-related artistic depictions in popular literature within the cultural context of the Edo period.

Localization of the *Tenshō karuta*-type during the mid-Edo period continued into the modern era due to the nature of card games. As a developed genre of card games used by gamblers over the course of decades, the Portuguese-patterned *karuta* had a stabilized design. By the end of the Edo period, makers had followed the design and developed them into regional-patterned variations with further simplified and abstract images. *Karuta* designs eventually settled, as playing card designs usually remain unchanged once they gain wide recognition and use in games and gambling.[42] This developmental process explains the drastic difference between early *Tenshō karuta* sets and later *karuta* designs, as well as the similarity in images between the many regional variations as seen in figures 1 and 2. The most significant difference between regional variants was the use of bold or thin linework, which resulted from the individual manufacturer's choice of coloring method: either stencil-coloring, which led to bolder lines and blotchy color blocks, or hand-coloring, which featured thinner lines and a calligraphic touch. Ultimately, in sets produced after the advent of the twentieth century, both the bold, blotchy effect and the thin, calligraphic lines were reproduced through more effi-cient woodblock printing or the use of a more direct silkscreen or digital printing method, as seen in modern *karuta* decks.[43]

Conclusion

Tenshō karuta designs present an interesting case of unintentional simplification and abstraction. *Karuta* images transformed from elaborate illustrative forms into more concise pictorial signs designed for efficient visual communication and material reproduction in artistic depictions and playing cards, detaching from their European origin but continuing as a localized cultural symbol with iconographical significance. Travelers brought Portuguese-patterned *karuta* images to Japan in the Tenshō period, and these playing cards became a symbol of exoticism for the upper levels of society. Their cultural value is demonstrated through the ways in which the warrior and aristocratic classes and some wealthy members of the merchant class collected works of fine art and assorted art objects adorned with *Tenshō karuta* card designs. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *karuta* became popular among commoners as a form of everyday entertainment. Reinterpretations of *Tenshō karuta*-type playing cards, which involved new names and localized meanings to reflect their new Japanese cultural and historical circumstances, developed and were disseminated via works of popular literature. Following the increasing demand for production and circulation of playing cards, *karuta* designs gradually developed non-representational, simplified, and abstract forms. Once the abstraction of these designs was accepted as convention by people engaged in playing *karuta* games and gambling, the images stabilized and continued to be reproduced into the modern era.

The abstraction of images that began in the mid-Edo period remained visible in modern decks, with some still in the market for collectors today. However, just as mid-Edo-period creators and players lacked knowledge of Portuguese playing cards, collectors and

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42 Yamaguchi Kichirōbē, *Unsun karuta*, p. 88, cited in Ebashi, *Hanafuda*, pp. 81–82. Ebashi has articulated most of the methodologies and literature reviews related to *karuta* studies in his work on *Hanafuda*.

43 Ōishi Tengudō (*karuta* maker), personal communication, Kyoto, June 2019. As *Tenshō karuta*-type playing cards and their regional variations have become less popular and almost extinct today, the store has only been producing some regional-patterned *karuta* like *Sakuragawa* 桜川 through digital printing for collectors and players interested in the *Tenshō karuta*-type games, and the origin and rules of specific patterns have become vague and hard to trace.

designers today are puzzled and fascinated by the unusual patterns in *Tenshō karuta* and their regional variations. The rediscovery of value in *Tenshō karuta*-type playing cards has continued to generate more potential for *karuta* as a historical game today. In Japan, players and designers make efforts to reexamine the history of Portuguese-patterned *karuta* and their rules and to recover and replicate old designs, as seen in the modern-designed *Komatsu* 小松 regional pattern by Sōten Shisondō 雙天至尊堂, depicted in figures 1 and 2 (the bottom image in the thin pattern *karuta* group). At the same time, European and American designers and collectors are mesmerized by the dynamic and expressive designs of these *karuta*.[44] Nonetheless, overseas collectors continue to be challenged by the inaccessibility of information on the history and rules of Portuguese-patterned *karuta* due to a lack of English scholarship in this field. Thanks to strengthened digital platforms on the internet, however, designers, collectors, and scholars today can collaborate and form networks to study *karuta* images and games, just like the interdisciplinary study of playing cards proceeded in the 1980s with Japanese and European collectors working together to discover the history and regional distribution of European playing cards in Japan.[45]

This article has lightly traced the development of the Portuguese-patterned, four-suited *Tenshō karuta*-type of playing cards in terms of their simplification, abstraction, and localization, mainly focusing on the visual design aspect of playing cards. I have drawn upon a broad range of materials from the sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth century in order to overcome, at least in part, the limited scope and dearth of evidence such as playing card decks unavailable due to the ephemeral nature of their paper-based material. There is still so much more for historians of *karuta* to discover. Further research is required to better understand how the economical material of European playing cards influenced traditional Japanese matching games such as *Uta-awase karuta* poem-matching games and *Iroha karuta* proverb-matching games, which are still played today in classrooms and at family gatherings. In addition, there is room for more research on the Portuguese-patterned *karuta* deck developed into many other different kinds of *Tenshō karuta*-type games outside the scope of this paper, such as the expanded seventy-five card *Unsun karuta* deck with additional suit-marks and figures of Japanese deities, as well as *Hanafuda* decks that also contain forty-eight cards with rules resembling the *Tenshō karuta*-type card games. The large *karuta* family and its rich history awaits further exploration.

To conclude this journey through the history of *Tenshō karuta*, I would like to offer an inspiring quote from collector and researcher Ebashi Takashi, who used a poetic metaphor to describe *karuta* playing cards and their function in the study of history:

> I think, as historians, we live in a virtual historical world that goes beyond this reality. Sometimes when I immerse myself in the history of *karuta*, I suddenly find myself entering a world where I can listen to Edo-period *karuta* makers boasting, where I get invited to Kyōden's *mekuri karuta* games, and where I challenge and argue with Meiji- and Showa-era collectors and researchers while reading newspapers in their archives. I hope that, through studying and handling the Edo-period *karuta*, you will also sense the warmth and inherit the memory of that era. *Karuta* is a pass for historians to travel beyond time and space.[46]

Through the visual and material study of *karuta* images, these ephemeral but long-lived playing cards carry us back to the everyday life of the past and provide

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44 English-speaking collectors, players, and designers have created a *karuta* group on the online community Discord to exchange information and find inspiration for designs and new card games. I would like to thank them for their help and information.

45 Many works related to *Mekuri karuta* were contributed by John Fairbairn to the *Journal of the International Playing Card Society* during the 1980s and early 1990s, but I am still unable to obtain any copies of his articles. A list of works by Fairbairn is included below; all journal numbers refer to the edition in the IPCS journal, cited from "Combined Index of IPCS Publications 1972–1997 (I–XXV)," The International Playing-Card Society. Last modified 18 August 1999. Accessed 29 August 2021. https://www.i-p-c-s.org/tpcindex.html.
Cheating with Japanese cards XVI/4/97-9; [De Poli] XII/3/100; Distribution of Japanese Mekuri cards XVI/3/87-9; Inside a Gambling den (*Akikazu*, trans. J. Fairbairn) XVI/4/99; 18th century cardmakers in Japan XV/2/35; Italian regional patterns 43/15; Japanese literature on Unsun cards XII/3/65-79; Jokers 43/27; Modern Korean cards–a Japanese perspective XX/2/68-72; Note on a missing link between Japan and Australia, XVI/2/54-6; Playing card terms in cribbage 43/27; Poems of Echigobana [Japanese flower cards] XIV/4/97-102; A card game played with Kurofuda, trans. from Ebashi Takashi.

46 Ebashi Takashi, personal email exchange with the author, 5 July 2019.

an entrypoint into current and future discussions of art, games, and the shifting yet always significant relationships between humans, images, and things.

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